

Opinion **Work & Careers**

To learn another language, first nurture your own

Research shows children do better in a multilingual environment than total immersion

MICHAEL SKAPINKER



Throwing children from non-English speaking families straight into English-only schools is usually a mistake © Getty

Michael Skapinker 5 HOURS AGO

I was in a meeting last week with people from France, Germany and the Netherlands. The meeting was in English and the conversation was fast, fluent and funny. Those present were senior business people, academics and management trainers — and I was struck, as so often, by the level of English required to function at this level.

Parents all over the world are struck by it too, which is why many want their children schooled in English. When I interviewed the South African comic [Trevor Noah](#), now the presenter of *The Daily Show* in the US, he told me that his Xhosa-speaking mother was determined that he should go to English-language schools from the beginning. She thought it would give him a leg-up.

It worked in his case. As well as being a television star, he now speaks six languages, although he added Xhosa only later. But throwing children from non-English speaking families straight into English-only schools is usually a mistake, according to a paper published this week by Oxford University Press.

Children who go to English-language schools when it is not their mother tongue often struggle to learn not just the language but their school subjects too. To thrive, it is important that they hold on to their home languages.

This matters not just for those parents, from Argentina to South Korea, who want to improve their children's prospects by ensuring they speak English. It has implications for immigrants' children in English-speaking countries too, as well as for those English speakers who want their offspring to master a useful language, such as Mandarin.

The OUP paper, "The Role of the First Language in English-Medium Instruction", says schools around the world are using several techniques to ensure their students are ready for English-language universities, whether in English-speaking countries or elsewhere, and that they can compete in the global markets of business, science and technology.

Some governments believe in English-only schooling from the start. Nkonko Kamwangamalu, linguistics professor at Howard University in the US, [has written](#) about the large number of countries in Africa that do. The results are often poor, with high illiteracy rates, and the schools, in spite of their intentions, produce students with a poor command of English.

The best results, the OUP paper says, come from schools that nurture their students' home languages while also introducing English. Some schools are bilingual, teaching subjects in both the students' national language and English. Others teach some subjects in English and others in the national language.

The OUP paper points to the growing interest in "translanguaging", which encourages students to use both their home language and English in their school work. For example, the teacher might read a story in English and then encourage students to act it out in the home language. This helps not just the development of both languages but encourages "metalinguistic awareness", an understanding of how language works.

"Translanguaging" encourages students to use both their home language and English in school work

In English grammar tests, Polish secondary school students who were asked to compare Polish and English grammar subsequently outperformed those who had only been drilled in English.

What are the consequences for students in English-speaking countries, who often learn neither their own grammar nor any other language? Is it a good idea, as some ambitious parents in the US and the

UK are doing, to send them to pre-schools in Mandarin?

Victoria Murphy, applied linguistics professor at Oxford university and a consultant on the OUP paper, told me these schools were a great idea, provided the children maintained their contact with English.

Prof Murphy, herself an anglophone graduate of the Canadian French-immersion school system, where some lessons are in English, said similar ideas could help immigrant children in English-speaking countries.

While [government figures](#) for England show teenagers with a first language other than English matching or outperforming their first-language English peers, Prof Murphy pointed out that these immigrant-heritage students cover a wide range, from those highly fluent in English to children who have just arrived from Syria.

If teachers see children talking about their class activities in their family language, they shouldn't worry. The work they turn out in English may well turn out to be better as a result.

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