

# Secrets of bilingual parenting success - Language on the Move

*By Ingrid Piller*

Dr Van Tran, Charles Sturt University, presented this week's Lecture in Linguistic Diversity

In Australia almost a quarter of the population speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home but relatively few succeed in maintaining their home language across generations. The typical pattern in migrant families is bilingualism with LOTE dominance in the first generation, bilingualism with English dominance in the second generation, and English monolingualism in the third generation.

There is a gap between parents' desires to raise their children bilingually and their success in achieving their aspirations ([Piller & Gerber, 2018](#)).

Why do some parents succeed in their efforts to maintain the home language and to raise their children bilingually in English and a LOTE while others fail? Our guest speaker in this week's [Lecture in Linguistic Diversity](#), Dr Van Tran from Charles Sturt University, explored precisely this question with a focus on Vietnamese in Australia.

As part of the "[Vietspeech](#)" research project, the researcher surveyed over 150 first generation Vietnamese parents living in Australia with children aged below 18 years. The questionnaire study asked parents to rate their children's proficiency in Vietnamese and English, respond to questions about language use practices, and identify characteristics of the child, the parent, the family, and the community. She then went on to identify the factors that differed for children with above and below average Vietnamese language proficiency (as rated by their parents).

With regard to spoken language proficiency, the best predictor was child language use. Maybe unsurprisingly, the more likely a child was to use Vietnamese, the higher their ability to speak the language.

This finding points to the existence of vicious and virtuous cycles in language learning. A vicious language learning cycle is one where there are few opportunities to speak, resulting in fewer practice opportunities, resulting in deteriorating language proficiency, resulting in reduced likelihood to speak. By contrast, a virtuous language learning cycle works in the opposite direction: many and varied practice opportunities lead to proficiency gains which in turn further increase the likelihood of language use.

**This means that the ability to establish virtuous language learning cycles is one of the secrets of success in bilingual parenting.**

With regard to written proficiency, the researcher identified a correlation with children's age: obviously, a child has to be old enough to learn how to write. Literacy is tied to schooling. Therefore, children who had only recently arrived in Australia and had experienced some schooling in Vietnam had an advantage when it came to Vietnamese literacy.

In Australia, community language schools are supposed to teach literacy in the home language. However, the VietSpeech team has found that it makes no difference for a child's Vietnamese proficiency whether a child attends a community school or not. However, it would be wrong to conclude that language education in school is pointless and that all that matters is parental effort.

Parental attitudes and efforts matter most in the early years. During the early years, the focus is necessarily on developing oral proficiency and on getting those virtuous language cycles going. However, **the control parents have over a child's linguistic environment decreases rapidly as they get older.**

Starting school is usually a [turning point](#) and virtuous language learning cycles can all too easily collapse into vicious cycles at that point.

The challenge of maintaining the LOTE as the habitual language spoken in the home in the early primary years is magnified by the fact that, at this point, literacy comes into play. To continue developing the LOTE towards the full range of linguistic proficiencies, including academic proficiencies that will last into adulthood, it is essential for children to learn how to read and write in the LOTE. And learning to read and write does not only mean learning one's ABC but being able to draw knowledge from increasingly complex texts.

Achieving biliteracy on parental effort alone, without school support, is extremely difficult. Some families adopt a **“one child, two curricula” approach** ([Chao and Ma, 2019](#)). In this approach, which is also employed by some of the participants in our team member's [Yining Wang's](#) research with Chinese parents in Australia, parents coach their children outside school hours in the curriculum of the home country. In Chao and Ma's study, this included Chinese and maths; for one of Yining's participants, coaching was even more extensive and also included history and social studies.

Adopting a “one child, two curricula” approach is only feasible for a small minority of families. The capacity constraints on the part of both children and parents are obvious. Therefore, **for biliteracy to ever be a feasible option for all families who want it, school support is essential.**

In Australia, only a very small number of schools offer bilingual

curricula. Bilingual schools such as the [German International School Sydney](#), are not a wide option, either. They are few and far between and almost always expensive private schools.

This leaves community language schools as the main option to develop and support children's written home language proficiency. Unfortunately, Dr Tran's finding that Vietnamese community schools do not seem to be particularly effective is not unusual. With so many other things competing for precious time, most community schools find that attendance starts to plummet by the mid-primary years.

Australia is not unusual in its neglect of community schools, as Martha Sif Karrebæk recently reported in her [account of heritage language education in Denmark](#).

However, it does not have to be that way, as [an initiative in the German state of North-Rhine Westphalia](#) shows. There schools are required to provide home language teaching if requested by a minimum of 15 parents. Currently, schools in the city of Dortmund (ca. 586,000 inhabitants), for instance, teach 14 different home languages as part of their regular curriculum.

So proud is the city of its achievement in bilingual education that they've produced [a video](#) about it. Entitled “**Every language is a treasure**”, the heart-warming video [in German, Arabic, Bosnian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish] features the voices of parents, children, teachers, and policy makers, and shows **the real secret of successful bilingual parenting: communities and schools that value languages.**

## Next Lecture in Linguistic Diversity

Learn more about bilingual education and home language maintenance in Australia at next week's lecture by Dr Kerry Taylor-Leech about “[Translanguaging and identity: Creating safe space for Samoan language and culture in an Australian a'oga amata](#)”

## References

Chao, X., & Ma, X. Transnational habitus: Educational, bilingual and biliteracy practices of Chinese sojourner families in the U.S. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 0(0), 1468798417729551. doi:10.1177/1468798417729551

Piller, I., & Gerber, L. (2018). Family language policy between the bilingual advantage and the monolingual mindset. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-14. doi:10.1080/13670050.2018.1503227 [[available open access](#)]