

Bilingualism in teaching and learning: A privilege of a few or a resource for all?

Dina Mehmedbegovic

www.ioe.ac.uk



Bilingual/EAL Learners

The population of EAL learners in England has increased consistently in recent years and with it demand for different types of EAL provision linked to new patterns of immigration.

Latest national figures: 15.2 % primary ,11.1 % secondary schools. An increase from 14.3 % and 10.6% a year earlier. In urban areas there is a higher concentration, in inner London over 50% and in individual schools it can be as high as over 90%.

TDA has commissioned the Institute of Education, working with the Learning and Skills Network, to advise them on the development of a national school workforce strategy for EAL. The project runs from October 2008 to October 2010.

Starting point: Bilingualism as a resource

A bilingual child brings to school a resource for herself/himself, an additional dimension to linguistic, cognitive and social functioning that the use of two languages creates and s/he also brings a resource for everybody else in the classroom.

Key questions:

What are the benefits of promoting bilingualism in teaching and learning?

What evidence do we have?

Who currently benefits?

Being 'privileged'

Sneddon (2007) in a presentation of her research with bilingual children in mainstream London schools referred to being 'privileged' to work with children using their first languages and to witness their intellectual joy and challenge of 'solving the puzzle' that negotiating two languages presents to these children. And more so witnessing the children identified as not interested in reading transform into keen readers exploring different ways of text interpretation and comparison between languages they use. The reality is that only a small number of bilingual children in schools will themselves be privileged to operate bilingually in their mainstream classrooms and to experience the excitement, joy and stimulus of bilingual learning.

Parallel worlds

Official research reports, government policy documents and figures given for bilingual children in the context of education in England and Wales refer always only to mainstream schools. When discussing bilingual children and the positioning of other languages, one cannot help but notice that there is a visible parallel universe of private international and bilingual schools.

Insights into positioning languages skills: International schools

The following statement by a headteacher encapsulates well the aspirations of families who opt for international schools:

'Tomorrow entrepreneurs will need exceptional interpersonal skills to relate to others and to work successfully within a mobile and multicultural society. Thus they will be able to work professionally in more than one language and will be trained to understand cultural differences, having studied alongside friends from many different countries.'

(M.J. Cooper, Principal of the British School of the Netherlands, in Mejia, 2002)

School ethos: International Schools

ACS International School in Egham which caters for students from 40 different countries who speak 24 languages states that it ‘encourages all students to maintain their native language proficiency as it helps their acquisition of additional languages’ and it offers Native Language Enrichment programmes (www.acs-england.co.uk/schools/egham).

Mainstream schooling: Pockets of excellent practice

CILT website (www.cilt.org.uk) provides a database of good practice in mainstream schools such as:

- **Till Hill Wood Secondary School in Coventry teaching Geography through the medium of other languages;**
- **Newbury park School in Redbridge, European Languages Award Winner, 2005, which has developed Language of the Month initiative;**
- **Our Languages Project.**

Dominant myths in the mainstream

'In the classroom, my feeling is, that it could potentially be confusing to children who come to the school knowing or at least having an implication that the school is where English is spoken to find that the people are trying to speak in their language or trying to communicate in their language. I can't quite honestly see that. Although we do it here in sign form (welcome signs), I'm not sure ... I think it's playing the game. We have notices all around the school saying welcome in different languages – well they could say anything to be honest. They could be rude words, for all I know. Nobody is saying you can't speak another language or that we don't respect your other language, but when you come to school English is the language you expect to hear, that's the language you expect to use. And that way they would develop their bilingualism I think.'

(Headteacher of a London school, in Mehmedbegovic, 2008)

Deficit models of bilingual learners

Recent research uncovers that the deficit model of bilingual learners is still widely spread among school practitioners. 48 interviewed teachers, TAs and SENCOs reported that EAL children are often seen as:

- Not very bright;
- Slow learners;
- Unable to access the curriculum fully;
- Only understanding the most basic concepts;
- Possibly SEN.

(Mistry and Sood, 2009)

Learners' reflections

'We underachieve because we speak two languages.'

(Pimlico student in Mehmedbegovic and Hanoman, 2004)

' I read in a scientific journal that speaking two languages is good for you. It develops your brain.'

(ibid.)

What do politicians think?

‘I believe in diversity. Speaking another language at home is fine.’

(Labour MP, Interview data)

‘There will be certain families that will integrate and leave behind their home languages and there will be others that will take it seriously and continue to speak it at home. I think we should allow the individuals the freedom to decide which culture they are going to inherit and take on board.’ (Conservative MP, Interview data)

Issue of choice or 'symbolic violence'?

'Big messages are missing at the policy level in terms of value of first languages. As a child I was told not to use my first language – Punjabi. Now I feel disinherited in many different ways. I would be very disturbed if anybody in education: teachers, leaders, academics are saying that losing home language is a natural process. Home languages need to be flagged up within Every Child Matters. Linguistic identity of every child needs to be valued. Although that the standards mention EAL provision, ITTE providers are not inspected or probed on it, despite the fact that NQTs survey have been showing the lowest rate of satisfaction with that aspect of their training.' (IOE, 2009)

Issues for bilingual parents

**‘A quarter of a century ago when our first child was expected I knew instinctively that it was important for him to be bilingual. Our problem was that, for the lay parent, if anything at all was written about bilingualism it was about its problems ... full of prophecies of doom.’
(Grover, 2003)**

Research done by QCA (2006) acknowledged that bilingual parents have ‘little or no awareness’ what benefits come with first language maintenance.

Bilingualism in teaching and learning

Bourne (2001) suggests moving beyond practices of using other languages for an occasional story or song about a different culture in teaching and learning. Other languages need to be integrated into teaching and learning rather than an add on incidental aspect of it.

Examples of good practice

The National Strategy (2001) addresses good practice with bilingual learners. It promotes the use of first languages for the following reasons:

- drawing on existing skills and strengths;
- working quickly and fluently where the learning can be completed equally well in mother tongue;
- knowing that other languages are valued and good for learning too.

(DfES, 2001)

How can educators make a difference?

Professional development

Developing and implementing bilingual pedagogies

Promoting ethos of plurilingualism