

# Practical Bilingual Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms

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## Introduction

In twenty-first century Great Britain, we are living in an ever more diverse and multicultural society. Increasingly many schools have a high proportion of bilingual children. In 2000 a survey of London school children found that over 300 languages were spoken (Edwards, 2004). The 2001 census showed that one in eight pupils in schools were from a minority ethnic background. The prediction is that by 2010 this figure will probably be one in five (DfES, 2003). This clearly has implications for principles and practices in the classroom, and puts very specific and specialised demands on the teacher.

Since the advent of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, all schools and teachers have a statutory duty to promote racial equality. The Children Bill (2004) also places much greater emphasis on educational inclusion. The new Ofsted framework (2007) for inspection puts a strong emphasis on race equality, inclusion and the importance of narrowing the achievement gap. In addition, for teacher educators in Higher Education Institutions, the Handbook of Inspection for ITT (Ofsted, 2002a), and the New Standards (2006) clearly highlight the need for providers to produce and monitor the effectiveness of equal opportunities and race equality policies. Understanding what diversity and equality actually mean in practice continues to be an important part of teacher training (DfES, 2007). What is the implication of this for practising teachers?

One key implication is that there is not only a need for effective school policies, but also a shared positive ethos amongst staff that values the diverse school population and places emphasis upon effective teaching and learning. The statutory requirements also underline the need for increased teacher confidence and competence in working with children from

diverse backgrounds, and for whom English is an additional language (EAL):

Teachers need the confidence, competence and materials to use the existing flexibility within the curriculum to make subjects more relevant to pupils' own experience and to reflect their cultural heritage.

(DfES, 2003a: 17)

All teachers in schools where there are bilingual children also need to be familiar with the language learning process, if they are to effectively support all children and enable them to achieve to their full potential. Classroom practice will also need to reflect an understanding of how an additional language is learned, and what supports that learning (NALDIC 1998; Drury, 2007).

One important thing to remember is that we cannot think of bilingual children as one homogenous group. They are all individuals, with a wide range of particular needs. For instance, these children will come into the classroom with a range of different language and literacy backgrounds, and with varying degrees of exposure to British culture and the English language. They will also bring with them different cultural and lived experiences. Some children will have developed a range of skills in the home language and some will be pre-literate. In addition, some children will have had experience of schooling which is comparable to the United Kingdom; others might have had a more limited experience, or none at all. Some of these children may well be gifted and talented, some will have special needs of some sort. For many bilingual children the reasons for coming to the UK might be associated with trauma and tragedy. Edwards (1988) and Redfern (1994) talk of the trauma of a child arriving in England as a bilingual learner and some of the difficulties they face when starting out in a new country. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers get to know the individual circumstances of each child, and that their language ability is assessed so that teaching can be individualised to take account of the fact that learners will be at different *stages*. The child's level of confidence and motivation, and their experience of learning the additional language will also affect these different stages (Parke and Drury, 2001).

All children come to school with some existing language skills and a variety of experiences of talk in meaningful contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1985). It is important that teachers recognise and value the linguistic

metacognitive skills that bilingual children have, and also to build upon the child's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977), the cultural values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences they bring in from home. The child's language experiences in the home are likely to be very different from those literacy practices of the school. At home much more child initiated talk takes place, with language learning generally being unplanned by the adult but defined by the context within which the talk is taking place.

It is also important to recognise that children who are learning an additional language do not necessarily have special educational needs (SEN). Lack of language skills in a particular language, English in this case, does not indicate cognitive challenge or learning difficulty, and lack of development in English should not be regarded as a deficit model. It is not good practice to group bilingual children and children with special educational needs together. And it is good practice always to have high expectations.

In this book the strategies suggested for Early Years and Primary phases reflect experiences gained from talking to practitioners as well as observations made during visits to schools and Early Years centres. Although activities have been presented in two phases, there are many commonalities across the two. The primary aim of this book is to provide some guidance to help practitioners focus on strategies related to their appropriate Key Stages. However, these activities are presented as interlinked to support planning for progression as well as taking into account children's varying levels of ability.

Parents have been consulted as much as practically possible with home visits to enable observation of children's interaction with their siblings and parents in their home environments. As children engaged in role-play, discussed, debated and enquired about experiences in their home languages this showed how learning was taking place *through* as well as *in* the home language. More importantly it showed how topics of interaction which related to particular cultural and linguistic experiences formed key conceptual frames in children's minds. We found this to be the most important aspect of bilingual children's learning that needed close attention as they entered into mainstream schooling. The examples shown reflect positive practice in some schools where we have seen such experiences used most effectively.

# Chapter 1

## Principles of additional language learning

One of the key principles for additional language learning is that the learner is able to draw upon knowledge and language skills already acquired. It is very important to build upon existing skills and known experience, thus offering a reassuring context for learning. Effective language learning takes place in a meaningful context, with planned opportunities for purposeful communication (Genesee, 1987). This will involve opportunities for paired talk, talk partners and group talk with peers, and adults using English and the community language where possible. This will give children the ‘space’ they need for reflection. Careful consideration needs to be given to the language skills required to support the task or subject matter and to how this can be incorporated into lesson planning.

Language is not effectively taught or learnt in isolation. It is important to try to establish a ‘language classroom’, full of examples of different genres of writing and varied writing activities for children, quality texts and multimedia to encourage enjoyment of reading, and opportunities for purposeful talk to support learning and language development. To achieve these teachers could try to adopt an approach to teaching that integrates language and content learning, which gives pupils plenty of opportunities for meaningful contexts in which to read, talk and write. Many of these will need to start with familiar situations, which will make the additional language more accessible to the learner. This might involve some creative thinking about approaches to curriculum delivery, and will be increasingly possible through the cross-curricular planning approach advocated in *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003) and the revised *Primary Framework for Mathematics and Literacy* (2006).

First language development supports additional language acquisition. Wells (1986) and Cummins (2000) have written about the importance of