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[Emerging English/Korean Bilingualism and the Power of Reading](#)

As a language educator, I have to admit there is a profound sense of wonder and excitement when you see language acquisition theories (whether or not they are based on vigorous research findings) play out before your actual eyes. Such has been my recent experience in seeing bilingualism gradually grow in my young son and then suddenly spring forth like a keen flower in early spring.



My wife (who is Korean) and I have a son named Jamie. He is now 22 months old, and aside from two one-month stints in Australia (when he was 6 months and 18 months old respectively), his whole young life has been spent here in South Korea. I would tentatively estimate that around 70-80% of his overall language exposure has been to Korean - given the time he spends with his mother, her Korean-speaking family, friends, and other children at or around his own age.

Based on the language environment and exposure, an interesting question that currently poses itself to us and our extended network of friends and family is: now that he is starting to talk, why is so much of it in English? More specifically, how can he know so many more words and phrases in English than Korean?

Jamie already knows and eagerly points out most of the English colors. He understands numbers and can count up or down through the numbers 1-14 in English (mostly 1-10 of course, but the fact we live on the 14th floor of an apartment building with an elevator that displays bold numbers for floors as they swish past is an important one!). He identifies most animals with the English animal sounds (which as you might know tend to vary somewhat across different languages: a dog's bark is "woof woof" in English, "mong-mong" in Korean, and "vov vov" in Swedish!), names fruit, toys, and even English alphabet letter names. He knows dozens of books by their English titles - even fairly long or complicated ones. What is interesting is that it appears he has a much wider initial vocabulary in English, and from what I hear, a pretty good vocabulary in general compared to his monolingual cousins and mother's friends' children.

I think the answer to this has a lot to do with reading, something I'm sure [Stephen Krashen](#) would be happy but completely unsurprised to hear, given the decades of research he has dedicated to this subject.

I began reading English storybooks to Jamie while he was still in the tummy - I think from about the first trimester. Trying to work from a bit of a plan, and within the realms of a busy work schedule, I tried to do this regularly at about the same time each evening. This continued after he was born, and was one method I used to send him off to sleep while he was lying on my chest. Very early on (I think from about 3-4 months) he began to pick up and flip through his spongy material Maisey books, and once he could sit up he became quite obsessive with the thick cardboard [Sian Tucker](#) collection of books. From about 6 months to 12 months, he perceived this as somewhat a personal hobby and he did not want people pointing things out or read aloud to him - outside of the regular story reading times, anyway.

Once he turned one, his passion for stories and, in particular, his passion for having them read aloud to him, became much more obvious. I have to admit I have indulged this interest for all it is worth, not only in reading aloud with him regularly but also in investing a relatively huge proportion of our "toys" money in books. There are books all over in our apartment, with even the bottom two rows of the bookcase in my study a place for whichever books he likes to keep there.

There are various Krashenesque theories and principles I've been fortunate enough to have played out before my very eyes with Jamie.

One is the well-known idea of a [silent period](#). Jamie spent a considerable amount of time (of course) listening and watching as the adults around him interacted and conversed, but in terms of English most of

this played out with his books. He loved to curl up in my lap and just listen as I flipped through the brilliantly simple Sian Tucker books that present vivid images of things within themes (I guess you could almost call them situational lexical sets), and as soon as one was done - he was out of the lap and crawling (later stumbling, then later still dashing) for the bookcase for another. 20-30 of these could go down in a single night before bed time. He began to point to pictures as words were read aloud, and very quickly this became a little game of differentiating two different pictures presented in one open page.

Other theories Krashen has presented include **voluntary** and **extensive** reading, and I think I pretty much just pointed those out with the examples above.

Another is the idea of children instinctively opting for a variety of books, some of which may be easy and very familiar, and others which may be at or around but slightly push or stretch the child's ability. From what I've seen with my own son, this is a natural, in-built instinct in children. Jamie tended to go through his nice easy Sian Tucker books and then move on to a story of some kind - things like a story/singalong version of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, an awesome book called [Hippos Go Berserk by Sandra Boynton](#), Dr. Seuss books, and an all time favorite: [The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle](#). He is now rather obsessed with [Owl Babies, by Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson](#). For some of these books, Jamie is content to basically follow along and listen. For others, he becomes very much involved in the story, pointing out the things he knows or even predicting what is about to happen next.



There is a heck of a lot going on here that relates directly to three other theories I've found interesting - namely, what [Bruner](#) has to say about scaffolding, routines and formats. (There's a pretty good overview of some of this stuff at [this link](#))

So, what we have here in our family is a 22-month old boy who walks around, surrounded by the Korean language, coming out with an enormous number of English words, and a real passion for reading books. He does of course speak Korean, understands it very readily, and is especially good at singing songs in Korean with his mother. But being at a sort of "look! it's a ...!" stage in his cognitive and language development, a heck of a lot of basic terms are coming out of his mouth in English. He's not yet at a point where he needs to negotiate a lot of meaning or ask for complicated things with outsiders to the immediate at-home family, so his use of English doesn't strike me as bizarre at all. No doubt that will change as he gets older, and he'll recognize the need to use one language over the other depending on the context and situation.

However, one question I get asked all the time by Korean mothers (in rather good, even elaborate English) is: **how do I give my child an early start with English?** My simple answer to that is to stop investing all your money in toddler genius programs and private tutors. Turn your home into a library, and start reading - you and your child *together*.

I have proof, you see.

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