



BILINGUAL AND BILITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TO EARLY GRADES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents of children in Mandarin immersion programs often mention that “Chinese is a difficult language” and that “learning Chinese characters is hard.” Chinese does not belong to the Indo-European language family, and does not use an alphabet in writing. For a learner, acquiring Chinese literacy in addition to learning the language poses a set of challenges. However, as Mandarin immersion programs and other types of early childhood education programs for Chinese continue to grow nationwide, it is critical for educators and families to understand children’s learning experiences in Mandarin immersion from the lens of bilingual (listening and speaking) and biliteracy (reading and writing) development and to be able to support that development. What are the psycholinguistic and linguistic prerequisite and requisite skills that a journey of developing the two languages requires? How can teachers and parents meaningfully foster and make use of children’s existing skills, developed in the two languages, and tap into resources in their homes, their communities, and beyond? What are specific strategies that they can use?

The Brief begins with the authors explaining the theoretical foundations of oral language and reading development. For example, in the first language, by age three, when children enter preschool, they have acquired a large and varied lexicon and can string together sentences with multiple words, participate in conversations, and sometimes make jokes. They can even begin to talk

about events or objects that are not present or happening right in front of them. By age five, when they enter kindergarten, they have typically acquired a relatively sophisticated repertoire of vocabulary, use appropriate grammar, and even create imaginative stories. Unless neurologically or hearing impaired, almost all children learn to speak. This speaking ability provides the foundation for learning to read and write.

But the transition from oral language to literacy development is not a natural one. Learning to read in any language can be understood as the process of learning how one’s writing system encodes one’s spoken language. In order to assist children to develop literacy, it is central to understand the five components of oral language and how each of the components is related to literacy. They include phonological skills (which include phonemes, rhymes, and syllables); morphological skills (which include taking words apart [segmenting] and putting parts of words together [blending]); vocabulary; syntactic skills, the ability to understand grammatical rules embedded in sentences heard and read; and pragmatic skills, the ability to understand the social rules governing communication. The Brief pays special attention to discusses how to tap into phonological skills and vocabulary to help children develop biliteracy. It also discusses the function and role of Pinyin and ways that it can be included in the transition to reading and writing.

The authors offer a set of recommendations for practices and strategies for families, educators, and schools to consider using. They include promoting oral language use and especially expressive language competence, engaging children in interactive reading, using fun language games, and offering resources that they might consult. There is a section that offers suggestions for parents who do not know Chinese. The principles of learning described in this Brief are applicable to other languages and conditions, if context-appropriate modifications are made.

The Brief concludes by pointing out that the journey of helping children become bilingual and biliterate is full of ups and downs, as well as moments of joy and frustration. They encourage educators and parents to normalize practices of bilingualism and biliteracy as a life-long journey with determination, courage, and positivity.