

Author's Statement:

The initial prompt for this essay was to write an argumentative essay that related to the readings we had in class. The topics included immigration, language barriers, and social change. At the time of writing, the debate of bilingual education was still a heated topic in Mongolia, and I saw it as an opportunity to contribute to the discussion with more than a social media post. As I conducted my research, I discovered that this problem wasn't unique to Mongolia but also prevalent in places like Native American Tribes in North America, India, Pakistan, and many other countries. My personal goal in writing this essay turned into contributing to a cause I deeply care about – the continued preservation of the beauty and diversity of languages.

Bilingual Education in Mongolia: Balancing English Proficiency and Native Language Preservation

In the capital city of Mongolia, where almost two thirds of the country's population reside, fierce debate erupted among the public in May 2023 when several government officials advocated for introducing English language instruction in the first grade at public schools. This proposal was made to bridge the educational disparity between public and private schools and by extension socioeconomic classes. While public schools start teaching English from the fourth grade, their private counterparts often initiate English instruction as early as the first grade. English proficiency offers substantial benefits for students, such as access to a global network of information and increased professional opportunities. However, implementing a curriculum that prioritizes English language acquisition from the first grade runs the risk of subtractive bilingualism, stagnation, and potential loss of the Mongolian language. Moreover, the benefits of early introduction for language acquisition have weak evidentiary support

and takes away from resources that could instead be used for revising and improving the current English curriculum that starts from the fourth grade.

Learning English has become imperative for a developing country with a budding population of just over three million people such as Mongolia. The higher education system in Mongolia is not developed enough to fulfill the needs of the tens of thousands of students graduating each year. English, the global lingua franca, has also gained prominence in the last thirty years in Mongolia due to the country's third neighbor policy with the United States. Learning English allows students to tap into a world reservoir of knowledge not accessible in Mongolian and accelerate their academic development in school. Proficiency of the language is also one of the most critical factors in getting into higher education institutions abroad. The importance placed upon foreign higher education can be seen from the thousands of Mongolians taking English proficiency examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL each year, often repeatedly, in hopes of passing the threshold proficiency for university. The number of Grade 12 students using ESL (English as a Second Language) examination scores for admission to domestic universities exceeds two thousand; based on this information, one can infer that more than ten thousand individuals are taking the tests each year (Davaabazar). Attending and graduating from a foreign university represent pathways to individual upward social mobility, offering personal growth and enhanced opportunities. Conversely, when citizens study abroad and come back, it contributes to the country's economic and academic development.

The proposal's emphasis on the instruction of English itself is not the issue. Bilingualism is proven to have many cognitive benefits, such as better executive functioning, problem-solving skills, and multitasking abilities (Bialystok 229). The critical period hypothesis and empirical evidence also support the widely held belief regarding that the average achievement of older language learners is less than that of those in their younger years. (Johnson and Newport). This simplified inverse

relationship between age and language acquisition influenced politicians to push for an introduction of English language in the first grade. Most private schools also have a second language program from the first grade; gradually transitioning into a curriculum taught solely in that second-language is also a common phenomenon among such schools.

However, the bilingualism that the government is promoting is subtractive, rather than genuine additive bilingualism. As a result, it does not yield the same benefits as its additive counterpart. Introducing Mongolian and English simultaneously raises the concern of subtractive bilingualism, a phenomenon where learning a globally dominant second language negatively impacts native language proficiency. In comparison to bilingual programs in developed countries with widely spoken native languages, Mongolian is notably more susceptible to subtractive bilingualism. Wright's research underscores this vulnerability, stating that 'the greater the difference in the social status, institutional dominance, and numerical superiority between the two languages,' the more likely it is to have subtractive effects on first language proficiency (Wright 64). This subtractive nature also detracts from the benefits of bilingualism and Mongolian proficiency in youth.

To establish classical additive bilingualism, a threshold proficiency, denoted by literacy, in the first language would be required. This is discussed in the “threshold hypothesis” and the “first things first” principle initially proposed by Cummins and Swain (Swain). Naturally, students entering their first year of formal schooling will not have developed this threshold proficiency in the Mongolian language. The application of age preventing learners from achieving native-like fluency in a second language is also too narrow to carry any weight in the case of comparing nine-year-olds to six-year-olds; it incorrectly assumes that there is a linear age-related decline in the success of first language acquisition even before puberty. This belief could be born from misinterpreting the critical period hypothesis in linguistics, which proposes that language can be only

acquired within a specific timeframe which extends from infancy to puberty and only applies to first language acquisition. Although there is some support that the hypothesis extends its effects to second language acquisition (Johnson and Newport, 60), there is no clear consensus on what accounts for the benchmark age of the hypothesis with ages ranging from 5 to 15 (Hakuta et al. 32). Overall, moving the starting date of English language instruction from age nine to age six will not have consequential advantages that justifies the negative consequences created by not adhering to the threshold principle.

Rather than diverting resources towards the premature introduction of English in public schools, a more practical approach is to allocate these resources to research and enhance the existing public school English curriculum. Currently, the burden of second language acquisition falls on the students due to inadequately sanctioned English classes. Numerous public school English teachers resort to expensive outsourced textbooks, which places a financial burden on students. By elevating the quality of the state-issued English textbook and implementing robust curricular support that complements Mongolian language instruction, such as pen-pal programs and translation workshops, we can ensure that the benefits of English language education are accessible to both public and private school students.

Many countries are facing similar challenges of striking the balance between colloquially dominant language and native language instruction. By embracing protective measures such as maintaining a required proficiency level before introducing foreign language instruction and tailoring curriculums to individual needs, we can not only ensure the vibrancy of linguistic and cultural diversity but also create an environment where individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have equal opportunities to flourish.

WORKS CITED

- Bialystok, Ellen. “Reshaping the Mind: The Benefits of Bilingualism.” *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2011, pp. 229–35, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025406>.
- Cummins, J., and Swain, M. *Bilingualism in education: Aspects of theory, research and practice*, Longman, 1986.
- Davaabazar, B. “Олон улсын шалгалтын дүнгээ ЭЕШ-ын оноогоор дүйцүүлсэн сурагчийн тоо өнгөрсөн жилээс хоёр дахин өсөж, 2,020 болов” (Number of students using international test scores for GEE doubles to 2020), *ikon.mn*, ikon.mn/n/2w41, 12.10.2023
- Hakuta, Kenji, et al. “Critical Evidence: A Test of the Critical-Period Hypothesis for Second-Language Acquisition.” *Psychological Science*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp. 31–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.01415>.
- Johnson, Jacqueline S., and Elissa L. Newport. “Critical Period Effects in Second Language Learning: The Influence of Maturational State on the Acquisition of English as a Second Language.” *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1989, pp. 60–99, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(89\)90003-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(89)90003-0).
- Wright, Stephen C., et al. “Subtractive Bilingualism and the Survival of the Inuit Language: Heritage- Versus Second-Language Education.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 92, no. 1, 2000, pp. 63–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.92.1.63>.