RICHARD W. MILLS & JEAN MILLS

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Bilingualism
in the Primary School

ROUTLEDGE

A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS

Bilingualism in the primary school

Over the past few years bilingualism has come to be seen not as a hindrance, but as an asset which, properly nurtured, will benefit children's linguistic awareness, cultural sensitivity and cognitive functioning. *Bilingualism in the Primary School* gives primary teachers a window on the experience of the bilingual children in their care. It helps them to make the most of what the children and their parents have to offer, giving those children a good start in the National Curriculum.

The book covers three main areas: first, the ways in which bilingual children in school can learn English and at the same time have their first languages incorporated naturally into the curriculum; second, various approaches to the assessment of oral language (including children's mother tongue); and, finally, the bilingual experience of children, teachers and parents within the wider community. Many of the contributors to the book are themselves bilingual and are thus able to understand the children's experience from within, but they are also particularly careful to show monolingual teachers how to make use of children's mother tongue experience. The book is based throughout on rich case study material of individual children at various stages on the bilingual spectrum.

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Contents

Figures and tables

FIGURES

TABLES

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Acknowledgements

Setting the scene

Richard Mills

> I speak English because I learned Polish at the age of two. I have forgotten every word of Polish, but I learned language. Here, as in other human gifts, the brain is wired to learn.
>
> (Jacob Bronowski 1973)

Many schools in large urban areas of Britain have a number of bilingual pupils. These schools may fall into one of two categories:

(a) Those that have substantial numbers of children who speak a South Asian language (Bengali, Gujerati, Punjabi, Urdu), and smaller groups, or individual children, who speak languages such as Arabic, Cantonese, Pushtu. (For instance, 8-year-old Kim was the only Vietnamese-speaking child in her school of four hundred boys and girls who spoke seven languages between them.)
(b) Those that do not have substantial numbers of bilingual children, but rather, small groups, or individuals, who speak one of the languages mentioned above, or a language from elsewhere in the world (e.g. Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish).

Developing bilingual children come as new arrivals in school from different backgrounds. They may be:

- joining the rest of the family who are already settled in Britain;
- accompanying parents who have come to study or work for a few years;
- arriving as refugees from a civil disturbance;
- attending a new school as British-born children who speak varying amounts of English at home.

These are children of the 1990s. Had they been of the 1960s the attitude towards their languages would have been very different.

At that time, teachers acknowledged the 'difference, if not the diversity' (Taylor and Hegarty 1985), in the religion, culture and language of the newcomers, as opposed to the so-called 'host community'. The terms used then and now are crucial to an understanding of the ways in which attitudes have changed. 'Difference' implies departure from a norm; 'diversity' signifies varied richness. 'Host' implies that those to be greeted are (temporary?) guests.

The whole 'multicultural' debate is, in fact, full of language time bombs. For instance, the term 'immigrants' has now acquired such pejorative overtones that it can hardly be used in school without giving offence. In its place is something like the phrase, 'members of ethnic minority communities'. One suspects it is only a matter of time before the inadequacy of those words is recognized.

The problem is that we use shorthand terms to explain complex phenomena. This is nowhere more clearly evident than in our use of the terms 'mother tongue' and 'bilingual'. 'Mother tongue' is variously used to describe:

- the first language a child speaks;
- the language invariably used at home (the 'home language');
- the language in which the user is most competent;
- the language of the community.

None of these is adequate. A speaker may have lost the use of first language; more than one language may be used at home; competence may depend on context and audience.

A better term, perhaps, is 'preferred language',

> as a substitute for the notions of dominant language, mother tongue or L1, since it brings out clearly the varying nature of bilingual proficiency.
>
> (Baetens Beardsmore, 1986)

This term was coined by Dodson (1981) and is attractive since it takes some account of personal choice and possible changes across time and context. Perhaps, also, the concept has about it a certain status and, as such, may be helpful in combating what Skutnabb-Kangas (1990) refers to as 'linguicism', i.e. language prejudice, akin to racism and sexism.

Such language prejudice was seen vividly back in the 1960s assimilationist phase when teachers, schools and Local Education Authorities were strongly urging that incoming children use English only.

Popular report has it that children were spoken of as 'having no language', meaning no English language, and were exhorted to 'speak only English'. The concept of 'verbal deficit' was common, alongside the notion of 'first language interference'. As Chatwin (1984) suggests:

> Since languages other than English would be thought to obstruct or delay pupils' acquisition of English, their use would be discouraged. All non-standard usages would be corrected.

Such a view of English language insularity is akin to the notion of racial purity; mixing implies contamination. In fact, any language in a dynamic society is itself dynamic; it is constantly evolving in response to the demands of time, attitudes, context. To speak of 'first language interference' is to present that first language negatively, not as something to build on but, rather, as an unwelcome hindrance.

A much richer, all-embracing notion is that of 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972), used to refer to an individual learner's own language system. Here there is movement back and forth between two or more languages, as the learner makes use of existing knowledge to forge new understanding. The stress is on process, rather than product, and acceptability of 'errors' is as justifiable in this area as it is in any other realm of developing understanding, whether it be mathematics or morality, science or psychology. The so-called 'errors' are a genuine part of the learning; indeed, without them there would be no learning to take place. They are a sign that learning can occur. As Cook (1991) writes of interlanguage:

> Learners are not wilfully distorting the native system; they are inventing a system of their own. No-one is claiming that the learner's interlanguage takes precedence over the version of the native speaker. That, after all, is where the learners are, in a sense, heading.

Many instances quoted in the chapters which follow represent the full spectrum of language use, from interdependence to interchangeability, from interlanguage to code-switching, where speakers who are bilingually proficient move imperceptibly between languages.

What is more, they are now encouraged to do so in many schools, so great has been the change in the last thirty years. In the memorable (albeit sexist, expression) of the Bullock Report (1975):

> No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures

which have to be kept firmly apart. The curriculum should reflect many elements of that part of his life, which a child lives outside school.

This is in line with Plowden, of course, and the crucial educational concept of moving from the known to the unknown. Bullock, however, goes further in seeing bilingualism in itself as something to be cared for and sustained:

> Their bilingualism is of great importance to the children and their families, and also to society as a whole. In a linguistically conscious nation in the modern world, we should see it as an asset, as something to be nurtured, and one of the agencies which should nurture it is the school.

The term 'bilingualism' is here used by Bullock in an apparently undifferentiated sense. In fact, the word is capable of many subtleties of definition, which include such modifiers as: Achieved, Additive, Ascendant, Ascribed, Asymmetrical, Balanced, Compound, Consecutive, Co-ordinate, Covert, Diagonal, Dormant, Functional, Horizontal, Incipient, Passive, Productive, Receptive, Recessive, Residual, Secondary, Simultaneous, Societal, Subordinate, Subtractive, Successive, Vertical.

I mention these not merely to indicate an acquaintance with the index of Baetens Beardsmore (1986), but to alert readers to the fact that, whenever the terms 'bilingual' and 'bilingualism' are used in the pages which follow, the precise definition cannot constantly be supplied. To do so would be both tedious and counter-productive. Instead, the terms are best understood if the modifier 'developing' (perversely, not used by Baetens Beardsmore) is taken as read. In other words, children whom we describe as 'bilingual' are, in fact, 'developing bilinguals'. Each is somewhere along the spectrum which has 'monolingual' at one end and 'balanced bilingual' or 'code-switcher' at the other.

Furthermore, there is the question of the place of language within the multicultural debate. If we grant that the current position in our thinking is one of 'cultural pluralism', then the stance we take in this book towards bilingualism or multilingualism can be seen to be consistent. I use the term 'cultural pluralism' to reflect the accepted co-existence of two or more mutually respected and respectable ways of behaving and living. Language, as a sub-set of behaviour, comes within this definition.

This being so, a balance needs to be vigilantly maintained by, and on behalf of, developing bilingual children. As the NCMTT (1985) has it:

> To learn English to the highest level possible is important, but so is the fostering and nurturing of one's first language. One without the other cannot be called 'pluralism'.

Such a balance appears to have eluded the National Curriculum English Working Group in their statement (1988):

> The key to equality of opportunity, to academic success and, more broadly, to participation on equal terms as a full member of society, is good command of English, and the emphasis must, therefore, we feel, be on the learning of English.

One wonders what concept of 'society' the authors had in mind when they wrote these words and it is interesting to balance this statement against another National Curriculum document, that for Modern Foreign Languages (1990):

> There should be no restrictions on bilingual pupils studying the language of their home or community as their first foreign language.

Our stance in this book is that the learning of English is vital. But then so, also, is the maintenance and development of one's mother tongue. If the balance is right, the expectation is that each will feed off and enhance the other, to the benefit of the learner, in terms of language, cultural sensitivity and cognitive functioning. (See Baker, 1988: Chapter 2, for a discussion of these potential benefits.)

Most of our case studies and examples are of children who speak Punjabi (often spelled 'Panjabi'). This language is spoken in the Punjab, the historic region now divided between India and Pakistan. Indian Punjabi speakers are mainly Sikh or Hindu and in Britain originate largely from the Punjab, neighbouring states or East Africa. While Sikh Punjabi speakers use the Gurmukhi script for literacy, many Hindu Punjabi speakers will read and write in Hindi. Pakistani Punjabi speakers in Britain are mainly Muslim and use Urdu for literacy and religious instruction. Many come from the Mirpur region of Pakistan and speak Mirpuri Punjabi.

This, then, is the background of most of the children we focus on in this book. Different linguistic points could be made about children whose first language is, say, Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese or Greek, but we believe that the major premises we advance, in terms of culture maintenance, assessment in mother tongue, bilingual benefits, community involvement, and so forth, remain fairly constant, and would apply to most non-English language groupings in school. Our guiding principle throughout is that concentrating upon individual children is not only valid in itself but, ultimately, more productive in revealing processes and forces at work within the larger communities.

The book is divided into three sections. We begin with the school as a language community and the individual child within that community. We move on to consider the specific issue of language assessment, and we end with a focus on the bilingual experience itself and a looking forward to the involvement of the wider community in bilingual education.

All the members of our team of contributors are bilingual in some sense (although, to some of us, the term does not come naturally). As with children in school, so we have tried to learn from each other, as we hope the contents and authorship will indicate.

Finally, as a demonstration of changing attitudes to language acquisition, it is worth recalling that Tacitus records the legend of how, after the defeat of a Roman army in Germany in AD 9, the Germans cut out the tongues of Roman prisoners and ate them, in the belief that they would thereby learn Latin. We are not, in this book, recommending such an approach. We do not know if it worked.

Note: Italics are used throughout the book where quoted extracts were spoken in the mother tongue and have been reported in English for clarity.