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Bilingualism and language acquisition in early childhood: research and application

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As the fields of bilingualism and language acquisition have advanced in recent years, there has been a surge of interest in early bilingual acquisition as an area standing at the intersection of these two fields. We highlight some significant research findings based on our own work in the Hong Kong community (Yip and Matthews 2007, in preparation) and the international academic community that have practical implications for raising bilingual children in early childhood. Two groups of bilingual children in our longitudinal study will be examined: (1) children (1;03-4;06) from one parent-one language families where one parent is a native speaker of Cantonese and the other a native speaker of English and (2) children (1;07-4;0) from one parent-two language families where the parents are native speakers of Cantonese who speak English as a second language. In both cases, children are able to develop bilingualism in the first few years of life.

Parents who delay exposing children to both languages on the grounds that it will be a burden for them are under a misapprehension. When the input conditions are favorable, there are strong grounds for children to learn two or more languages in tandem from early on and thus achieve bilingual competence. Special reference will be made to the growing demand in Hong Kong for children to be exposed to and receive trilingual education in Cantonese, English and Mandarin. While encouraging children to learn English and Mandarin, it is important to preserve Cantonese as a foundation for the acquisition of additional languages, and as part of the cultural heritage of the majority of speakers in Hong Kong.

Equally important is the application of research findings in bilingual acquisition to early childhood education. Systematic research integrating bilingualism and language acquisition is needed more than ever in informing educators as well as developing assessment tools that are sensitive to bilingual children's profiles. We argue that research and application go hand in hand in deepening our understanding of how children develop bilingual competence in early childhood.