

## **Is There an Easy Solution to Bilingual Education in the Pacific?**

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Bilingualism is a consequence of formal education in the Pacific.

In metropolitan countries, such as the United States or Australia, where English is both the official language and the language of the home for the majority of the population, many children have the advantage of learning to read in the language spoken in the home and community before they progress to reading to learn about things in school. In the small island states of the Pacific, however, the linguistic situation is far more complex. The languages used by children in the home, community and school may all be different. For the vast majority of children, they will not be the same.

English has been the medium of education in Fiji since the inception of colonial government schooling in the late nineteenth century (Mangubhai, 1989). Other countries in the Pacific region have similar colonial histories underscoring the language policy choices which have been made in their education systems. All Pacific children are educated in a world language : normally English or French; Spanish in Rapanui. Children in the Pacific, therefore, achieve some measure of bilingualism as an outcome of attending school.

Given that bilingualism and literacy skills in a second language<sup>1</sup> form the basis of school learning in Pacific schools, it is important to ask: Is there an easy solution to bilingual education in the Pacific?

### **Acquiring vs learning a second language**

Being bilingual means being able to communicate fluently in two languages. A bilingual is not necessarily a biliterate person, i.e., someone who can read

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<sup>1</sup> The term second language here refers to any language learned subsequent to the native language, whether it be the second, third or fourth language to be acquired.

and write in two languages, but the kind of bilingualism we require of children in Pacific schools requires either biliteracy, such as is found in Fiji where children learn to read in both a vernacular language and English, or literacy in a second language, which may be at the expense of literacy in the mother tongue, such as is the case currently in Nauru. A child's native language or mother tongue ( $L_1$ ) is naturally acquired. Children develop proficiency in their  $L_1$  automatically no matter how much credit their care givers try to take for "teaching" them.  $L_1$  acquisition is an essential part of normal human development. Second language ( $L_2$ ) acquisition is not.

Children who naturally pick up, or *acquire*, an  $L_2$  in childhood become bilinguals without even trying. Their command of the  $L_2$  will be unconscious under these conditions of acquisition. For example, urban Ni-Vanuatu preschoolers would normally acquire Bislama as an  $L_2$  using it as their language of wider communication.

Many children in the Pacific acquire second languages as a natural consequence of cross-cultural interaction. However, few preschoolers are lucky enough to acquire a working knowledge of standard English in this way. Most children in the Pacific must learn English at school.

*Learning* an  $L_2$  is a conscious effort, and children who must learn an  $L_2$  do not have the natural contextual supports surrounding their  $L_2$  learning that they had in their  $L_1$  development. For example, in the  $L_2$  classroom, children do not have the year of life in which they can listen (without responding) to the language being used fluently all around them such as they had in the home with their  $L_1$  acquisition. Nor do they get to go through several subsequent years of talking to tolerant listeners who don't expect the language produced to be "correct".

Children who are learning an  $L_2$ , such as English as a second language (ESL), have a restricted context - a classroom - in which a limited number of topics are discussed, often, by non-native speakers who present a less than perfect model of the language. Children are called upon to produce speech and writing in a language they have had too little exposure to and are criticised, often harshly, for making the most natural of mistakes.

## **Additive and subtractive bilingualism**

What happens to the  $L_1$  in second language learning contexts?

Some parents, unnecessarily fearful that children will become "mixed up" through exposure to more than one language, restrict access to the  $L_2$ . However, children normally sort their way through whatever languages they are exposed to.

Conversely, some parents feel that the  $L_2$ , where it is a high status world language such as English or French, should be substituted for the vernacular in the home so that children will have more opportunity to learn the higher status language. This is a negative practice, potentially detrimental to language development in general, leading to loss of the  $L_1$  as well as poor acquisition of the  $L_2$ .

Research indicates that the child develops as an additive bilingual (Lambert, 1975) where use of the  $L_1$  is well-supported. In other words, use of the  $L_2$  is added to use of the  $L_1$ . The child has two languages to draw on rather than one.

However, if the  $L_1$  is left to atrophy through disuse, the process of bilingualism becomes a one-way street of substituting one language for another. The result is subtractive bilingualism where one language supplants another and the child, rather than acquiring a language, loses one (Cummins, 1989).

Children subjected to unenlightened, discriminatory language programmes encouraging subtractive bilingualism, whose  $L_1$  is not given the support to develop through normal communicative use and whose exposure to the  $L_2$  is through a poor model in a less than ideal context, have been described as "semilinguals" : children who seem to have never really learned to speak any language fluently (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981).

## **Pacific models of bilingual education**

Language education policy varies from country to country in the Pacific;

however, all children in the South Pacific are educated partly, or in some cases, totally, in a world language. Two models of bilingual education are prevalent, which this paper will refer to as the *vernacular literacy* model and the *L<sub>2</sub> immersion* model.

In the Melanesian countries, the policy is to put children into an immersion situation where they are expected to enter an English-speaking (or French-speaking in French stream schools in Vanuatu) classroom from their first day at school. They must learn to become literate in an L<sub>2</sub> which they are simultaneously trying to learn. The basic underlying theory in L<sub>2</sub> immersion education is communicative competence: children will learn to use the target language if it is used as the medium of communication for authentic purposes in the classroom. In practice, however, the medium of the classroom is unlikely to be exclusively English, so the language of spoken communication may not match the language of written communication.

In other countries, the policy is to educate children to basic literacy and numeracy in their mother tongue while teaching them ESL. They then switch from the vernacular to English as the medium of education as they continue on in school. The intention is that they should transfer basic literacy skills to the L<sub>2</sub> and carry on their education in the world language. However, from country to country and even within a country such as Fiji, the L<sub>2</sub> has varied levels of support outside (and to a lesser extent, inside) the classroom, ranging from not at all to widely spoken.

Of these two models, the *vernacular literacy* model is the more facilitative programme for encouraging initial literacy because children have the opportunity to develop literacy skills in their L<sub>1</sub> while learning the L<sub>2</sub>. Literacy and ESL are, thus, distinguishable developments.

### **Practical problems**

There are real problems with the practical implementation of both models of education, however.

Vernacular literacy is only practicable where the school children and the teacher share the same mother tongue or the teacher is, at least, a proficient

speaker of the vernacular. In Fiji, vernacular education is only truly offered in monolingual communities where the teacher speaks the local dialect. In urban and many rural areas, classes are heterogeneous: children have different  $L_1$  backgrounds. So the vernacular used as a medium of instruction in the classroom will not be everyone's vernacular. The class is, thus, conducted in, for example, Bauan Fijian as a second dialect for (some) Fijian students, and as a second language for students of other ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, classes conducted in Fiji Hindi, which is a pidginized language, rely on materials written in the subcontinent standard. So neither Hindi vernacular classes, nor "Fijian" vernacular classes are true vernacular literacy education.

There are also problems in using the vernacular literacy model where school children come from a homogeneous language background, e.g. Western Samoa, because using an  $L_2$  among speakers of the same  $L_1$  is unnatural. Samoan is the language that is shared by children, teachers and the community at large in Western Samoa, for example. English is not used as a language of wider communication among Samoans in the community, so it is not supported outside the classroom, except in select bureaucratic and trade communications in which school children are unlikely to be significantly involved. As a consequence the de facto use of the vernacular in the classroom when English is supposed to be in use is reported to be a frequent occurrence (Lo Bianco, 1990). The medium of the classroom is, thus, English in writing, but not necessarily in speech.

The  $L_2$  immersion model is used in Pacific countries where the children come from heterogeneous language backgrounds, such as the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. (It is also used in Nauru where the indigenous people are monolingual.) The  $L_2$  immersion education given to these children literally throws them in at the deep end. They must learn to read in a language they do not know. They must learn a language for which there is little contextual support outside the school. Complicating this is the fact that many primary school teachers have an insecure grasp of English themselves, and will be found to be using either the vernacular or, in Melanesia, Melanesian Pidgin (Pijin in Solomon Islands; Bislama in Vanuatu) as the spoken medium of the classroom. Melanesian children are thus faced with the unrealistic task of having to become literate in a language they have insufficient good auditory exposure to in real life.

Furthermore, school learning does not provide a continuation of community learning, as it has the potential to do in vernacular literacy programmes where family members can follow and even help the progress of their children reading in the vernacular. Schooling is all strange and new and very difficult under these circumstances.

### **Psycholinguistic considerations in bilingual education**

Being able to converse in an  $L_2$  does not adequately prepare children for meeting academic demands in that language. According to bilingualism expert, Jim Cummins, (1991), the sort of language proficiency children need in order to learn in school: cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP), enables children to cope with language which is decontextualized and disembedded, such as in textbooks. The child's development of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) does not ensure cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP).

Furthermore, it is insufficient to simply expose students to more and more  $L_2$  in the hopes of raising their proficiency. In fact, children need to be working on developing their cognitive academic language proficiency in their  $L_1$ , so that they are learning to deal adequately with the learning tasks at hand while they are increasing their knowledge of the  $L_2$ .

$L_1$  and  $L_2$  academic skills are interdependent (Cummins, 1989). If children continue to reinforce knowing through language, then it is of little consequence how much English is taught or when. Learning through the  $L_1$  will foster conceptual language development. Fostering pride and conceptual development in the  $L_1$  will positively affect the acquisition of the  $L_2$ .

Literacy is conceptual knowledge. We build the foundation for conceptual development when we give children a normal grounding in their  $L_1$  in which they hear and see all kinds of language functions being conducted competently.

Parents and community members are not expected to be psycholinguists, equipped with the theoretical knowledge to understand that the development of the  $L_1$  is the development of language skills which are transferable to other

languages. But it is essential that they see that the L<sub>2</sub> should not deprive children of their linguistic and cultural heritage, but augment it.

In a personal discussion, Cummins stated that the most important factor in the success of bilingual education was not a linguistic factor at all, but socio-cultural identity (Cummins, personal communication, June, 1992). In "educational" programmes, where the cultural heritage of the community is devalued in favour of the high status language of, in our case in the Pacific, officialdom, education and international trade, subtractive bilingualism is encouraged. These programmes are not language immersion but language submersion.

### **Considerations in developing appropriate bilingual education programmes in the Pacific**

English is an important language in the Pacific region; the medium of education throughout the USP region is English (with the exception of Vanuatu where French is the medium in francophone schools). In most countries, English becomes the official medium of education by Class 4 after basic vernacular literacy and numeracy have been acquired. In three countries of the USP region, English is the official medium of education from the first day of formal schooling. Children's prospects of success in education crumble if their proficiency in English is unsatisfactory.

Children need to adequately develop CALP in their L<sub>1</sub> while acquiring the very high level of L<sub>2</sub> proficiency essential to achieving success in school. How can this be done?

Is there an easy solution to bilingual education in the Pacific?

No. There are too many variables affecting language and education from community to community and from country to country to find a simple solution to this big question. Considerations relate as much to the use of language in the home and community as they do to the use of language in the school. We must consider:

#### ***1. Is the L<sub>1</sub> community homogeneous or heterogeneous?***

Do all people in the community speak the  $L_1$ ? In many countries, there is a single vernacular, e.g. Western Samoa. In others, particularly in Melanesia, many vernaculars are spoken, e.g. Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Fiji.

Where the entire population speaks the  $L_1$ , vernacular schooling can be more easily implemented. This is much more difficult where many vernaculars are spoken within a community, although a language of wider communication, e.g. Solomons Pijin, or Bislama, if universally spoken by the community, can be effectively implemented as the language of basic literacy in a vernacular literacy model of bilingual education (Lotherington-Woloszyn, 1993). This provides far more support to young children learning literacy skills in school than immersion in English.

## ***2. Is the $L_1$ a majority or a minority language?***

In countries where there is a single vernacular spoken by the population (which varies only slightly in dialect differences), e.g. Tongan in Tonga, or where there is a vernacular which is widely spoken in a particular community so that the language of the home is the same as the language of wider communication in the community, e.g. Pukapukan on Pukapuka in the Cook Islands, then the  $L_1$  can be considered to be a majority language. However, if the language of the home is not used in the wider community, e.g. Cantonese in Samoa; Tamil in Fiji, or where there are many languages spoken in the community and a language of wider communication is used to conduct everyday business, e.g. vernaculars from other islands being used in Port Vila, Vanuatu, then the  $L_1$  must be considered to be a minority language.

Children from minority  $L_1$  backgrounds risk jeopardising the language functions learned prior to school attendance if the minority  $L_1$  is not maintained and supported in the home.

## ***3. Is the $L_2$ a majority or a minority language?***

English cannot be considered to be a majority language in any country in the Pacific although it is widely spoken in urban communities in the major centres in Fiji and the Cook Islands.

#### ***4. Is the L<sub>1</sub> a high or low status language?***

The value put on a language by a society - language status - varies with official recognition and the social and economic importance of the language. For example, Bauan Fijian, the language of the paramount chief at the time of cession to England is a high status language. Solomons Pijin, although widely spoken, does not enjoy official sanction as a medium of wider communication and is not a high status language.

For children who speak an L<sub>1</sub> which does not enjoy particularly high status, it is essential that there be a strong home emphasis on continued L<sub>1</sub> development so that subtractive bilingualism does not evolve.

#### ***5. Is the L<sub>2</sub> a high or a low status language?***

English is a high status language in the Pacific for largely economic reasons. It is a major world language which is, generally speaking, seen as the ticket to economic success in life. Thus, pressure on children to learn to use English effectively is very high and problems in learning English are tantamount to failure.

Therefore, the instrumental motivation to learn English is strong. Parents and teachers must be aware that the importance of English should not become overriding, thereby reducing the status of the home language and paving the way for community-supported language submersion, and subtractive bilingualism.

#### ***6. What educational support is offered for bilingual programmes?***

Are teachers proficient users of the L<sub>2</sub>? Is the L<sub>2</sub> spoken in the classroom or are children expected to be able to read a language that they seldom hear in use?

Do children use English at school and the vernacular in the community? Can the community be brought into the school to decrease the distance between learning in the L<sub>1</sub> and in the L<sub>2</sub>? For example, members of the community could be called upon to serve as resources on school projects that require

community support, e.g., elders to speak (in the L<sub>1</sub>) on cultural arts, ethnoscience or personal histories; community artists to illustrate books made at school (cf: Christie, 1991; Crago, 1992; McCarty et al, 1991 for ideas about incorporating indigenous modes of inquiry and resources into curriculum development).

Does the school provide opportunities for remedial subject help in the L<sub>1</sub> and remedial language help in the L<sub>2</sub>? Does the language curriculum adequately cater to the development of CALP?

### ***7. What community support is offered for bilingual programmes?***

In what language(s) are labels for medicines, signs in the community, packaged foods, newspapers? Could local products be labelled in the vernacular or in the language of wider communication, such as Solomons Pijin, to support literacy exposure?

Are there books in the L<sub>1</sub>? Is singing, story-telling, drama, community education, news available in the vernacular in the community? Are children encouraged to think, communicate and create in the L<sub>1</sub> when they are out of school?

### ***8. Is bilingual schooling necessary? Should it be optional or mandatory?***

Must all children learn English in order to be educated above (or to) basic literacy and numeracy? At present, schools in the USP region depend on English (or French) as the medium of instruction from the beginning of or soon after early primary school. None has an alternative vernacular programme. This possibility should be explored.

In Belau, where both English and Palauan are official languages, Palauan is used as the medium of instruction in the classroom from Grades 1 to 8. English is introduced in primary and becomes the medium of instruction only in upper secondary (Palomo, 1990 cited in Spencer, 1992).

Of course, an extended vernacular education programme of this nature requires the support of qualified vernacular-speaking teachers as well as

educational materials in the vernacular.

## **Conclusion**

Bilingual education means education in two languages; both the L<sub>1</sub> and the L<sub>2</sub> have their essential roles to play. Educational policy planners must focus on the complex interplay between the L<sub>1</sub> and the L<sub>2</sub>.

They must recognise the fact that education occurs within a social context; school learning cannot be isolated from community learning. This is particularly important with regard to language education.

Therefore, the planning of bilingual education programmes cannot be closeted within the centralised offices of a government ministry. Appropriate bilingual education programmes must be tailored to the conditions and needs of the home and community (whether a wider urban community or an outer island community), and nation. A bilingual education programme designed for the children of urban Fiji will not serve the needs and community context of remote island schools where there is far more cultural homogeneity and far less access to English - in everyday speech, libraries, media and entertainment.

What is required is that education policy planners sit down with teachers, parents and local community organisers to work out the most informed alternatives for a flexible bilingual education curriculum in light of the considerations set out in this paper. Perhaps then appropriate bilingual education will begin to take shape.

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