

## Professional Reflections

### Bilingual Education: Some History and Some Clarifications

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We are pleased to accept the invitation of Dr. Anchalee Chayanuvat, Dean of Rangsit University's Suryadhep Teachers College (formerly known as the Faculty of Education), to prepare this reflection. In a short period of time Dr. Anchalee has been instrumental in revitalising Rangsit's M.Ed. in Bilingual Education degree programme, and is succeeding in attracting an increasing number of students from Thailand and neighbouring countries who wish to become specialists in second language education.

This present article will begin by reflecting on the early beginnings of RSU's decision to become the leader in bilingual education in Thailand. Its M.Ed. programme in Bilingual Education is celebrating this year 15 years of operation.

We, the authors, were among those who were charged with the challenge of developing a Master of Education degree in Bilingual Education. Others who were deeply involved at that time were Dr. Vichai Tunsiri, formerly Deputy Minister of Education in Thailand, then advisor to RSU's president, Dr. Arthit Ourairat; Dr. Manit Boonprasert, the first Dean of RSU's Faculty of Education; and, Mme. Songsri Wanasen, formerly Inspector General with the Ministry of Education, and who had supervisory responsibilities for the accreditation and monitoring of English Programme (EP) schools throughout the Kingdom.

The M.Ed. programme in Bilingual Education was and continues to attract professionals from various first language and academic backgrounds who wish to specialise in the teaching and learning of second languages. As English is the language of instruction for the M.Ed. programme, applicants must themselves be competent in English.

Graduates of this 15-year old programme have come from many parts of the world: Thailand, of course. But also (in alphabetical order): Bhutan, Cambodia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, UK, and USA.

It is not surprising that there have been some new understandings or clarifications concerning the nature of second language learning in the past 15 years. What follows is a brief discussion of two: first, when is the best time for children to begin second language learning; and the second has to do with the role of parents. What is their role during the time when their child is enjoying learning a second language?

**Timing.** When is the best time to begin the process of acquiring second languages? Specialists in language acquisition no longer believe that second language learning should best begin when children reach the age of 10 or 11 years of age.

The work of neuroscientists has changed that view. New-borns develop new synaptic connections at the rate of up to three billion per second. "Everything that a baby hears,

sees, feels, tastes, and touches is absorbed by the brain and stored in its memory cells.” (Kotulak, 1997)

Kotulak’s review of brain research some 22 years ago is the basis upon which contemporary specialists support **early childhood** bilingualism. He concluded that by 6-8 months a baby’s brain has about 1,000 trillion synaptic connections. And, that later, the number of connections begins to diminish. By age 10, half of the connections have died off in the average child. Prior to age 12 the brain of the young child has been like a sponge.

His review led to the conclusion that it was during this period of brain development that the foundations were set in the young brain for “thinking, language, vision, attitudes, aptitudes and other characteristics. After this stage of development, the windows close; the fundamental architecture of the brain is complete” (Kotulak, 1997).

Some researchers countered that at ages 11 or 12 children could more easily understand what teachers are teaching, and therefore would more likely make progress more quickly than a younger child. While this may be true, contemporary researchers point out that a child who is first exposed to a second language at that later stage (11 or 12 years of age) *will not intrinsically learn it in the same way a younger-aged child would learn it.*

Chapelton (2016), of the British Council, described the gift that very young children have with respect to the learning of languages: *they can not only differentiate among the different sounds of languages, but also they can **produce** the sounds peculiar to specific languages.*

“Learning another language early allows a child to fully enjoy the way it sounds. Children aren’t afraid to play with languages. They are drawn into the magic of rhymes and songs. They hear and experiment with the beat of a song; they enjoy mimicking the pronunciation of new and strange words; and they play with rhyming words through repetition, even inventing their own examples. By doing these things, [children are] listening to the sounds of the language, and inadvertently working on rhythm, stress, intonation and pronunciation” (Chapelton, 2016, 2-3)

She adds that older learners lose this fascination with words and sounds, and they become self-conscious and are therefore less likely to acquire a second language in the uninhibited way as younger learners. Second language learning for the very young can approximate the way children are acquiring their first language.

Second-language researchers, including Byers-Heinlein and Liw-Williams (2013), support the claim that the *ideal-time* for second language learning **closes as early as age 6 or 7**. While it is clear that the best age for a child to start learning a second language is essentially from birth, practically speaking, the best time is “**as early as possible**” (Chapelton, 2016).

An indicator of readiness to begin second language learning experiences would be when young children have begun to show signs of being comfortable in new environments. Such children would show excitement for example by the prospect of traveling to new places such as shopping centres or visiting relatives and family friends (Vos, 2008; Science Daily, 2009 and 2019).

International schools in major Asian cities, for example, offer excellent second language environments for pre-kindergarten children, as young as 2 years of age.

Readers unfamiliar with such programmes may wish to explore their websites. Those sites contain photos and video clips of typical day-time activities for such children. Typical of such schools include Bangkok Patana School, and Rangsit University's Satit (Demonstration) Bilingual School. See, for example, <https://www.patana.ac.th/primary.asp> and <https://www.sbs.ac.th/>.

**Children's first language development.** Parents are often quite concerned about what they can do to help with their child's second-language learning experiences. It is important that parents understand the importance of their providing a nurturing home environment for the continuing development of their child's first language. Of course, that is also an important task for schools.

It is in the home and community environment where children participate on a daily basis using their first language. It equips a child to participate in family and extended family activities. Children will be less likely to become isolated from family members. Thus, the acquisition of two languages will proceed quietly and unconsciously when a partnership exists between the two institutions: family and school.

But skill development in a child's first language is also important to skill development in a second language. Research shows that children who have a strong foundation in their home or native language will lead to stronger skills in a second language. The Hanen Centre offers some guidelines to parents (and educators):

- Do what feels comfortable for you and your family. Don't try to speak a language with your child in which you are not comfortable or fluent in that language
- Don't worry if your child mixes her or his two languages. This is a normal part of becoming bilingual. Provide your child with many opportunities to hear, speak, play, and interact in your home language.

If you wish further information, we recommend: <http://www.hanen.org/helpful-info/articles/bilingualism-in-young-children-separating-fact-r.aspx>.

**Concluding comments.** In this 'Reflections' article, we've enjoyed sharing some early history of RSU's M.Ed. in Bilingual Education. And, we hope that you, the readers, found our review of some recent discoveries and clarifications helpful. If you had some comments or observations, we would be pleased if you would pass them along to us. Like all areas of knowledge, it is important for all of us to be 'on the lookout' for the latest research findings as well as reports from leading practitioners. As teachers we should also be learners.

#### **The Authors**

Jamie Wallin, previously was Professor of Education at The University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Currently, he is a part-time Visiting Professor at Suryadhep Teachers College of Rangsit University, and a member of the Board of Governors of the Demonstration School of Rangsit University (SBS). His first language is English. He has studied French and Swedish as second languages.

Boonsri Cheevakumjorn is currently head of the General English Section at International College of Rangsit University. Formerly, Dr. Boonsri was the founding principal of the kindergarten division of SBS (Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit

University). Her first language is Chinese; her second languages are Thai and English. Comments or suggestions are welcome. They may be sent to the first author, Jamie Wallin at: [rsu.wallin@yahoo.ca](mailto:rsu.wallin@yahoo.ca)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Reflections article has drawn upon relevant sections of a 2018 report entitled *Learning English as a Second Language: Earlier is Better*. It was prepared by Dr. Jamie Wallin, who at that time was Visiting Professor at Rangsit University RSU). Dr. Boonsri Cheevakumjorn recently assisted in a major revision of this first report (Learning English as a Second Language: Earlier is Better) by contributing her knowledge of early childhood development and her previous experience as principal of the kindergarten division of Satit Bilingual School (SBS) of Rangsit University.

The original research work of Dr. Jamie Wallin was generously supported by Dr. Apiramon Ourairat, Chief Executive Officer of the Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University. During that research year, in addition to the 'Earlier is Better' report, Dr. Jamie completed two other research reports: *Pathways to Greater Success for Adolescent Learners of English as a Second Language*, and, *Non-Literary Benefits of Learning a Second Language*.

Dr. Apiramon's leadership in "second-language learning for all" has been and continues to be exemplary. Her vision and that of her father, Dr. Arthit Ourairat (President of Rangsit University), has been and continues to be 'every child should have the opportunity to learn a second language'. Their beliefs may have been a major factor that led to the establishment of Rangsit University's master's degree programme in Bilingual Education.

Dr. Apiramon's current responsibilities, in addition to being a lecturer in the M.Ed. programme in Bilingual Education, include overseeing the operation of three educational institutions: Satit Bilingual School of Rangsit University (SBS), located in Metropolitan Bangkok, The International Bilingual School of Chiang Mai, and the British International School located in Phuket. Her deep commitment is to bilingual education and to providing international standard learning opportunities, not only for Thai children, but for children from other countries who are currently living in Thailand.

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