

# The Prospect of Early Bilingual Education in China

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**Abstract.** This study will review and analyze literatures of the field to indicate the prospect of the early bilingual education in China. As scientific findings about early bilingualism have few opportunities to be disseminated in China, my investigation aims to introduce some mainstream concepts of bilingual education in the state of art works, and provide more information and implications on the early bilingual field to Chinese parents, educators, and educational policymakers. The essay argues that advanced effectiveness of early bilingual education in improving children's language proficiency and cognitive competence contribute to a promising prospect in Chinese context. Finally, the findings of this essay are expected to encourage more relevant stakeholders to engage in early bilingual field.

**Keywords:** *early childhood, bilingual education, language proficiency, cognitive*

## 1. Introduction

This essay argues that the prospect of bilingual (English-English) education for children at early childhood (3 to 8 years old) in China is bright because of its effectiveness in improving children's language proficiency and cognitive competence.

The inevitable and irreversible globalization has put China on the international stage, and thus Chinese people are demanded to speak English in the global community. As a result, the enthusiasms of Chinese people on learning English have even escalated through Chinese preschools. According to a report of *China daily*(2012),one of the major international English-language daily newspapers in China, numerous young and rich Chinese parents choose bilingual kindergartens for their children to learn English alongside Mandarin. However, despite the prevalence of bilingualism, researches on the topic of bilingual language learning in toddlers and preschoolers are few and no definite answers to many questions in this field due to vast differences among families, regions, and economics. The controversies of the prospect of early bilingual education in China never stops and has attracted much attention in research [1].

Based on the above-mentioned reasons, this study will review and analyze literatures of this field to indicate the prospect of the early bilingual education in China. To begin with, the concept of early bilingual education is introduced. Then, benefits of early bilingual education on cognitive competence and English proficiency aspects in China are discussed. Finally, the existing challenges of early bilingual education in context of China are presented, and some possible solutions are thereby put forwarded.

## 2. Definition of Early Bilingual Education

As defined by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1987, bilingual education is an education act that uses two different instructional languages in the educational process, in which one of these languages is not the learners' native language. Cummins & Hornberger (2008) proposed a new definition of Bilingual Education, which uses two languages as the medium of instructions at certain points in students' school careers [2]. According to the study of Gao & Ren (2019), a rising dissatisfaction with the result of traditional English as Foreigner Language (EFL) teaching approaches leads to the emergence of Chinese-English bilingual education [1]. In consequence, early bilingual education in this essay means that children get exposed to two languages from an early age and teachers use content-based English language instruction in kindergartens to meet the need for subject learning and English proficiency.

### **3. Advantages of Early Bilingual Education**

There is an increasing number of studies that claim the benefits of studying more than one language while young. For children, learning a second language (L2) aims to not only enables them to be well prepared for the globalized society, but enrich their mind, social skills, and broaden their horizons, etc. Bilingual children learn to use diverse languages to express their thoughts and ideas, and they also can easier understand thoughts and ideas of other cultures. Thus, the early bilingual education particularly facilitates the cognitive competence and language proficiency of children at an early age.

#### **3.1 Benefits of Early Bilingual Education to Cognitive Competence**

There are many academic researchers reported that young children who receive bilingual education perform better than other monolingual educational peers in terms of certain cognitive skills. For instance, Bialystok et al. (2009) reported that compared with monolinguals, bilingual children had better performance in focusing, remembering, planning skills, and making decisions in life [3]. Consistent with their findings, Adesope et al. (2010) proposed that people who had bilingual experiences in an early age led to some positive outcomes in their working memory, attention control, interference inhibition, as well as comprehension of abstract concepts or symbolisms. The reasons for these positive effects of bilingualism were presumed by Kroll & Dijkstra (2002), that both languages (L1 and L2) remain incessantly active in the users' mind when they are employing either one of them [4]. In other words, bilingual children must continuously control the fluency and accuracy of relevant language and inhibit the nonrelevant language in making speeches. In some certain circumstances, bilinguals also need to switch between L1 and L2 flexibly. Such intensive practice processes on controlling attention effectively promotes and develops children's cognitive competence.

However, many Chinese parents, even educators are worrying about the negative effects of early bilingual education programs. For example, Bae (2007) pointed out a perennial suspicion on early bilingual education that it might lead to irreparable damages for non-English young children, who are in the most vital period for language acquisition [5]. Skeptical parents are worrying that bilingual education results in the delay in the acquisition of children's first language or confusion in acquiring L1&L2 simultaneously, and other unclear negative influences on language development. Even some pediatricians recommend not to expose children to more than one language. Nevertheless, these negative attitudes on early bilingual education are often based on imagination or misunderstanding, rather than scientific findings.

As a matter of fact, confusion behavior is a kind of misinterpretation, and word mixing is a normal phenomenon of bilingual development [6]. For one thing, the phenomenon that some children mixing languages in communications occurs frequently, because they just imitate what they the adults around them doing. For another, similar to young monolinguals, children who are educated by bilingual education are sometimes limited to their vocabularies or linguistic resources [7]. Hence, early bilingual education has positive influences on each language's linguistic aspects such as reading, writing and speaking when learning two languages simultaneously, meanwhile bilingual children have stronger metalinguistic awareness and better foreign accents [8].

#### **3.2 Benefits of Early Bilingual Education to English Proficiency**

In general, educators believe that in order to reach a person's optimum oral language level, the second language instruction should start from kindergarten or earlier [9]. In statistical aspect, learners who began L2 learning in kindergartens obtained higher levels of language proficiency than those who started leaning L2 in Grade 5[10], which can be a strong evidence to encourage the parents to let their kids have L2 language education in kindergartens. The advantages of bilingual education programs in the early childhood period have also been proved by many other research studies, particularly those on early age children's language acquisition.

A few researchers believe that early childhood is the best time for people to learn a second language, because young children are born with the ability to learn language and they obtain the

language through living and playing under natural circumstances. Kids even do not feel like they are working when learning English in bilingual preschools; most children have fun and feel enjoyable to do activities using the second language [11].

For adults, learning a second language often can be daunting and they can rarely achieve native-like fluency while children who experience two languages from birth are typically more likely to become bilingual speakers [12]. Young children have a better capability and capacity than adults in the process of language acquisition [13], since they can easier follow similar grammar rules when learning one or more languages at the same time[14].

The research findings about the benefits of early bilingual education on both language proficiency and cognitive skills aspects can provide positive evidences on the prospect of early bilingual education in China. The obtained results strongly enhance the confidence of Chinese parents in sending their children to bilingual kindergartens to obtain early bilingual education, meanwhile, Chinese educational policymakers should think about how to generalize this program to some other early education fields. The following section will discuss the current status, problems or challenges of early bilingual education, as well as my recommendations on each aspect.

#### **4. Challenges of Early Bilingual Education in China**

The increasing demand of international language acquisition from Chinese society and families has been fully considered by the field of educational entrepreneurship, which leads to the emergence of many early bilingual educational institutions or international kindergartens established in mainland China. However, the English teaching levels of teachers in these early childhood educational settings are often questioned. This is mainly due to the fact that when evaluating and selecting bilingual instructors, there are no criteria which are nationally recognised on English proficiency of these bilingual teachers[15]. Hence, “*Which level of English proficiency should bilingual teachers in preschools or kindergartens has?*” is a serious problem for English department and educational policymakers to consider.

To address this problem of the shortage of qualified bilingual English-Chinese teachers for young children, I would suggest that Ministry of Education in China encourages or directly appoints universities to provide professional trainings associated with nationally recognized certification. Because in general, universities in China possess the rich educational environment and facilities, implying that they have the ability and responsibility to establish such kind of training systems to foster qualified pre-service early bilingual teachers.

On this basis, I suggest educational policymakers in China create a bilingual teacher certification for teachers who will be in-service in bilingual preschools. First, provide a particular bilingual teaching training tutorial to bilingual teachers in kindergartens to demonstrate how to explain and express the activities in both English and Chinese properly to young children, improving these teachers’ language proficiency. Then, provide preschool bilingual teachers with some teaching cases to illustrate them how to teach children in both languages more efficiently, since most teachers showed that a fundamental challenge for them is lack of bilingual teaching experience [16]. Finally, design a final test that based on what these kindergarten teachers have learned to decide whether they are qualified for early bilingual education; only the teachers who have passed the exam and have obtained this certification (as nationally recognized) can be considered as a qualified bilingual teacher.

Hence, we can predict the prospect of bilingual education in China with the implementation of the training and exam for Chinese national recognized early bilingual education certification. First of all, the employment of early bilingual teachers can relieve the employment pressure of Chinese college students; graduates who have interest in this field can have more opportunities to work and develop in this industry. In the meantime, more Chinese young children will have a chance to participate in reliable bilingual education programs. For Chinese kindergartens industry, it will have a great potential to reap a flourishing development by employing qualified bilingual teachers.

Besides, there are many other challenges in bilingual field in China. For example, the lack of well-designed curricula and teaching materials for early bilingual education can be an obstructer for popularising this program in kindergartens and other similar preschools. Another example is that updated and advanced teaching materials in other (developed) countries are hard to be effectively accessed in China, restraining bilingual instructors' teaching quality and research activities [17]. Future investigations should also consider the financial feasibility since training a bilingual educator is less inexpensive and not all Chinese parents can afford bilingual kindergartens.

## 5. Conclusion

Numerous advantages of early bilingual education, such as enhancing cognitive competence and language proficiency, have been confirmed by many academic investigations in the world. Through understanding the knowledge of early bilingual education, Chinese parents, English educators, and educational policymakers can have a chance to reflect and pay more attention to this field.

In spite of the existing challenges in implementing the early bilingual education program in preschools, including no national recognized certification to supervise the teaching ability of bilingual preschool teachers, shortage of qualified bilingual teachers and lack of proper teaching materials, once educational policymakers pay attention and give recognition to the effectiveness of early bilingual education program in China, the recommendations in this essay may have positive influences on the adjustment and improvement to the field. Additionally, it will pose further active influences on Chinese society such as relief of employment pressure and promotion of development of bilingual kindergartens' industry. To sum up, there would be a promising prospect on early bilingual education in China.

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