Learning many languages 'no problem for infants'

By Sumita Sreedharan, TODAY | Posted: 07 February 2012 0736 hrs

SINGAPORE: A child's language learning ability is not hindered even if he or she is taught multiple languages, according to a landmark study.

The study of 100 infants, aged between 18 and 30 months, found they could coordinate different sets of rules when learning different languages.

The infants were taught a new word using a video display, and then an element, for example, the tone, would be changed.

Researchers would track the children's eye movements to see if they thought the meaning of the word had changed.

Associate Professor Leher Singh from the National University of Singapore's Department of Psychology found that children aged 18 months could differentiate words using vowels and tones in the languages that they are learning, and it did not matter if they were monolingual English learners or English-Mandarin bilinguals.

When children reached the age of 24 months, English learners were able to identify that a vowel change means a change in meaning for English words.

English-Mandarin learners, meanwhile, were able to consider both vowel and tone changes when identifying that there was a change to the meaning of Mandarin words.

She also found that children aged 30 months were able to translate between English and Mandarin but could only do so from the language that they were dominant into the non-dominant language.

For example, if an infant learns 60 per cent English and 40 per cent Mandarin, the child can translate rapidly from English to Mandarin but not vice versa.

The landmark study did not come without its own challenges. "When working with children ... you are not sure if you caught the child in a bad or uncooperative mood," said Assoc Prof Singh.

Her team is looking to study this area further and are recruiting about 200 children between the ages of two to four.

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