

The importance of the mother tongue

ESL students in international schools learn English more quickly and effectively if they maintain and develop their proficiency in the mother tongue.

How does the mother tongue help the learning of English?

Research* has shown that many skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to the second language. So, for example, if your child has developed good reading skills in Korean, she is likely to be able to apply these skills when reading English. (One useful reading skill is the ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. Another one is the ability to decide which new words in a text are important to look up in the dictionary and which words can safely be ignored.) For this reason it helps if you can encourage your child to read good fiction and non-fiction in her own language. Similarly, the skills of being able to plan out a piece of writing or develop an argument in a persuasive essay can be applied in the second language once they have been learned in the first.

* "In early stages it [reading in the first language] can profoundly accelerate the development of reading ability in the second language."

This is true because:

- reading skills transfer from language one to language two
- reading provides knowledge of the world that makes second-language texts more comprehensible
- the pleasure of the reading habit itself transfers to the second language

Krashen, S. (2004) *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Heinemann. Portsmouth

Research Points:

What does the [research](#) say?

- The key to literacy engagement for English Language Learners (ELL) is connecting what they know in their first language to English.
- Conscious control and depth of one's mother tongue language facilitates the learning of a second language in the formal school setting.
- English Language Learners draw on their knowledge of other languages (Specifically their mother tongue) as they discover the complexities of the new language they are learning.
- Current views of second language development emphasize the interaction between the first language, cognitive processes, and the samples of the target language that learners encounter in the input.
- A child who sounds like a native speaker of English (Lacking accent from mother tongue) and may appear to have solid skills in English (Specifically on a social level), yet may not be able to function cognitively at the same level. Teachers and ELL specialists need to take caution in this area, as the child's abilities may mask the reality.
- Early second language learning needs to be approached cautiously. Young children can lose their native language in their early years, as their native tongue is still developing. This can result in [subtractive bilingualism](#), or [semilingualism](#), both of which can have lasting negative consequences on academic development, emotional development, and on family dynamics. Again, children who begin their schooling in a language they are grounded in will have more success, more self-confidence, and will be able to learn a second language more effectively in the early school years.

What are the other reasons for maintaining and developing mother tongue proficiency? Firstly, many children in

international schools plan to return to their home country at some point to continue their education there. This is a strong reason to make sure they do not have gaps in mother tongue language or cognitive development. And secondly, ESL students who turn against or otherwise neglect their mother tongue can often suffer from problems of identity loss or alienation from their parents, and from their grandparents or other family members in their home country.

How can ESL students best develop their mother tongue proficiency? For some students, developing mother tongue proficiency is easier because they have lessons each week in their native language. For students who are not in this fortunate position, there is still much that can be done to maintain the mother tongue. For example, parents can make sure that they have good reference books or textbooks at home - in the native language. Students should be encouraged to read good literature and to discuss school work. Some of the long summer vacation could be devoted to mother-tongue learning and reading.

Your children will learn English much more effectively if they continue to develop their first language at the same time.

Benefits of Bilingualism

It is often questioned, particularly in the United States, whether bilingualism is an advantage or a disadvantage. Internationally, we must look at the level of bilingualism that we're talking about. Students who are "[Limited Bilinguals](#)" are those who are not fully fluent or literate in both their mother tongue and in the second language. This is obviously a disadvantage, and an issue that ISB educators and parents are looking to avoid. ISB and international families must work hand in hand to promote age-appropriate competency in both the mother tongue and the English language. By fully developing both languages, our students will become "[Balanced Bilinguals](#)". Balanced Bilinguals are those who have age-appropriate

competency in both languages. Balanced bilingualism brings many positive cognitive benefits:

- Strong level of creativity
- Solid problem-solving ability
- Superior awareness of language properties
- Monolingual people only use 20% of their brain! When another language is learned, a different area of the brain is activated and engaged, utilizing a greater percentage of the brain
- Greater capacity for inventiveness and creativity with oral and written language
- Greater sensitivity to grammatical functions
- Heightened respect for different languages and cultures, creating learners with a more global approach to life
- Higher performance rate than monolinguals on tests of intelligence and tests of fluency, flexibility, and originality
- Greater marketability in the professional world

How to help your child learn faster:

In this article I would like to make suggestions to parents who wish to support their children at home without employing a private tutor. The single most effective thing a student can do at home is to read regularly. If this is done over a long period, it will benefit your child in various ways: it will obviously develop her general ability to understand what she reads, but it will also increase her vocabulary and provide models of grammar and sentence structure that will help her in her own writing.

Your child can develop her listening skills at home by borrowing audio cassettes and video cassettes from the main school and ESL libraries. For speaking practice your child could give a summary of the main events in the stories she has read or heard, or she could state some of the important information she has learned from non-fiction sources. Writing can be practiced if your child keeps a journal in which, for example, she records her response to the books she has read or movies or TV programs she has seen. She could also create her own fiction stories.

As for grammar and vocabulary: in my opinion these are best learned in the contexts of reading or listening. However, there are many grammar and vocabulary practice books available, and if your child has one that she enjoys using, there is no reason why she should not spend an hour or so a week on such exercises. The suggestions made above will help your child to improve her general English proficiency, and this of course will have a beneficial effect on her other school work. You may, however, wish to help her more directly with her assignments in her other subjects, such as science, history, maths etc. In this case the best thing you can do is to have at home good reference materials*, **in your own language**. Your child can consult these to increase her general understanding of the topic she is learning. It would also help very much if you could discuss with her what she has read, again in your own language. This will deepen her background knowledge and prepare her to understand the difficult English she will hear and read in school.

The final piece of advice here is perhaps the most important: if your child does not herself have the desire to do extra practice at home as suggested above, then it is best to respect this. She is probably working hard enough already and may prefer to spend her free time just doing nothing, or in a sporting or musical activity. This mental and physical relaxation is the best way to prepare her for the rigors of the next school day. In fact, being involved in an after-school activity is a great way for your child to mix with native-speakers of English and practice her speaking skills!

* Reference materials include encyclopedia[†], atlases, bilingual dictionaries, and textbooks from your child's native school system.

† The Microsoft computer encyclopedia [Encarta](#) is available in many different language editions. It is a good starting point for acquiring general background information on a huge variety of topics. The online dictionary [Wikipedia](#) is another good, and growing, source of information in all the world's major languages.

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Language Learning Tips:

Here are some tips for your family that can support the development and strengthening of the Mother Tongue, which will ultimately also enhance additional languages that are learned.

- **Make a Plan and Set a Goal:** Decide which [Family Language Plan](#) suits your family situation and your child. Think about your mother tongue and the research that supports preserving and enhancing this language. Determine the level of language ability you want your child to development in both the mother tongue and language learned at school.
- **Your Commitment:** After you have chosen Family Language Plan strategy, please be consistent with it! Changes will not occur overnight, and you may even find that your child will rebel from the linguistic plan. Be persistent, perseverant, and patient!
- **Speak Your Language Properly:** When talking to your child, speak your language articulately, using rich vocabulary, and without the use of "baby talk". Use the appropriate names and create whole, articulate sentences. Children can handle this, and develop stronger language skills (In multiple languages) as a result. You can develop Mother Tongue skills by reading, talking and writing in your native language.
- **Different Topics:** Talk about everything (In your mother tongue, of course)! Speak with your child about what is happening around you, encourage your child to ask questions, and take the time to answer them too. Remember, knowledge, skills and concepts that are learned in the native language can easily be transferred into another language. However, if no concepts are learned in the mother tongue, the vocabulary and literacy of the child will be very limited - in all the languages that he/she is studying.
- **Different Means:** Follow up your Family Language Plan with music, books, stories, tapes and computer software in your mother tongue language. You can also create native language games according to your child's development, and make your own collection of rhymes and riddles that can be used over and over again.
- **Broad Range of Conversation Partners:** Show your child that other people speak your language too. Your child needs to hear the

language from many different speakers (Old, young, male and female voices, various accents and dialects, and in different media such as the telephone or radio). Enlist the help of family members to help support this. Also, mix with other people from the community who speak your language to expose your child to different situations and environments. This allows the child to learn how adults communicate, as he/she has the opportunity to listen to communication between same language speakers.

- **Take Your Language To School:** Let teachers, other parents and children at GEMS know, what language(s) your family speaks. It is important to know that teachers support your mother tongue, and often encourage parents to participate in creating a multicultural climate with global students through projects and information about your culture and language. Children feel a deeper sense of cultural pride and self-awareness when they know that their mother tongue is valued both at home and school.
- **Praise Your Child and Have Fun!:** Continue to positively nurture and praise your child's growth and development both at home and school. Support your child at his/her own pace. Focus on the fun involved and avoid stress. Enjoy and praise every little progress and focus on small success.

Fact or Fiction?

More than one language confuses the child and it mixes the languages: FICTION

No, research shows that having more than one language only provides advantages to a child. Bilingual children often go through a state when they mix languages. This is normal, and a stage that typically passes.

A language is just a language, and the diminishing of the mother tongue is not that big of a deal: FICTION

Language is not only the means of communication, but it is also deeply connected with culture. If children lose their mother tongue in the early years, they are also losing a part of their culture, resulting of the stripping of identity. Language is not just a language, it also means learning and understanding the culture that the language belongs to.

Speaking more the second language without accent means that you are bilingual: FICTION

It is not unusual for younger language learning children to speak their second language without a foreign accent. The lack of accent is a physical issue and has nothing to do with the amount or level of language that the child has achieved.

Questions & Answers

Question: *When my child has friends come to the house to play, I am confused about what language to speak if the friend does not speak our mother tongue.*

Answer: Our GEMS children interact in English every school day. It is the common language that links them together, and the language that was used to form their friendship. When your child has a friend of another language over, address the children in English. However, when directly speaking to your child about something not related to the play date, revert to your mother tongue. You become a language model for both your child, and the child he/she is playing with, sending the message that mother tongue is valued and used.

Question: *My child's English is better than mine. It is helpful if I can use him as a translator in the community. Is it OK to do this?*

Answer: As parents, we have determined that it is important for our child to learn an additional language for a variety of reasons. Your child has worked hard to obtain English. Show your child that you respect his hard work of obtaining the language. Challenge yourself to take classes to learn English, and allow your child to see that you too struggle in the language learning process. Your child can connect to these experiences of frustration, and will understand and respect why he/she has been educated to learn more than one language. Using your child as an interpreter is not encouraged.

Question: *When my child was born, I always spoke Thai, my mother tongue, to her. But by the time she was 2 or 3, I started to worry that she would need English to succeed at GEMS. She is five years old now, and I am not sure anymore about what is right. What should I do?*

Answer: Having a Family Language Plan is vital, but parents and even teachers, don't always know or fully understand this. If you started speaking Thai to your child from birth to age 2, then Thai is her mother tongue, and it still remains a part of her brain. It is important to determine what linguistic goals you have for your child. Do you want your child to be able to communicate with grandparents and other family members proficiently in her mother tongue? Do you want your child to feel a sense of pride about being Thai? Do you want your child to reap the benefits of being bilingual? It is not too late to revert back to speaking only Thai to her. However, once you commit to this, it is vital that you remain firm and consistent in doing this, and avoid language mixing. When she speaks to you in English, always answer her question in Thai. Do not force the language on her. The transition of returning to the mother tongue will not happen overnight, or even in a few weeks. It takes time, dedication and, most important, modeling and consistency by you. It is also important to notify the teacher about how language has been handled at home and find out if the child is struggling in English learning. Often times, when children are not grounded in their mother tongue, their second language suffers as well because they cannot make linguistic connections.

Question: *My child's first language is Dutch, but his first reading experiences are in English. We've always spoken Dutch at home, but is it OK that English is the language where he is getting his first literacy skills? And when should I have him learn to read and write in Dutch?*

Answer: When children learn a second language in the early years, it is common that they may also have their first reading and writing experience in this second language. This is OK. Knowing exactly when to introduce the child to mother tongue literacy skills is more difficult to respond to. This is always a "case by case" situation. Some parents wait until the English reading and writing skills are solid, and other parents have the child taking mother tongue reading/writing classes simultaneously. There is no specific "right" time to go about this. If you decide that your child will learn mother tongue literacy skills while he is learning English literacy skills, is important to keep an eye on your child's progress, remaining closely connected with

all teachers involved to ensure that forward progress is continuing. If you decide to wait until your child is a little older and fluent in English literacy skills, this is OK too, as your child will have a connection to make that will transfer. It is a good idea to talk with both the classroom teacher and the ESL teacher that works in the mainstream classroom.

Question: *When my child goes to the GEMS library, she picks so many books that she always wants me to read at home. We are supposed to encourage our kids to practice reading, and to read to them, but I feel like I am getting mixed messages. Do I reject these English books? Should I translate them in to my mother tongue?*

Answer: GEMS does promote and foster the love of literature and we do encourage our parents to help support this by reading to the children at home. The library is a time of individual book choice. The children enjoy this freedom and often choose many books that they are excited about. Reading the children a bedtime story in English is perfectly acceptable. However, if you have limited time with your child to enhance the mother tongue, you may want to create a schedule for book reading that can work towards benefiting both the mother tongue and your child's enthusiasm for his/her English books. For example, perhaps on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, you can read your child's English library books, and on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, you can read books from that are in your mother tongue. Explain to your child why such a schedule and maintaining the mother tongue is important. By setting a routine and remaining consistent, your child will come to accept the schedule and comply with it. Another option, if you are limited in mother tongue literature, is to take the library books that are in English, and summarize each page in your mother tongue, essentially telling the story in your native language.