

S'pore kids 'using more English but strong in Chinese'

Over half of Chinese pre-schoolers bilingual despite less mother tongue exposure: Study

Amelia Teng

Young Chinese Singaporeans may have moved away from their mother tongue to use more English, but a new study has found that these pre-schoolers still have a good grasp of grammar and vocabulary and competent oral skills when it comes to the Chinese language.

More than half of them are still bilingual, although they use English more often with their peers and siblings, according to a two-year study by a team from the Singapore Cen-

tre for Chinese Language (SCCL).

The study, which was completed last year and funded by the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism, aimed to gain a deeper insight into the use of both languages among young children here.

About 1,300 parents with children from 74 pre-schools were asked about their language use and how much they exposed their children to oral and written forms of Chinese and English. This included time spent reading storybooks, watching television and listening to songs.

The researchers also tested 380

pre-schoolers, aged five to six years, on their proficiency in character recognition and oral Chinese.

Associate Professor Tan Chee Lay, the SCCL's executive director of research and development, said that previous research had painted a "dismal" picture of young Chinese Singaporeans having a poor grasp of their mother tongue.

But the latest study shows that they have not completely neglected Chinese.

Prof Tan, lead author of the study, said the aim was to capture more "nuanced" aspects of language use, such as children's written and oral Chinese abilities, and how much they communicate in Chinese and English. The findings have since been published in several interna-

tional journals, such as the *Early Childhood Education Journal*.

Prof Tan said the results showed children who spoke and read more in Chinese performed better in the oral and written tests respectively.

But the amount of exposure they had to Chinese was much lower compared with that for English. Their oral exposure to Chinese – including watching television – was about 15 hours a week compared with 25 hours for English.

Overall print exposure was about five times a week for Chinese and 15 times for English.

Prof Tan said the study showed that the children already had some foundation in their mother tongue – even with limited exposure.

Chinese language teachers should build on this foundation that children have from pre-school, he said.

Also, most parents in their 30s and 40s grew up in Singapore's bilingual education system, and can speak both languages, he said, adding that those surveyed reported their Mandarin-speaking ability as "comparable" to that of English.

He noted that although the children had a foundation in Chinese, they preferred to use English with their siblings and peers. For instance, 32 per cent of them used English with their siblings and peers compared with 18 per cent and 25 per cent with their mother and father respectively.

About 8 per cent to 9 per cent of them used Mandarin with their parents, and 3 per cent to 6 per cent used it with their peers and siblings.

"If this trend continues, you can say that the younger generation will eventually speak more English... as they grow up with siblings and peers together," said Prof Tan.

"Parents need to speak more Mandarin with their children from young," he added.

"From birth to six years old – it's a golden period for them to learn the language, its grammar and sentence structures and vocabulary."

He suggested that at least one parent converse entirely in Mandarin with the child.

"We know where the gaps are through this research... (Children) do have exposure but to be effectively bilingual, you need much more," he said.

Parents with young children whom *The Straits Times* spoke to said they recognise the importance of exposing their children to the language.

Administrative executive Huang Shufen, who has two daughters aged six and nine, said: "When they were younger, we spoke more Mandarin with them. We want them to be able to speak Mandarin."

Her family now uses more English but the 33-year-old, who is fluent in Mandarin, said: "I don't think my girls will lose touch with Chinese as they still use it with their grandparents, and they are in a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school."

SAP schools are those that develop pupils to be bilingual in English and Chinese.

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MORE ENGLISH USE

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAN CHEE LAY, lead author of the study, which found that young children prefer to use English with their siblings and peers.