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The Use of “Ná” and “Hold” Verbs by Bilingual Pre-School Children in Singapore

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Abstract. Verb forms a major category of lexicon in any language. As our daily actions consist of mostly hand actions, it is important for bilingual speakers to be able to use different specific hand action verbs to describe the corresponding actions. This study focuses on one particular type of hand action, namely, holding actions, to examine Singaporean bilingual preschoolers’ competencies in both English and Mandarin through their usage of holding verbs.

Thirty bilingual children between the ages of 3 and 6 were recruited for the study. In the experiment of the study, we used the standard PPVT-IV pictures and self-selected pictures of different holding actions as stimulus and asked the children to describe the actions in English and Chinese. The results show that most of the children used the Mandarin word “ná” (拿) and the English word “hold” for almost all the scenarios of holding in the experiment.

Keywords: Mandarin, English, holding action verb, bilingual children, language acquisition

1 Introduction

Singapore is a multi-racial country where many languages co-exist in a single society. The four official languages of Singapore are namely English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, with English being the lingua franca of communication among all the ethnic groups, while the rest of the languages being the mother tongues of the respective ethnic groups. As Singapore implements a bilingual education policy, children are all taught in English and their mother tongues when they begin to go to kindergartens around at the age of three years old. All students are taught English in schools as their first language for most of the subjects and their mother tongues language as a second language during the language lesson.

Even though Singaporean children are bilingual, most of them are English-dominated in terms of language performance. With a final goal to help our children in becoming balanced bilinguals, this study is designed to explore English-Chinese bilingual children’s varying competencies in their use of holding verbs in English and Mandarin. Factors that might be responsible for bilingual children in using holding

action verbs appropriately in both languages would be discussed. It is hoped that the results of such a study could help language teachers in understanding more specifically in terms of the degree of proficiency the bilingual children have learned the two languages, accounting for some of the verbs being easier to learn over others, and what teaching methods could be applied in their teaching of domain-specific words to bilingual children.

2 Methodology

Thirty English-Chinese Singaporean bilingual children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old were recruited for this study.

There are in total four parts designed for this study. The first part consists of a parental report designed by Gao (2014) for the investigation of Singaporean bilingual children's lexical development.

The second part is a standard PPVT-IV test where children were being asked to identify pictures of simple objects. We used the results to determine whether the children's vocabulary size was within the normal range, which would serve as the benchmark for the children to continue with the third and fourth tests accordingly.

The third part is a picture test. Children were being asked to describe the different physical actions as shown in the picture.

The fourth part consists of pictures depicting different holding actions. Children were shown several pictures of a hand holding an object, one at a time. This test aims to investigate whether children are able to use different hand action verbs, that is, near-synonyms, in both languages, to identify holding actions in different manners. The objects being held by hands as shown in the pictures were commonly seen objects and thus are familiar to the children. Pictures were shown randomly in the slides. Some of them which were shown are as follow:

- two pictures with a hand holding a same object in two different manners appearing one after another
- two pictures with a hand holding a same object in different manners placed further apart; and
- two pictures with a hand holding different objects but are being held in a same manner.

3 Results and Analysis

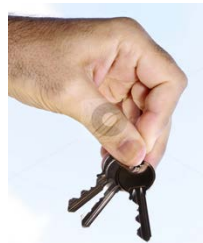
3.1 Different Verbs Used in Describing Two Pictures with a Hand Holding a Same Object

In describing two pictures with a hand holding an identical object, the bilingual children were found to be able to apply different verbs particularly when the two pictures were placed in between other pictures. For example, Pictures 1 and 2 below illustrate that the manners of how the keys were being

held are somewhat similar. The only directional difference is that the key in Picture 1 was facing upwards while the keys in Picture 2 were facing downwards.



Picture 1. Holding Action 1



Picture 2. Holding Action 2

The children were asked in both languages pertaining to what the hand was doing in the two pictures. The verbs that the children used in English included “hold”, “take”, “grab”, and “carry”. Among these, “hold” was used the most frequently, accounting 46.67% and 40.00% respectively for both figures. (See Table 1 and 2)

Most of the children who did not manage to say out the verbs responded instead by identifying the objects being held in the hand. Some also imitated the hand actions as shown in the figures or simply remained silent.

English	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	Hold	14	46.67%
	Take	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Key	7	23.33%
	Don't know	5	16.67%
	*Imitates action	1	3.33%
	*Silence	2	6.67%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 1. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 1 in English

English	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	Hold/Holding	12	40.00%
	Carrying	1	3.33%
	Grabbing	1	3.33%
	Take	3	10.00%
no hand action verbs used	Key	9	30.00%
	Don't Know	2	6.67%
	*Imitates action	2	6.67%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 2. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 2 in English

When being asked to describe Pictures 1 and 2 in Mandarin, the children’s responses varied significantly. In Picture 1, the Mandarin verbs used included “ná” (“拿”: “to hold”), “tōu” (“偷”: “to steal”), “zhuā” (“抓”: “to catch”), and “dǎ kāi” (“打开”: “to open”) (see Table 3). However, in describing Picture 2, the children used merely one verb, which was “ná” (“拿”: “to hold”).

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	13	43.33%
	偷	1	3.33%
	抓	1	3.33%
	Hold/Holding	3	10.00%
	打开	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	key	3	10.00%
	锁匙	1	3.33%
	Don't know	4	13.33%
	*Imitates action	2	6.67%
	*Silence	1	3.33%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 3. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 1 in Mandarin

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	14	46.67%
	Hold/Holding	5	16.67%
no hand action verbs used	key	3	10.00%
	锁匙	2	6.67%
	Don't Know	2	6.67%
	*Imitates action	2	6.67%
	*Silence	2	6.67%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 4. Children's responses when being asked to describe Picture 2 in Mandarin

Tables 3 and 4 list the different verbs used to describe Pictures 1 and 2. This indicates that even though the same object was being held, the participants were able to differentiate the varying manners used in holding the same object. This is particularly true of the children's responses in English.

3.2 Varieties of Verbs used in English but not in Mandarin for Similar Pictures Shown Consecutively

Pictures 3 and 4 illustrate a hand holding some 10 dollar Singapore bills. The children used a variety of English holding verbs to describe them when these two pictures were placed next to each other.



Picture 3. Holding Action 3



Picture 4. Holding Action 4

The above two pictures differ from each other in terms of the manner of holding. Picture 3 shows simply a hand holding the dollar bills in a “relaxed” manner whereas in Picture 4, the hand is being clenched in a “tensed” manner.

Table 5 lists the different verbs used by the children to describe Picture 3 as “hold”, “take” and “count”. The verbs used to describe Picture 4 also include those verbs used in describing Picture 3 but with an additional 3 verbs which are namely “catch”, “grab” and “squeeze” as listed in Table 6. This implies that the participants knew that the manners were different and they could use a variety of English verbs to differentiate the varying manners of a hand holding an identical object.

In reality, when one catches, grabs or squeezes an object, the hand tends to close up and clench. The children seemed to understand these physical differences and therefore used them accordingly to describe Picture 4. Their demonstration of these use of verbs also suggests that they knew that these verbs are different in that each verb indicates certain features that could be used to describe different holding actions. In this case, the semantic features of the English holding verbs “catch”, “grab”, and “squeeze” that can be differentiated from that of *hold* would be in terms of +more strength and +clenched fistetc.

English	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	Hold/Holding	9	30.00%
	Take	5	16.67%
	Counting	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	*Imitates action	4	13.33%
	Don't know	3	10.00%
	Money	8	26.67%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 5. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 3 in English

English	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	Hold/Holding	11	36.67%
	Take	4	13.33%
	Squeeze	1	3.33%
	Catching	2	6.67%
	Grabbing	3	10.00%
no hand action verbs used	*Imitates Action	4	13.33%
	Don't know	1	3.33%
	Money	4	13.33%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 6. Children's responses when being asked to describe Picture 4 in English

However, when the children were being asked to describe the same pictures in Mandarin, they used merely one verb “*ná*” (“*拿*”) in describing the two actions. (See Table 7 and 8) This may imply that the participants had not yet acquired the different hand action verbs in Mandarin and hence were unable to use a different verb even though they were cognitively aware of the differences between the two scenarios. This explanation could be corroborated by their usage of a variety of English holding verbs.

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	16	53.33%
	hold	1	3.33%
	count	1	3.33%
	take	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Money	4	13.33%
	钱	2	6.67%
	*Imitates action	4	13.33%
	*Silence	1	3.33%
Total Responses	30	100%	

Table 7. Children' responses when being asked to describe Picture 3 in Mandarin

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	11	36.67%
	Hold/Holding	2	6.67%
	Take	1	3.33%
	Squeeze	2	6.67%
	Catching	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Money	2	6.67%
	钱	2	6.67%
	Don't know	3	10.00%
	*Imitates Action	3	10.00%
	*Silence	3	10.00%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 8. Children's responses when being asked to describe Picture 4 in Mandarin

3.3 Similar Verbs Used for Pictures of Hand Holding in a Similar Manner

It was also observed that the verbs used by the children were relatively similar in describing the pictures of hands holding different objects in a similar manner.

For example, as illustrated in Pictures 5 and 6, the holding manners of the objects are very similar.



Picture 5. Holding Action 5



Picture 6. Holding Action 6

Tables 9 and 10 list the same variety of English holding verbs used in the description of the above pictures. They are “hold”, “take” and “carrying” (in its present parti-

iple form). The percentage of these verbs used is also relatively equal. For “hold” and “holding”, the percentages of their usage are 40.00% and 36.67% respectively. The usage of the verb “take” are also relatively equal for both pictures, with the respective percentages being 16.67% and 20.00%. The usage of “carrying” is 3.33% for both pictures. This implies that this holding action to the children corresponded to the three English holding verbs as mentioned above since no other variety of verbs were used by the children for the description of these two pictures.

English	Children	
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.) %
	Hold/Holding	12 40.00%
	Take	5 16.67%
	Carrying	1 3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Bag	6 20.00%
	Small	1 3.33%
	Don't know	3 10.00%
	*Imitates action	2 6.67%
	Total Responses	30 100%

Table 9. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 5 in English

English	Children	
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.) %
	Hold/Holding	11 36.67%
	Take	6 20.00%
	Carrying	1 3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Don't Know	4 13.33%
	Cage	1 3.33%
	Bird	5 16.67%
	*Imitates action	2 6.67%
	Total Responses	30 100%

Table 10. Children’s responses when being asked to describe Picture 6 in English

Likewise, there is one identical Mandarin verb “ná” (“拿 ”) being used to describe both Pictures 5 and 6, as listed in Tables 11 and 12. The English verb “hold” was used by the children, which indicates that although they did not know the verb of the action depicted by the pictures in Mandarin, they regarded “hold” as the equivalent of “ná” (“拿 ”) that could be used to describe the action.

In cases where no verbs were used, some participants merely named the object which the hand was holding, while the others imitated the action of the hand, and there were also some who did not know at all .

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	12	40.00%
	Hold/Holding	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	纸袋/包	2	6.67%
	Bag	5	16.67%
	Don't know	5	16.67%
	*Silence	2	6.67%
	*Imitates action	3	10.00%
	Total Responses	30	100%

Table 11. Children's responses when being asked to describe Picture 5 in Mandarin

Mandarin	Children		
	Verbs/Non-verbs	(no.)	%
	拿	11	36.67%
	Hold/Holding	1	3.33%
	Catch	1	3.33%
no hand action verbs used	Cage	1	3.33%
	鸟	3	10.00%
	Bird	1	3.33%
	Don't know	7	23.33%
	*Silence	2	6.67%
	*Imitates action	3	10.00%
Total Responses	30	100%	

Table 12. Children's responses when being asked to describe **Picture 6** in Mandarin

3.4 Discussion

In this study, an experiment was conducted in which 3-to-6-years-old bilingual pre-schoolers were being asked to identify hand holding actions in English and Mandarin. There were altogether 43 pictures of hands holding different objects shown to the children and they described them in both English and Chinese.

The most common English and Mandarin verbs used by the children in describing the 43 pictures are "hold" in English (76.63%) and "ná"("拿") in Mandarin (79.01%) respectively. It then appears that the perception of similar actions of a typical young child is simplified. This could be possible due to the fact that a child's focus while

conversing with an adult would be to convey what he or she saw in the most direct and simplistic manner possible. The Mandarin and English holding verbs “ná”(“拿”) and “hold” are considered to be the more basic verbs in describing prototypical holding actions.

The results listed in the tables demonstrate that the participants were able to differentiate certain hand actions in the pictures by using a variety of English holding verbs. However, when describing the actions in Mandarin, the children used fewer varieties of verbs significantly. There was a total of 7.38% more varieties of other English holding verbs used as compared to other Mandarin holding verbs used.

According to Gao (2015), “the types and the ordering of children’s learning of physical action verbs may advance in parallel with their experience and understanding of the physical world around them.” This suggests that in the cases of holding actions, children would find it easier to choose a word to express themselves if they had experienced the holding actions in the corresponding different manners. The children’s performance in Mandarin reveals that they might not have been using the language as often as compared to that in English. When being asked in Mandarin what the hands were doing in the pictures, most of the younger children whom are aged 3 and 4 years old did not answer the questions; instead, they merely named the objects being held in the hands. As mentioned previously, it might be due to the fact that the objects in the pictures caught the children’s attention more easily as compared to the hand action itself. Another reason could be that even though they knew (they were all able to imitate the actions) and had seen those scenarios before, they had not yet acquired or used the linguistics terms before in their daily expressions.

4 Conclusion

The verb “hold” in English and “ná” (“拿”) in Mandarin are the most commonly used hand action verbs in both languages. It is one of the earliest lexical items acquired by young children.

The results of this study demonstrate that most of the children used the Mandarin word “ná” (“拿”) and the English word “hold” correctly even though the children were mostly English dominated speakers. They tended to give responses in English despite being asked to describe the scenarios in Mandarin. In addition, they also used more English holding verbs than the Mandarin counterparts. It is possible that the children had not yet learnt the different ‘hold’ action verbs in Mandarin. Moreover, the limitation of the design of the study could have also restricted the children from giving more detailed responses. Consequently, further studies could be conducted to refine these questions.

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