

Bilingualism as a catalyst for social development in children

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A child deciding if he wants to follow the experimenter's point during the test phase of the study. Credit: SUTD

SUTD researchers delve into the bilingual experience and its impact on children's context-sensitive perception of trust, offering insights into

how language diversity can enrich and benefit children's social-cognitive development.

As children learn more about the world through the people around them, the [diversity](#) in languages presents them with a unique opportunity for better social-cognitive learning.

Past research has shown that children who grew up bilingual have heightened sensitivities to communicative cues and are more adept at understanding a speaker's context and intent. An area that had yet to be explored was the role of bilingualism in a child's ability to assess communicative cues along with the speaker's context and intent.

Associate Professor Yow Wei Quin from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) addressed this gap in literature by investigating how children with varying linguistic backgrounds consider context when evaluating a speaker's reliability in communicative cues.

Together with SUTD researcher Li Xiaoqian, Assoc Prof Yow published a paper titled, 'Role of bilingual experience in children's context-sensitive selective trust strategies' in *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. The research provided novel insights into how the bilingual experience influences the ability of children to discern and trust reliable speakers.

The participating children, aged between three and five, were tasked with finding a sticker hidden in one of two boxes, which were either transparent or partially covered. An informant was present to aid their search by giving accurate or inaccurate cues to the whereabouts of the sticker.

Based on the boxes used, the children knew if the informant could see the location of the sticker (visual access to information). The setup was

repeated in several phases prior to the actual experiment to help the children determine if the informant was reliable in giving correct cues (accurate informant versus inaccurate informant).

What Assoc Prof Yow found was that children with greater [language diversity](#) were more sensitive to contextual factors when assessing the informant's reliability than those with less language diversity. When the informant had visual access to information, these children would selectively trust the informant if he or she had previously provided accurate cues, but not when he or she provided inaccurate cues in the past.

On the other hand, if the children attributed the informant's prior inaccuracy to the lack of visual access to information, they showed comparable trust towards both accurate and inaccurate informants. This result demonstrates bilingual children's deeper understanding of contexts and communication nuances.

"The advantages of bilingualism in children's social-cognitive development likely stem from a greater communicative flexibility that the children has acquired in order to interact socially with people from different language and cultural backgrounds," Assoc Prof Yow explained. Regularly adapting to changing communicative contexts, when switching between speakers of [different languages](#) or cultures for example, challenges and fine-tunes the children's skillful management of their daily interactions.

Through this research, Assoc Prof Yow aims to develop ideas on ways to embrace language diversity, with the ultimate goal of harnessing the advantages of bilingualism to improve the developmental and educational outcomes for children from all walks of life. For example, encouraging dual language exposure can boost opportunities for children to develop effective communicative skills and social-cognitive abilities.

In the bigger picture, Assoc Prof Yow hopes to inspire a positive shift in attitudes towards language diversity.

"By embracing bilingualism, parents and educators can provide their children with a rich social and cognitive foundation for the development of important social-communication skills," she said.

Assoc Prof Yow's next step is to extend her research to the role of multilingualism in children's development and the impact of language diversity in adulthood. Supported by the Singapore Ministry of Education Academic Research Fund, her team at SUTD, has embarked on a project that investigates how lifelong bilingual experiences and picking up different languages early in life can shape social understanding in young and older adults.

Together with a team of researchers led by Assoc Prof Helen Zhou from NUS, they are also evaluating how such experiences promote cognitive and brain plasticity, believing that these new insights can help humans leverage the advantages of [language](#) diversity for personal growth and social cohesion.

More information: W. Quin Yow et al, Role of bilingual experience in children's context-sensitive selective trust strategies, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S1366728923000433](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728923000433)

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