

## **Academic Conversation: Multilingual Learners**

**Wed, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2007, IOE**

### **Notes of the session and discussion**

Jan Robertson (Director of the London Centre for Leadership in Learning) welcomed participants on behalf of LCLL, appropriately speaking in the languages of her native New Zealand.

Dina Mehmedbegovic, LERU, introduced the event, noting that it follows from the publication of LERU's first digest, *Multilingual Learners in London* (available on the website).

Charmian Kenner from Goldsmiths College presented research in progress with bilingual Bengali learners in East London

ESRC funded research to investigate whether demonstrated benefits of bilingualism would also apply for 2nd and 3rd generation Bengalis who may be stronger in English than Sylheti/Bengali (Bangla). What is the place of bilingual learning for these children? Yr 2 and Yr 4 in one school, Y2 and Y6 in another school. Planned bi-lingual tasks in literacy and numeracy, involved teachers in planning. Children did task, watched video and commented.

Children read and acted: *Mirror, mirror on the wall...* from *Snow White*. Transliterated it and then translated it. Wrote their own version.

Immediately the students started to compare the Bengali version with the English version. One of the grandmothers did Bengali script with them - one boy had not ever done Bengali script. Then they wrote underneath it in English letters (used their phonics to work out how to transliterate it - writing English script underneath). When they wrote their own versions, some moved from Bangla to English and vice versa. One wrote all in English. Worked out their own similes and constructions. Metaphor is quite difficult in another language so its interesting to explore it through bilingualism

Raymonde Sneddon, UEL, presented research on multilingual learning through dual language books.

Looking at how teachers can support children in settings where they don't have a chance to go to a community class, or others in their schools don't speak their language. Teacher used dual language books - then researcher observed the mother and children using the book at home. To understand what children are doing when they are working with two languages on the same page.

Family of Albanian refugees, with children born in England. School introduced books in Albanian/English. Used books and fridge magnets to introduce letters. Reading one text at

a time and decoding. Mother correcting pronunciation errors. Lots of questions about meaning - nb children's English is better than mothers. Negotiating meaning without necessarily referring back to English text. Both mother and child find words they don't know in either language - work it out from pictures and whole passage.

Outcomes:

- developing a bilingual and bicultural identity - over course of year started to use Albanian in the home and keep a diary in Albanian. Learning new vocabulary in both languages. Mothers' English improved and one got involved in school as classroom assistant and is helping to run Albanian club. They were asked to read poetry in Albanian and dance in assembly in traditional dress.

Also gave the Urdu example: Children working at the edge of their understanding of language - very keen and motivated. A code to crack. Myadda starts to read more in English.

Dina Mehmedbegovic, IOE, presented research on Attitudes to Bilingualism: "Miss, who needs the languages of immigrants?"

Good practice using bilingualism in schools happens only in pockets of good practice. Dina argues that children are not fulfilling their full potential if their first language is not being used.

Based on study of politicians and lead professionals: Aim to gain an insight into attitudes of professionals and engage them with the opinions of students, parents, professionals and researchers.

Research questions: What evidence is there of valuing bilingualism? what evidence of promoting it? In what way are attitudes related to relevant research and theory?

Method - statements sent in advance and interviewees comment on them.

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu's theory of misrecognition and its end result - symbolic violence.

A sample of findings: Difference between attitudes to 'home' languages (indigenous minority languages) versus non-indigenous. Discourses of 'our culture' (indigenous only) and 'our economy'. For how long does a community have to live in this country before it becomes 'our culture'? Biological metaphors of language loss - languages evolve and some die. But this ignores power structures - its only some languages that die!

Recommends greater 'ethnolinguistic democracy'. A start would be sending affirmative messages to children about their languages, even if they are taught in on language. Dina says: it should be part of the healthy schools initiative.

**Discussion**

What happened 2nd time round in CKs action research? : one thing they learned was about 'monolingual spaces' - so the 2nd time they included even more Bangla. Also class teacher got more involved the 2nd time.

Regents Park School in Birmingham - made it explicit that all languages were acceptable, and gave them a talk partner in their home language. Very high results. No doubt that this is a learning resource. But these places are a handful. Need to spread good practice outside inner city schools.

In Leicester - experience of teaching bilingually.

New Foundation stage says children should use their own language.

Also starting to happen slowly in Japan - what is the goal? is it to learn both languages perfectly? Or to feel connected in own language? Council of Europe advises 'plurilingualism' - drawing on cultural knowledge and language skills. This cannot be captured by language assessment in one language only.

CILT - has just produced 'use it or lose it' - for secondary schools - encouraging children to use their languages, and how they can get qualifications etc. Also coming soon, a series of four posters on 'a hidden asset'.

Need decent research at secondary level - example of a school in London that tried and said that results were poor. Without decent research the wrong message emerges.

Working with languages always results in parents becoming more involved in the school

Messages to be learned from Wales - bilingualism promoted in Wales but not England - its a social justice issue. But Dina says attitudes to Welsh are very different in comparison to attitudes in non-indigenous languages. According to her research findings: other languages are third class.