Raising Thai-English bilingual children in a native Thai Family: Worth a Try or Waste of Time[16]

เลี้ยงลูกให้เป็นเด็กสองภาษา (ไทย-อังกฤษ): สมควรลอง หรือเสียเวลา

Varisa Kamalanavin

Department of Linguistics, Thammasat University

Abstract

A common myth within bilingualism holds that in order to become bilingual, children must live in a native environment in which each parent strictly speaks his/her own native language to them (King and Mackey 2007: 23). For example, for a child to become bilingual in English and Thai, one parent should be a native Thai speaker and the other a native English speaker. However, *Khun Pongrapee Tachapahapong*, an ordinary Thai parent whose native language is Thai, has dispelled this myth by speaking English to Peipei, his daughter, since she was born, while his wife speaks only Thai to her. Peipei, now eight years old, is doing quite well in her English language

---

[16] This paper is a continuation of my previous article, titled "Raising Bilingual Children", which was published in the Bangkok Post Newspaper on November 29, 2011. (See http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/268363). In that article, I introduced the story of Nong Peipei, who has been raised as a Thai-English speaker by Thai parents. I also explained how Khun Pongrapee Tachapahapong, Peipei's father, initiated the idea of raising bilingual children and later created a website to promote his ideas among Thai parents. This paper further reviews the practice of so-called elective bilingualism that has been discussed in the literature on bilingualism. It also collected reports and opinions from the forum posts raised by Thai parents in www.2pasa.com in order to examine the positive and negative effects of raising bilingual children. My view towards elective bilingualism is based upon reports from the parents reflected in such forums.

skills. The case of Peipei has proven that raising a child to become bilingual in both Thai and English in a family where both parents are native Thai is not far from possible. In this paper, factors that lead to success and failure in raising such elective-bilingual children were compiled from over 3,756 forum posts of the website www.2pasa.com where parents posted their stories of raising bilingual children in Thailand. Their experience of raising elective-bilingual children unfolded from these forums has led me to conclude that it is worth a try for Thai monolingual parents to raise their children to be bilingual, as long as everyone in the family, both parents and their children, are happy to do so, with the following suggestions: (1) your child's home language (Thai) must develop at a normal pace; (2) set clear objectives of raising children to be bilingual; (3) choose the most appropriate language strategy (OPOL, T&P, or MLP); (4) do not create tension in introducing English with your child; (5) do not say things that you are not certain of in English; (6) use every possible language tool at your disposal; and (7) expose your child to native English speakers and environments whenever possible.

บทคัดย่อ

      คนทั่วไปมักเข้าใจผิดว่า ผู้พูดสองภาษา (หรือมากกว่าสองภาษา) ควรมีบิดาหรือมารดาเป็นเจ้าของภาษาใดภาษาหนึ่ง ตัวอย่างเช่น เด็กสองภาษา (ไทย-อังกฤษ) ควรมีบิดามารดาคนใดคนหนึ่ง เป็นเจ้าของภาษาไทย และอีกฝ่ายหนึ่งเป็นเจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ แต่ในความเป็นจริงอาจมิได้เป็นเช่นนั้น ครอบครัวของคุณพงษ์ระพี เตชพาหพงษ์ เป็นตัวอย่างของครอบครัวคนไทยธรรมดา ที่ประสบความสำเร็จในการเลี้ยงดูบุตรสาวให้เป็นเด็กสองภาษา (ไทย-อังกฤษ) โดยคุณพงษ์ระพีได้

ตัดสินใจพูดภาษาอังกฤษกับน้องเพ่ยเพ่ย บุตรสาวมาตั้งแต่เกิด ส่วนภรรยาของคุณ
พงษ์ระพี รวมทั้งสมาชิกคนอื่นในครอบครัวได้พูดภาษาไทยกับน้องเพ่ยเพ่ยตาม
ปรกติ ขณะนี้น้องเพ่ยเพ่ยอายุประมาณ 8 ปี น้องเพ่ยเพ่ยสามารถพูดภาษาไทยและ
อังกฤษได้อย่างคล่องแคล่ว ครอบครัวของคุณพงษ์ระพีเป็นครอบครัวตัวอย่างที่
ชี้ให้เห็นว่า การเลี้ยงลูกให้เป็นเด็กสองภาษา แม้บิดามารดาไม่ได้เป็นเจ้าของภาษา
นั้นๆ เป็นเรื่องที่เป็นไปได้ บทความเรื่องนี้ สำรวจปัญหา ทัศนะ และปัจจัยต่างๆ ที่
ผู้ปกครองได้เขียนเข้ามาแสดงความคิดเห็นในกระทู้เว็ปไซด์หมู่บ้านเพื่อนสองภาษา
ที่คุณพงษ์ระพีก่อตั้งขึ้น รวมทั้งสิ้น 3,756 กระทู้ การศึกษาประสบการณ์ของพ่อแม่
คนไทยที่ได้ทดลองเลี้ยงลูกให้เป็นเด็กสองภาษา (ไทย-อังกฤษ) ชี้ให้เห็นว่า การเลี้ยง
ดูลูกให้เป็นผู้พูดสองภาษา (ไทย-อังกฤษ) เป็นสิ่งที่สมควรลองตราบใดที่ครอบครัวทำ
ตามแนวทางการสร้างเด็กสองภาษาแล้วมีความสุข โดยผู้ปกครองควรยึดหลักต่างๆ
ที่สำคัญดังต่อไปนี้ (1) ภาษาไทยของบุตรควรพัฒนาไปตามปรกติ (2) ผู้ปกครองควร
มีเป้าหมายที่ชัดเจนในการเลี้ยงดูบุตรตามแนวทางนี้ (3) เลือกวิธีการพูดภาษาที่
เหมาะสมกับเด็ก (4) ผู้ปกครองพึงระวังอย่าให้เด็กเกิดความเครียดจากการเลี้ยงดู
บุตรตามแนวทางนี้ (5) อย่าพูดภาษาอังกฤษในประโยคที่ตนเองไม่แน่ใจว่าถูกต้อง
หรือไม่ (6) ใช้ประโยชน์จากสื่อเทคโนโลยีต่างๆให้หลากหลาย และ (7) หากเป็นไป
ได้ พยายามให้บุตรได้มีโอกาสพบปะ พูดคุย หรือคลุกคลีกับเจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ
เท่าที่จะสามารถทำได้

คำสำคัญ: การรู้สองภาษา เด็กสองภาษาทางเลือก การเรียนรู้ภาษาที่สอง

Introduction

      A bilingual person refers to someone who has acquired two
native languages (Saville-Troike 2006: 186, Malmkjaer 1991: 57). On
the other hand, a multilingual person is applied to those who speak
more than two native languages. Bilingual speakers generally fall into
two types. The first one includes those whose both languages can be
claimed as native proficiency. These bilingual speakers have balanced

proficiency in two languages. Bloomfield (1933) called them 'balanced bilinguals'. Such speakers are also known as ambilinguals (Pearson 2008: 90) as well as simultaneous bilinguals (Montrul 2008: 94) though such cases of ambilingualism are quite rare. Usually, one language is more dominant than the other. It is also common for bilingual people that certain skills in one language are better in the other. For example, English-Thai bilingual children, who have one native-Thai parent and the other an English native speaker, can read and write Thai better than English if they go to a Thai school. Instances such as this fall into the second type of bilingualism. Because bilingual speakers of the second type are more common, Cook and Singleton (2014: 4-7) considered most bilingual speakers to be 'second language users' while Montrul (2008: 97-99) called them sequential bilinguals.

A common stereotype for raising bilingual children suggests that children need to be surrounded by an environment where their parents speak their own native languages, so that they grow to become bilingual in their parents' mother tongues.[17] In Thailand, it is possible that children could become natural English-Thai bilinguals by attending schools that provide English program curricula as well as international schools. The International Schools Association of Thailand (ISAT) reports that there are 113 schools which have been registered with ISAT[18], out of 39,576 schools in total[19]; the number of

---

[17] In Section 2.3, I have quoted some linguists' statement against the idea of speaking a non-native language to one's own children as an example of this stereotypical view.

[18] *About ISAT*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2015, from http://isat.or.th/about-isat.

international schools is therefore approximately 3% of all the schools in Thailand. Keyuravong (2008: data taken from Bax 2010: 11) explains that there are two types of English programs that are implemented in Thai schools: one is called the Mini English Program (MEP) providing at least two core subjects taught in English. The other is called the English Program (EP) providing at least four core subjects taught in English.

Bax (2010: 19) points out that the schools which offer the EP curriculum are increasing in number, indicating that the enrollment of Thai students in English programs is gaining ground throughout the country. However, becoming Thai-English bilinguals also comes with some costs. Thai parents are well aware of the extra costs that they have to pay for their children to enroll in any type of English program. Bax (2010: 19-20) reports that the Ministry of Education's regulations allow a school to charge some extra fees on the English Program to ensure its quality.

Apparently, the EP would be limited to children whose parents can afford such high costs, not to mention the English-based international schools which charge as much as two or three times more in tuition costs than regular Thai schools. An alternative method, which is free of charge, is to provide our children with a bilingual environment by speaking English directly to them on a regular basis. In other words, Thai parents could use English as a medium of communication with their children. This kind of

---

[19] The total number of schools are taken from the most updated database in 2010, by the Ministry of Education (www.moe.go.th).

bilingualism is the concerted focus in this paper. Pearson (2008: 177) refers to this type of bilingualism as 'elective', 'artificial', or 'non-native'. Personally, I prefer the term 'elective' since it has the least negative connotation, and therefore I will use this term throughout this paper in reference to this type of bilingualism.

One example of a Thai family who has decided to raise their child to be elective-bilingual in Thai and English can be observed in the *Tachapahapong*'s family. Khun Pongrapee Tachapahapong and his wife are native Thai speakers. Despite being monolingual, they decided to raise Peipei, their 8-year-old daughter, to be bilingual in Thai and English. The family chose the One-Parent-One-Language (OPOL) system, one of the most practical and well-recognized strategies for raising bilingual children (Baker 2007: 13), whereby each parent speaks one particular language to their child; Khun Pongrapee speaks English to Peipei, while his wife speaks Thai to her. The couple speak Thai to each other, so Peipei knows that her father can speak Thai, but chooses to speak English to her.

With this method, Peipei began her journey of becoming a Thai-English bilingual child. By using the OPOL system with several supplementary tools such as free online dictionaries, English DVDs and TV programs, Peipei can now speak, read, and write in Thai and English quite comfortably. Having achieved the goal of raising Peipei to be skillful in English conversation, reading, and writing skills, Khun Pongrapee started to make his linguistic methods and strategies known to the public. He has appeared in several TV programs. He has written three books on how to raise bilingual children and has also

created a website www.2pasa.com which has long served as a source of information exchange for parents who have the same goal in raising elective-bilingual children. Today, more than 16,000 Thai parents are following this linguistic path, hoping for the same achievements. The evidence of both success and failure in raising elective-bilingual children was reflected in over 3,756 forum posts written by parents who told their stories, their pride, their problems as well as some tips for other Thai parents. In the forums we can observe their children's progress as well as the problems that they are facing.

In this paper, I examined the success and failure of the families who are raising their children to be Thai and English elective-bilinguals by collecting information from these internet forums. Before I discuss factors that lead to success and failure of raising elective-bilingual children, however, I will first review some research relating to this field, including some views from linguists before moving on to the factors that lead to success and failure in the following section.

The concept of elective bilingualism

General notions of bilingualism involve bilingual speakers whose parents are native speakers of a language. On the other hand, case studies in which parents speak to their children in a non-native language are quite rare. We usually find discussions about elective bilingualism without having any concrete evidence that supports or disapproves elective bilingualism.[20] In this section, I will first discuss

---

[20] With one exception, as far as I know, Pearson's (2008) supportive view was based on the data derived from several elective bilingual children whom she considered to be successful. The information of these successful children will be explained in Section 3.

the language strategies that are applicable to parents of elective bilingual children. Then, I will show different views from some linguists before proceeding to the relevant research studies that seem to support the approaches of elective bilingualism.

1. Language strategies.

Parents have several options to speak a second/foreign language to their children. The following strategies were discussed in Second Language Acquisition not specifically to elective bilingualism, but to bilingualism in general.

1.1. One Parent One Language (OPOL). This is the most widely used among bilingual families, which Pearson (2008: 167) called 'the Classic Pattern'. Baker (2007: 13) explained that this term was originally coined by Maurice Grammont[21] as 'une personne-une langue' over 100 years ago. In this strategy, each parent speaks one language to the children at all times. In the case of elective-bilingual Thai families, one parent speaks only English to their children, whereas the other speaks Thai. Parents can speak Thai to each other, but their children will be aware that they will communicate with each parent in the language that has already been chosen. For example, Khun Pongrapee is the one who speaks English to his daughter, while his wife strictly speaks Thai to her.

1.2. Minority Language at Home (mL@H). According to Pearson (2008: 138), the mL@H is a situation in which the minority

---

[21] Maurice Grammont wrote a paper titled 'Observations sur la langage des enfants' (Observations on Children's language) in 1902. No other information was found.

language is used by both parents at home. As the name suggests, this strategy is used in communities which speak 'minor' languages as opposed to the language of the 'majorities'. It is therefore applicable in foreign immigrant communities who speak languages different from the standard language of the host country. Raguenaud (2009: 22-23) describes a similar language strategy which she called 'One Language One Environment': the languages children speak depend on the place they are in. In the case of the Thai families specifically discussed in this paper, this strategy is irrelevant and is thus non-applicable.

1.3. Time and Place (T & P). Parents decide to speak each language to their children according to the fixed time of the day. This approach is more realistic in bilingual school settings, where one language is chosen to be used depending on the class subjects (Pearson 2008: 138). In Thailand, however, Thai parents in Khun Pongrapee's bilingual language community recognize this strategy through the name 'One Time One Language' as he introduced this strategy in his book by this name (Tachapahapong 2552: 81).

1.4. Mixed Language Policy (MLP). Pearson (2008: 139) explained that there is no fixed time or place to speak English. Language choice depends on topics and other circumstances that the whole family feels most comfortable with. I certainly agree with this strategy and believe that it is the most appropriate one for Thai families. Many parents admitted that they feel embarrassed when strangers, especially foreigners, overheard or recognized them speaking English with their children. Speaking English at home or when they

feel most secured would be the best solution.

2. Supporting views for elective bilingualism

Because elective bilingualism is not broadly discussed, opinions about its approach are consequently hard to find in the literature. Among a few of them include King and Mackey's (2007) discussion where they took a positive stance towards elective bilingualism. They wrote:

"...it's a myth to assume you need to be a native speaker to provide quality second language interaction for your child. Parents who have some limited second language skills can still provide an important foundation in the language. The truly critical factor is rich, dynamic, and meaningful interaction with speakers of those languages (and this can come in many different forms)..."

(King and Mackey, 2007: 23)

Similarly, Pearson (2008) encouraged parents to speak languages other than their native tongue to children, as she stated:

"Parents should not refrain from speaking the second language just because it is not their native tongue and they fear transmitting their errors and their foreign accent in it.

...There is no indication that children's language suffers because their parents' nonnative status ... (children should) have a language-rich environment with varied stimulation and an accepting atmosphere where they are encouraged to express themselves and where their verbal exchanges are valued." (Pearson 2008: 146-148)

By contrast, a number of linguists disagree with the idea of speaking a non-native language to children. We will look at some of these views in the following sections.

3. Views against elective bilingualism.

Williams (1992) noted that English spoken by Thai students was heavily influenced by their 'models'. He stated:

> "… the model of behaviour is assumed to be that of native speakers. In Thailand,…the majority of learners in schools have access only to models provided by teachers who themselves may only have limited ability and fluency in spoken English."   (Williams 1992: 86)

His view may not directly criticize elective bilingualism, but it is quite clear in his statement that students' models should be native speakers of English.   Baker (2007) also mentioned that non-native parents can emerge as 'bad models'. In his book he cited a question from a parent: "My second language is not perfect. Should I speak it to my child?", to which he responded as follows:

> "…If you are a bad model of language for your child, you should not speak that language to the child. If a child begins to learn incorrect linguistic structures or inexact expression from you speaking a second language, you may be undermining rather than helping the child's language development…".   (Baker, 2007: 96)

Similar views were found on *Linguist List* (www.linguistlist.org), a well-known website for linguistics professionals.   In response to similar questions, Professor Deborah D.K. Ruuskanen of the University of Vaasa, Finland, replied:

> "…Teaching a child a language that is not the mother-tongue of either parent is usually not a good idea. Unless the parents are completely bilingual themselves, that is, they speak two languages as native languages, then the sounds that are produced for the child to imitate will be tinged with a strong 'foreign accent'…".

And last but not least, Raguenaud (2009) encouraged parents who speak minority languages to use their home language to their children:

> "If parents give up using their native language with their children and switch to a weaker language, their interactions will be less sophisticated in vocabulary, concepts, and thinking."
>
> (Raguenaud 2009: 95)

4. Examples of elective bilingual children who are considered by their parents to be successful elective bilinguals.

In the previous section, it was noted that linguists have different and diverging views about elective bilingualism. These views were usually given without supportive evidence except that of Pearson (2008: 177-185), who demonstrated four cases of children who were raised to be bilingual (or multilingual) by parents who spoke non-native languages to their children. In the first case, an Australian father, a German-language teacher, spoke German to their children whereas the mother spoke English. The second case was an American family, where the father, a non-native Spanish user, spoke Spanish to their daughter while the mother communicated with her through American Sign Language (ASL).

To ensure that their daughter could speak Spanish fluently, they hired a Spanish housekeeper so that their daughter could also have opportunities to speak Spanish with a native Spanish speaker. Their daughter grew up to be a trilingual speaker whose native language was English, and who used ASL and Spanish quite well. The third family mentioned by Pearson was also an American family whose

parents spoke fluent Spanish as a foreign language to their children. The parents hired a Mexican au pair so their children would be exposed to native Spanish input. In the last case mentioned by Pearson, an American family wished their adopted child to be able to speak her heritage language (Spanish). The mother was a fluent Spanish speaker. She was very enthusiastic in contacting parents who shared the same interest in this method.

From these four cases Pearson illustrated that the parents who spoke a non-native language to their children were fluent foreign language users. As such the fact that their children were successful was not so surprising. In this vein, it is more intriguing to witness Thai families whose parents are poor English language users, yet have successfully raised their children to be fluent English speakers. In fact, there were quite a few Thai children as evidenced in Khun Pongrapee's website, who have been able to speak English beautifully and fluently, although their parents considered themselves to be poor English speakers.

One such example is the case of Nong Noey whose mother used the OPOL strategy with her despite her claims of low proficiency in English. Nong Noey's mother started to speak English with her when she was 2.6 years old, at which time she had already started speaking Thai fluently. Her mother used many computer-mediated learning tools such as an online dictionary, English for children tutorials from YouTube, and popular cartoon series. It took the family approximately five months before Nong Noey had started to utter some English words. Today she speaks English fluently with

confidence.[22]

In addition to the success of these children whose parents have chosen to speak a non-native language to them, evidence in support of elective bilingualism also comes from some research on children who received impaired input in their native language. Singleton and Newport (2004) studied the linguistic performance of a seven-year-old deaf child whose name was Simon. Simon's parents were both deaf. They were late learners of American Sign Language (ASL), as both of them started to learn ASL after age fifteen. Simon was sent to a normal school and learned together with other normal children except for some classes in which he had activities with other hearing-impaired children. Since his parents were late learners of ASL, Simon received inconsistent morphological input in ASL from his parents. The results of Simon's performance indicated that Simon's linguistic skills were almost compatible to children who use ASL as native speakers. This is a natural case of a child acquiring incomplete input in ASL as a native speaker.

A non-natural case study, but with a similar research objective, was conducted by Hudson Kam and Newport (2009). In one of their experiments, a group of children were asked to learn a new (invented) language. In each session they were taught vocabulary words and inconsistent grammatical forms. The results indicated that children had the ability to regularize these inconsistent grammatical forms. Research studies from Singleton and Newport (2004) and

---

[22] You can check out for Nong Noey's English ability for yourself in this video clip at go2pasa.ning.com/video/thing-to-play.

Hudson Kam and Newport (2009) seem to suggest that children have the ability to regularize the unsystematic grammar that they received. These findings are therefore in favor of elective bilingualism, suggesting that even if children were given ungrammatical language input from parents who are non-native speakers of that language, children will find a way to adjust and eventually master the language they are learning from their parents.

Advantages of successful elective-bilingual children

There is no doubt that the linguistic skills of a second language can be evaluated through several methods. In assessing pronunciation, for example, linguists can use different kinds of Likert scales to evaluate one's level of foreign accent (Jesney 2004: 2). Nevertheless, the sense of achievement in learning a second/foreign language is by no means subjective. Parents could sense their children's achievement in acquiring a second/foreign language by simply observing their children's linguistic performance. Cases of elective-bilingual children like Peipei are clear examples of achievement. Peipei's parents are happy with her English-speaking skills. By now, Peipei has become more and more fluent in English, and I would certainly categorize her as a "successful" young English learner.[23] In fact, there are many successful children like Peipei, whose English skills surpass ordinary Thai children within the same age group, as can be witnessed in video clips in www.2pasa.com. Here are

---

[23] My last meeting with her was some time in 2013, at which time her English fluency was noticeable.

some positive reports that the parents of successful elective-bilingual children wrote in their blogs:

1.	Speaking English with a Thai accent is not of great concern to parents who feel that their children thrive regardless. They are rather concerned with their children's English fluency. When fluency is apparently developing, they are thrilled and satisfied. Nor do parents feel disturbed by their children's grammatical mistakes. They viewed them as a natural step towards the English-language development, and therefore such grammatical mistakes are acceptable.

2.	Their children do not shy away from foreigners. They are proud to see that their children can communicate with native speakers of English as well as other foreigners who speak English.

3.	Parents notice remarkable improvement in their children's English scores. Specifically, many parents whose children enroll in EP curricula often report that their children received higher scores in every subject area. This is probably because students who were in EP programs have to speak English on a daily basis. Fluency certainly helps better communication between teachers and students of each class subject. On the other hand, English fluency does not have much effect on students who were in the Thai program, since English is not a medium of communication. Improvement in English is thus helpful for the English-language class, but not for any other.

4.	Children show continuous improvement in all English language skills. Parents feel satisfied with their children's listening

skills. Children showed their ability to understand simple sentences in children's TV programs by retelling the story in Thai and/or English. They discussed with their parents what was going on in the story they were listening to. Children were more comfortable to speak English with the English-speaking parent. Many children were perceived as risk-takers in speaking English with strangers and foreigners whenever opportunities were allowed.

Causes of anxiety in unsuccessful families

This section is divided into four subsections. First, I will explain children's language behavior that concerned parents which were derived from the most common errors discussed among parents in the forum of the website www.2pasa.com. Then, I will show how these problems affect parents in terms of both mental health as well as familial relationship. The third sub-section will discuss the impacts of elective bilingualism on children. The last sub-section were predicaments from school and outsiders, whom I am referring to as both non-family members as well as strangers.

1. Language behavior of elective-bilingual children

While it is evident that elective bilingualism is not entirely impossible, there are a great number of parents who could not hide their anxiety by complaining and seeking help in the website forum. The most frequent problems identified in the forums are as follows:

1.1 Problems with translation

Children formed a habit of asking their parents to translate for

them every sentence they heard. They also mixed Thai and English words together as if they were of the same chunk. For example, they would say 'bird-nok', 'fish-pla'[24] and so on. Some parents reported that their children translated their parents' utterance instead of responding to the command; and children often asked for verification of correctness, which sometimes prohibited the flow of conversation.

1.2 Grammatical mistakes

Several grammatical mistakes were detectable. Some grammatical markers were overgeneralized from English to Thai. For example, some children said 'a car' as well as 'a /mae/' (mother), 'a /ma:/' (dog). Children were confused with how to use possessive pronouns. For example, a child said 'I want to sit on my lap' ; in fact, what she wanted to say was 'I want to sit on your lap'.

1.3 Children's inability to communicate with English native speakers

Several parents said that their children could converse in English with them, but it was totally a different case when they encountered English native speakers.

1.4 Code-switching[25]

Children switched back and forth between Thai and English words as well as sentences in the case of code-switching. Thai

---

[24] /nok/ is a Thai word for 'bird', and /pla/ for 'fish'.

[25] The term 'code-switching' is loosely chosen over 'code-mixing' to refer to general circumstances in which children alternate English and Thai at either level of words, phrases, and sentences.

parents viewed the phenomena of code-switching as problematic, which in fact were common in bilingual communities. Gardner-Chloros (2009: 4) states that code-switching "affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect, to a greater or lesser extent."

1.5 English pronunciation with a Thai accent

Parents believed that they were bad models for their children in terms of English pronunciation. Despite many helpful learning tools available at home, phonetic interference from Thai was obvious as children spoke English with a Thai accent.

1.6 Habits of using fixed phrases

Children learned a limited number of English phrases that they were taught. It became a habit to use them. They were unable to create new phrases, and even resisted to be taught new phrases of the same meaning. For example, one parent reported that their child used a fossilized phrase "Give me some milk, please." When her mother introduced a new phrase to her "I want some more", she rejected and insisted on using the same old phrases that she knew.

1.7 Stuttering and lack of fluency in both English and Thai

Many parents raised concerns over the perceptions that their children were neither fluent in speaking English nor Thai. Some parents reported that their children stuttered in Thai. However, Raguenaud (2009: 14) states that it is unknown if bilingualism causes stuttering. Stuttering is commonly found in children, whether

monolingual or bilingual, between ages of two-and-a-half and five.

2. Negative impact on parents

Unsuccessful efforts in raising their children to be Thai-English bilinguals causes some problems in terms of mental health as well as distorted behavior, as explained below:

2.1. Mental health

Disappointed by the outcome of raising their children to be bilingual, parents reported that they felt depressed, exhausted, and moody. In addition, derogatory remarks made by strangers and outsiders had a huge impact on parents. On hearing these remarks, they felt ashamed for not being able to speak English fluently. They believed that they could never improve their English. Obviously, negative remarks from strangers are so powerful that they have the potential to lower one's self-esteem. They felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, and uncertain whether they should pursue this approach. Problems also arise when children's English surpasses that of their parents. Parents could not discuss a variety of topics with their children in English when they were asked for further explanation. Parents know only a limited number of vocabulary words. As a result, the conversations were not thoroughly carried out in English. Parents were upset that they had to switch to Thai when they were caught in such circumstances.

2.2. Abnormal behavior

Some parents said that they tried to speak English as much as

they could, even if their children had no response for their interactions. As a result, they had developed habits of talking to themselves even when no one was listening.

3. Negative impact on children

Children who resisted communicating with their parents in English showed signs of strain on their mental health as well as unpleasant behavior.

3.1. Mental health

Parents reported their children were depressed, frustrated, vociferous, and moody. The relationship between children and parents who spoke English to them was estranged. Children walked away from their parents and did not want to talk to them.

3.2. Unpleasant behavior

Some children became more aggressive and violent. They said bad words to their parents. Small children showed resistance by crying on the floor. Some of them became so depressed that they would not talk to their friends at school. In addition, parents reported that their children had started to be addicted to the computer mediated tools such as iPads, TV programs, games that they were encouraged to use for English improvement.

4. Predicaments from school and outsiders

4.1. Further complications involved teachers, friends from school, as well as the English curriculum. Disagreement from the children's teachers were common. Some native-Thai English teachers

were offended when they learned that parents were speaking English to their students. They felt that they were fully responsible for teaching English to students. Once they found that parents spoke English at home, they would discourage them to do so in order not to confuse children. Some parents complained that English teachers gave wrong information or introduced ungrammatical phrases/ sentences to their children.

On the other hand, parents complained that it was hard to correct their children's English grammar, when they found that teachers taught some incorrect grammar to their children, as the children were more prone to believe their teachers than their own parents. Elective-bilingual children sometimes find it hard to communicate with their schoolmates. They could not get along with their monolingual friends. In terms of the English-language curriculum, many schools still practice the rote-learning method, by which students have to memorize fixed phrases and sentences including the spelling of each word, such as a-n-t "ant-mot"[26]. English grammar is the main focus of the curriculum. Even in the English-Language Program (EP), Thai teachers usually translate from English into Thai right after an English-native teacher said each and every sentence.

4.2. Relatives or even strangers, whom I categorize as outsiders to the family, have also had some impact on the elective-bilingual families. When these people showed disagreement, gave derogatory remarks, or challenged children's English skills, parents felt

---

[26] /mot/ is a Thai word for 'ant'.

depressed and worried, and had their confidence shattered in pursuing this approach.

Suggestions to Thai parents who plan to speak English to their children

When parents decide to speak English to their children, they should make a careful plan in choosing the language strategies most appropriate for their family. As we have seen from Section 4, taking wrong steps in communicating with children could result in negative impacts to both children's mental and physical health. Here are some suggestions and tips that I learned from the information that parents shared in the www.2pasa.com website:

1. Parents should make plans for the language strategy that best fits their family. For parents whose English proficiency is high in all language skills, the OPOL strategy is certainly an option. They should be able to communicate with their children in most subject matters in a natural way. On the other hand, the OPOL strategy may not be appropriate for parents whose English proficiency is low. In other words, parents with limited speaking skill should not speak English to their children at all times as if English were their home language. This is not to say that they should not speak English to their children. They can actually practice speaking English to their children focusing on what they know or are learning. In sections 4.2 and 4.3 we have seen negative impacts on both parents and children. These unpleasant circumstances usually occurred in families who select the OPOL strategy when the English-speaking parent is unskillful. The

unnatural conversation eventually results in a damaged relationship.

2. Both parents and children should have a positive attitudes towards speaking English. It should be a fun activity in the family. Parents who felt that their children thrived usually mentioned the enjoyment of the whole family when they practiced speaking English.

3. In the course of the milestone of bilingualism, parents must not forget that children should be able to acquire Thai as a native language speaker. The natural development of the Thai language in children is more essential than the ability to speak English as a foreign language.

4. Parents as well as children should set clear goals in the family of why they want to speak English at home, at which level they expect their children to reach those goals, and what they can do to achieve them. The goals should be realistic and based on the needs and background of each family. For example, it is unrealistic for parents whose English language proficiency is low at every level to expect to raise their children to be native-like in English. Being clear of what to expect from raising children in this way would keep them focused on the targets that they want to reach and at the same time keep them from feeling disappointed. Disappointment causes much tension and frustration within the family, which in turn cause estranged relationships within the family.

5. Parents should not discuss with children in English topics that they find too difficult. This is because they do not know adequate vocabulary words to discuss with their children and might give

ungrammatical input to them. Even though studies from Singleton and Newport (2004) and Hudson, Kam, and Newport (2009) have shown that children have the ability to systematize wrong input, several questions remain unanswered and further studies should be conducted to prove this theory. Therefore, parents should not risk their children's failure by giving wrong language input to their children. They should communicate in Thai when it comes to difficult topics.

6. We learned from the forum that all forms of media would be a great help for children to learn English. I found that the most useful DVDs are Caillou, Barney, and Dora the Explorer.

7. Though not essential, yet very helpful where possible, children should be exposed to native speakers of English as much as possible.

Conclusion

It has been approximately six years since Khun Pongrapee Tachapahapong had introduced the notion of elective bilingualism to Thai families. Today, many parents have tried to bring in English to their home environment and make it a natural way to communicate with their children. Comments from parents that were sent to the forum in *www.2pasa.com* were evidence of how elective bilingual families in Thailand are doing. Many families have assessed their children to be successful English speakers, while quite a few reported otherwise.

In this paper, I collected information from the forum to examine the problems that most parents have during the course of

the bilingual milestone. I found that children's success is subjective to their parents' point of view and attitude. Children who have reached a certain level of English proficiency may or may not be viewed as successful, depending on the expectation of their parents. Anxiety and emotional concerns have a huge impact on straining relationships among family members. Parents need to create a learning environment in such a way that children would feel that speaking English is a fun activity.

The right choice of language strategy is also very important. Parents with low proficiency in English should not risk using the OPOL strategy, by speaking English the whole time to their children. In fact, they should apply the Mixed Language Policy (MLP) at home; that is, speak English whenever they feel like. This is to reduce anxiety for both parents and children. Most cases where the family who raise concerns about their children's deteriorating behavior and emotional well being are due to parents' anxiety and misconstrued expectations as well as their wrong choice of language strategy.

To answer the question raised from the title of this paper, I would conclude that it is definitely worth helping your children's English by implementing an appropriate language plan, as we have witnessed many cases of successful families. However, parents must carefully decide on the language strategy that best fits their family and speak English to them accordingly. Children will not be able to improve their English if the English curriculum at school still focuses on English spelling and vocabulary by rote-learning. Elective bilingualism is not only an option but is a must as well in this case.

References

Baker, C. (2007). **A Parents and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism**. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD.

Bax, D. S. (2010). **Researching English Bilingual Education in Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea**. Retrieved from British Council: http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk /sites/teaching/ files/publication_2_- researching_english_ bilingual_ education.pdf, on May 2, 2015.

Bloomfield, L. (1933). **Language**. New York: Holt, Rinchart and Winston.

Cook, V., & Singleton, D. (2014). **Key Topics in Second Language Acquisition.** Croydon: Multilingual Matters.

Gardner-Chloros, P. (2009). **Code-switching.** New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hudson Kam, C. L., & Newport, E. L. (2009). Getting it right by getting it wrong: When learners change languages. **Cognitive Psychology**, 59(1):30-66. doi:10.1016/ j.cogpsych. 20 09.01.001

Jesney, K. (2004). **The Use of Global Foreign Accent Rating in Studies of L2.** A Report Prepared for the Language Research Centre, University of Calgary. Retrieved from http://www-bcf.usc.edu, on June 9, 2015,

Keyuravong, S (2008) **CLIL PEAC 2008 Insights Thailand: CLIL-PEAC Country Report:** *Thailand*. Unpublished report

King, K., & Mackey, A. (2007). **The Bilingual Edge: Why, When, and How to Teach Your Child a Second Language**. New York: Harper Perennial.

Malmkjaer, K. (1991). **The Linguistics Encyclopedia**. (J. M. North

American consultant editor, Ed.) London: Routledge.

Ministry of Education**.** (2010). **Schools All Jurisdiction**. Retrieved from
www.moe.go.th/data_stat/ Down load_ Excel/ School/2010-
02-09_School2552By Juris& Province .xls, on May 2, 2015.

Montrul, S. A. (2008). **Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism: Re-examining the Age Factor**. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
Publishing.

Pearson, B. Z. (2008). **Raising a Bilingual Child**. New York: Living
Language.

Raguenaud, V. (2009). **Bilingual By Choice: Raising Kids in Two (or
More!) Languages.** Boston: Nicholas Brealey America.

Saville-Troike, P. M. (2006). **Introducing Second Language
Acquisition**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singleton, J. L., & Newport, E. L. (2004). When Learners Surpass Their
Models: The Acquisition of American Sign Language From
Inconsistent Input. **Cognitive Psychology 49:** 370–407.

Tachapahapong, P. (2009). **Dek Song Pasa Po Mae Sang Dai [bilingual
children: Parents Could Raise].** Bangkok: Mind connections.
(in Thai)

Williams, G. (1992). Thai Pronunciation of English. **Journal of language
and linguistics,** Thammasat University. 11(1): 83-97

Varisa Kamalanavin received a bachelor's degree in English from Thammasat University, Thailand, a Master's dgree in Linguistics (ESL) from California State University at Fresno, California, USA, and a doctoral degree in Linguistics from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Hawaii, USA. She is currently a lecturer at Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University. The Linguistics courses that she teaches include the Lao Language, Language Change, General Phonetics, English Phonetics, and Phonology.