WILL MY CHILD SPEAK LIKE MY MAID?

a guide for parents

UNDERSTANDING CHILD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
WHAT IS THIS GUIDE ABOUT?

This guide focuses on child language development in the context of multilingual (two or more languages) Singapore.

Over the years, the role of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) have become integral in running Singaporean households smoothly. Your FDW sends and picks up your child to and from school, cooks for them and attends to their needs at home. Some are even tasked to supervise your child’s homework completion.

As such, parents may have concerns:

① **Will my maid’s lack of proficiency in English impact my child’s language development?**

② **Should I get my child to learn a foreign language from her instead?**

③ **How can I help my child acquire English proficiently?**

Through this guide, we hope to provide you a better understanding about the language acquisition of children by answering the abovementioned questions.
WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

Full-time working parents employing an FDW

Concerned parent(s) who wish(es) to help your child learn languages efficiently

Anyone who wants to find out more about child language development!
Q: Will my FDW’s lack of proficiency in English impact my child’s language skills negatively?

A: Your FDW’s lack of proficiency in English will not impact your child’s language skills negatively, to a certain extent.

What does it mean to be proficient to be a language? Although there is no ‘one size fits all’ definition to this concept, proficiency usually refers to a person’s ability to use a language for a variety of purposes, including speaking, listening, reading and writing. In other words, to consider your FDW proficient in English is to regard her as an ‘expert’ in the language, which most of us are not. Hence, a more appropriate term would be ‘fluent’, where a speaker is comfortable with a language, which is not necessarily their first.

Your FDW may have an accented English but that’s okay! All of us speak English with a little accent, and we may not even realise it. Accents are a result of where and how we have learnt the language we are speaking. Thus we have to understand that not everyone speaks English the way we do.
But what if our FDWs have very limited vocabulary and poor sentence structure? Will our child pick up poor grammatical habits? This seems to be the worry that most parents have.

**Fret not!** Children will always make grammatical mistakes. It is in fact, all part of the language-learning process. As they are still figuring out how to grasp certain rules in constructing sentences, they will tend to make ‘errors’ in their speech. For example, you may have heard your child saying **runned** instead of **ran**. What happened here is that the child has learnt how to use the rule for past tense, but overextends it to all verbs.

This is a good sign! It shows that your child is not imitating whatever he/she hears from the people around them.\(^2\)

Although your child may seem clueless about language, they are actually adept language learners. From a very young age, children are able to tell who are good language teachers. In other words, they can tell who are providing the right input, and whose input they should take with a pinch of salt. Children are skilful in extracting the language patterns they hear and filtering out noise and irrelevant data, which means that even if your FDWs are uttering the incorrect verbs, children are able to pick up on the general trend.\(^3\)
When it comes to language acquisition, quality is more important than quantity. To ensure that your child develops their language skills properly, your FDW must have quality interactions with them. Not only do children need to hear words, they too need to feel engaged in conversations.\[4\]

This is where it may be a challenge. If your child does not go to a pre-school, which can provide a rich and supportive environment in building their language skills, it is therefore important for your child to feel connected with your FDW. It is through quality interactions that the child is able to say and learn new words and meanings. Lesser opportunities for quality interactions can impede a child’s language development.

So **encourage** your FDW to build rapport with your child! After all, she’s the one your child is spending time with while you’re at work. Not only can she help to build your child’s language skills, they can also have fun and enjoy each other’s company.

Your child may even learn more about another culture!
Q: You mentioned culture. Should I get my child to learn another language from my FDW?

A: Yes! You can get your child to learn another language! And don’t worry, your child will not get confused.

If your FDW is more comfortable speaking in her own language to your child, then let your child pick up her language! Some parents worry about their child learning more than one or two languages when they are young, claiming that an additional language would only cause their children to be confused but this is not true.

As your children get older, they will lose their initial ability to distinguish speech sounds from various languages—an ability that they have when they were new-borns. This is because they tend to focus in on the sounds that occur in the language that their mothers would speak to them.\(^5\)

However, if your child is exposed to a few languages at a very young age, they will be able to “retain” the ability to extinguish these foreign sounds. This is due to the ‘critical period’ that enables children to pick up languages easily and effectively.\(^5\)
Your child will not get confused learning a few languages at a time because one language does not develop at the cost of the other. Languages grow independently, hence your child would be able to absorb these languages seamlessly and keep them separate. Although your child may use or borrow terms from another language when speaking in one language, this does not mean that your child has a poor command of a language or is forgetting what they have learnt.

As your child learns several languages at a time, they will have limited vocabularies and may be slow in trying to retrieve the word in a particular language. Hence, they will use another word in another language to convey the same meaning. This shows that your child has a good awareness of languages. They may even grow to have linguistic preferences depending on who they interact with.

So if your FDW speaks Tagalog, and your child has learnt Tagalog, they will only speak in Tagalog with their FDW. This is a good way for your child to develop empathy and maintain a healthy emotional relationship with your FDW. Furthermore, in a multilingual setting like Singapore, your child will constantly be exposed to a diversity of languages all around them. It is therefore helpful to get your child to learn another language and have language practice with people around them who matter.

*I want that... bola*!

*bola* is 'ball' in Malay/Bahasa Indonesia
Q: HOW CAN I, AS A PARENT, ENSURE THAT MY CHILD ACQUIRE A LANGUAGE PROFICIENTLY?

A: FOUR LETTERS. T.A.L.K.

T – TEACH
A – AMPLE INTERACTIONS
L – LOVE YOUR KIDS
K – KNOW THEY ARE JUST KIDS

You may still be worried about your child’s language development even after reading the above-mentioned answers. You want to help your child learn English more effectively, but don’t know how. Read further to find out how you can apply the acronym above to provide a conducive environment for your child to learn the language.

As you spend a reasonable amount of time at work on weekdays and leave your child in the care of your FDW, ensure that you (and your husband/wife) set aside time for your child at the end of the weekday and throughout the weekends. The language stimulation that you give to your child during these periods of time will make all the difference.
Teach your child the right way to pronounce certain words. A study by a group of researchers from the Technical University of Denmark has claimed that toddlers are not able to react to hearing their voice the same way adults do. In other words, they are not able to adjust the way they make sounds based on what we hear. Hence, problems in pronunciation may persist and this is where parents can come in to help your child pronounce their words properly.

Guide them in their speech by repeating back the correct pronunciation but don’t make them say it. There is no need to. Focus on the content of the message that your child is trying to deliver, rather than highlighting what your child has said incorrectly. This helps to provide a safe, subtle and positive correction by modelling the correct responses.

Have Ample interactions with your child. Shower your child with the attention that they need. The way you interact with your child makes a big difference to how well their languages develop. Researcher Kathy Hirsch-Pasek and her colleagues found that 3-year-olds had stronger language skills as they were involved in interactions with their mothers that had joint engagement, familiar routines and connectedness.
Joint engagement refers to a parent-child interaction, where both parties are focusing on and sending messages about the same thing. This kind of interaction is object-driven, that is both parent and child must be referring to something while they are talking. This allows your child to learn words as you will provide the necessary vocabulary needed to describe the actions and the objects that both of you are paying attention to.

Engage in two-way routines—such as having lunch, playing games, or reading a book together with your child. The familiarity of the routines will help your child pay attention to your actions and your speech hence helping them to learn language more effectively.

When you and your child are connected during your conversations with one another, it holds the attention span of your child and motivates your child to interact with you. This provides more room for them to improve and learn.[11]

Lastly, Love your children. Know that your children are just children. Don’t worry too much if your child is unable to articulate their thoughts properly. As they are still young, their speech will be susceptible to errors. Be patient, keep talking and responding to them. Your child will greatly benefit from constant exposure to language that is rich not just in information, but also quality.
USEFUL RESOURCES

If you notice your child has speech and language difficulties and exhibits the following symptoms:

- Language delays or disorders (difficulty understanding or expressing him/herself at an age-appropriate level)
- Speech sound disorders (mispronunciation or distortion of sounds)
- Stammering/stuttering (disruption to the natural flow of speech)
- Voice disorders (abnormal pitch, loudness or quality of the sound produced)

You may approach Speech Language Therapists at KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital to get an assessment of your child’s communication, feeding and swallowing skills. This is to ensure that your child is given the appropriate individualised treatment to meet his/her needs.

You may enquire more about Speech Language Therapy and/or other rehabilitation services at:

KK WOMEN’S AND CHILDREN’S HOSPITAL
REHABILITATION CENTRE BASEMENT 1, CHILDREN’S TOWER (BESIDE CHILDREN’S EMERGENCY)
TEL: +65 6294 4050 (BY APPOINTMENT)


thank you!