

## A global perspective on bilingualism and bilingual education

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**Introduction.** The number of languages spoken throughout the world is estimated to be approximately 6,000 (Grimes 1992). Although people frequently observe that a small number of languages such as Arabic, Bengali, English, French, Hindi, Malay, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish serve as important link languages or languages of wider communication around the world, these are very often spoken as second, third, fourth or later-acquired languages by their speakers (see, for example, Cheshire 1991; Comrie 1987; Edwards 1994). The available evidence seems to indicate that governments in many countries deliberately present a somewhat skewed picture of monolingualism as normative by the explicit or implicit language policies that they adopt and promulgate (Crystal 1987). Thus, fewer than 25% of the world's approximately 200 countries recognize two or more official languages—with a mere handful recognizing *more than two* (e.g., India, Luxembourg, Nigeria, etc.). Despite these conservative government policies, however, available data indicate that there are many more bilingual or multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolingual. In addition, many more children throughout the world have been, and continue to be, educated via a second or a later-acquired language—at least for some portion of their formal education—than the number of children educated exclusively via first language. In many parts of the world, bilingualism or multilingualism and innovative approaches to education that involve the use of two or more languages constitute the normal everyday experience (see, for example Dutcher 1994; World Bank 1995).

**Multiple languages in education.** The use of multiple languages in education may be attributed to, or be a reflection of, numerous factors such as the linguistic heterogeneity of a country or region (e.g., Luxembourg or Singapore); specific social or religious attitudes (e.g., the addition of Sanskrit to mark Hinduism or Pali to mark Buddhism); or the desire to promote national identity (e.g., in India, Nigeria, the Philippines). In addition, innovative language education programs are often implemented to promote proficiency in international language(s) of wider communication, together with proficiency in national and re-

gional languages. The composite portrait of language education policies and practices throughout the world is exceedingly complex—and simultaneously fascinating. In Eritrea, for instance, an educated person will likely have attended some portion of schooling taught via Tigrigna *and* Arabic *and* English—and developed proficiency in reading these languages, which are written using three different scripts (Geez, Arabic, and Roman)! In Oceania, to take a different example, linguists estimate that a mere 4% of the world’s population speaks approximately 20% of the world’s 6,000 languages. In Papua New Guinea, a country that has a population of approximately 3,000,000, linguists have described more than 870 languages (Summer Institute of Linguistics 1995). There, it is common for a child to grow up speaking one local indigenous language at home, another in the market place, adding Tok Pisin to her repertoire as a lingua franca, and English if she continues her schooling. Analogous situations recur in many parts of the world such as India, which has declared 15 of its approximately 1,650 indigenous languages to be “official”; or Guatemala, or Nigeria, or South Africa—to name but a few countries in which multilingualism predominates, and in which children are frequently exposed to numerous languages as they move from their homes into their communities and eventually through the formal educational system.

**Prevalent educational myths.** Despite the prevalence of innovative language education programs around the world, the number of sound, critical, longitudinal, and published evaluations remains relatively small, and there are a plethora of *prevalent educational myths* that continually circulate:

- Creoles are not real languages; therefore, they cannot be used as media of instruction.
- If the major goal is to develop the highest degree of proficiency and subject-matter mastery via English (or French or XYZ), the more time spent educating the child via English (or French or XYZ), the better.
- Anyone who can speak a language can teach successfully via that language.
- In multilingual countries, it is too “expensive” to develop materials and to train teachers in a number of different languages.
- There is one, and only one, “correct solution” to the choice and sequencing of language(s) for purposes of initial literacy training and content instruction for all multilingual countries.

Against this backdrop, Nadine Dutcher (1994) and I carried out a comprehensive review for the World Bank of the use of first and second languages in education in which we examined, in some detail, the literature from research conducted in three different types of countries: (1) those with no (or few) mother-tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g., Haiti, Nigeria, the Philippines); (2)

those with some mother-tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g., Guatemala); and (3) those with many mother-tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g., Canada, New Zealand, the United States).

I will now describe what I hope will be a few of the familiar highlights of this review—findings that are also consonant with those contained in “Section 3: Case Studies in Multilingual Education” in the splendid recent volume edited by Cenoz and Genesee (1998) as well as with the papers in the special issue of the *Journal of Multilingual Multicultural Education* (1996, vol. 17) and selected papers in two of the volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (Cummins and Corson 1997; Tucker and Corson 1997). Interested readers may also wish to review the excellent case study by Gonzalez and Sibayan (1988) as well as the recent volume by Baker and Jones (1998).

**Conclusions from extant research.** My reading of the available literature, together with the personal research that I have conducted over the past three decades in varied language-education settings throughout the world leads me to a number of relatively straightforward conclusions.

- The language of school is *very* different from the language of home.
- The development of cognitive-academic language requires *time* (four to seven years of formal instruction).
- Individuals most easily develop literacy skills in a familiar language.
- Individuals most easily develop cognitive skills and master content material that is taught in a familiar language.
- Cognitive-academic language skills, once developed, and content-subject material, once acquired, *transfer* readily.
- The *best* predictor of cognitive-academic language development in a second language is the level of development of cognitive-academic language proficiency in the first language.
- Children learn a second language in different ways depending upon their culture, their group, and their individual personality.

Therefore, if the goal is to help the student ultimately develop the highest possible degree of content mastery and second-language proficiency, time spent instructing the child in a familiar language is a wise investment—that is, Lambert’s notion (1980) of “additive” bilingualism.

**Common programmatic threads.** Furthermore, Dutcher and I noted that the following common threads cut across *all* of the successful programs that we reviewed when the goal is to provide students with multiple-language proficiency and with access to academic content material (even though, we noted, there is a wide range of models available for implementation):

- Development of the mother tongue is encouraged for cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language.
- Parental and community support and involvement are essential to all successful programs.
- Teachers are able to understand, speak, and use with a high level of proficiency the language of instruction, whether it is their first or second language.
- Teachers are well trained; they have cultural competence and subject-matter knowledge, and they continually upgrade their training.
- Recurrent costs for innovative programs are about the same as they are for “traditional” programs (although there may be additional one-time start-up costs).
- Cost-benefit calculations can typically be estimated in terms of the cost savings to the education system, improvements in years of schooling, and enhanced earning potential for students with multiple language proficiency.

The results from published, longitudinal, and critical research undertaken in varied settings throughout the world indicate clearly that the development of multiple-language proficiency is possible, and indeed that it is viewed as desirable by educators, policy makers, and parents in many countries. Ironically, that which is viewed as desirable in Eritrea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, or South Africa, to name but a few countries, is not similarly viewed in the United States. Although the focus of this paper is specifically on bilingual education internationally, the findings summarized above are clearly consistent with those reported by researchers in the United States and Canada (e.g., Brisk 1998; Christian 1996; Thomas and Collier 1996).

**Cross-cutting themes.** I next wish to comment briefly on two cross-cutting themes that seem to me to be critical linchpins for moving forward policy or planning discussions within the domain of language education reform. The first is the critical role of the child’s mother tongue in initial literacy attainment and content-subject mastery and the subsequent transfer of skills across languages. Second is the natural tension between importing a model versus importing a “cycle of discovery.”

*Nurturing the first language.* Despite decades of sound educational research, there still remains a belief in many quarters that somehow, when an additional language is introduced into a curriculum, the child must go back and relearn all over again concepts already mastered. Although there remains much to be learned about the contexts and strategies that facilitate transfer across languages, the fact that such transfer occurs should not be a topic for debate. The work of Hakuta

(1986) and his colleagues provides clear evidence that a child who acquires basic literacy or numeracy concepts in one language can transfer these concepts and knowledge easily to a second or third or other later-acquired languages. The literature, and our practical experience, are replete with examples that confirm the importance of nurturing the child's mother tongue. Gonzalez (1998), in particular, writes and speaks especially compellingly about the need to develop basic functions of literacy, numeracy, and scientific discourse in the L1 to the fullest extent possible while facilitating transfer to the L2. We have an imperfect understanding of the constructs of so-called basic interpersonal communication skills (or contextualized language abilities), cognitive academic language proficiency (or decontextualized language abilities), and cognitive processes that facilitate or impede cross-language transfer of skills. This underscores the need for additional basic research on this important topic but should not detract from the utility and the practical importance of the underlying concept.

*Importation of models versus importation of "cycles of discovery."* At this stage, one is tempted to call for the widespread implementation of new programs based on the results of documented experiences from settings such as Canada, the Philippines, or some of the other countries mentioned previously. I think, however, that it may be instructive to underscore the observations made by Swain (1996) at an international conference on bilingualism held in Brunei Darussalam (see also Tucker 1996). There, she described some of the critical attributes of Canadian immersion programs and shared with participants the ways in which she and colleagues have continued to reflect upon the products of their earlier research in order to better understand and clarify some of the basic processes underlying successful and unsuccessful language education. She described the need to "transfer" the stages and processes of evaluation, theory building, generation of hypotheses, experimentation, and further evaluation that will help to ensure the implementation of programs appropriate for the unique sociocultural contexts in which they will operate. That is, she cautioned that it is not a particular model of innovative language education (and, in particular, a Western model) that should be transferred, for example, to Brunei Darussalam, Namibia, or Peru; but rather a "cycle of discovery" that should be transferred.

Swain reminded us that the so-called threshold levels of L2 skills required for successful participation in formal education may differ quite dramatically across content areas, and that a majority of children face a language "gap" that must be bridged when they move from learning the target language to using the target language as a medium of instruction. Many policy makers have characterized bilingual education as a "high risk" undertaking by which they mean that it is necessary to attend to a complex set of interacting educational, sociolinguistic, economic, and political factors.

**Key issues warranting further attention.** Based upon a review of available literature, it is possible to identify four areas that deserve additional attention:

- sociolinguistic research throughout the world,
- a more thorough examination of the concept and parameters of transfer,
- materials development, reproduction, and distribution in the so-called truly less commonly spoken languages (e.g., the majority of the African languages spoken in Namibia; the majority of the languages in Papua New Guinea, etc.), and
- development of a cadre of trained teachers who are proficient speakers of these languages.

Despite several decades of rather extensive sociolinguistic fieldwork in many areas, there remains much to be done to describe the language situation in many parts of the world. For example, personnel from the World Bank were recently engaged in a preliminary educational mission to Guinea Bissau but discovered that they knew relatively little about the distribution and status of languages and their speakers throughout the country, which makes sound educational planning problematic. Many of the world's languages have yet to be written, codified, or elaborated. Furthermore, there are no materials available for initial literacy training or for advanced education; nor are there teachers who have been trained to teach via many of the world's languages. These are all issues that have been identified as crucial by the World Bank in a recent report of priorities and strategies for enhancing educational development in the twenty-first century (World Bank 1995). And they are issues that must be dealt with effectively before systemic reform that will encourage multilingual proficiency can be widely implemented.

**Conclusions.** By way of summary, let me identify a number of important questions that I think must be addressed whenever parents, educators, and administrators discuss the prospects of multilingual education for their communities:

- What are the explicit or implicit goals for formal education in the region?
- Is there general satisfaction throughout the region with the level of educational attainment by all participants (both those who terminate their education relatively early and those who wish to go on to tertiary studies)?
- Is the region relatively homogeneous or is it heterogeneous linguistically and culturally and how would bilingual education complement the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the community?
- Does the region have an explicit or implicit policy with respect to the role of language in education, and how would bilingual education fit or

not fit with this existing policy? Is this policy based upon tradition or the result of language (education) planning?

- What priorities are accorded to goals such as the development of broadly based permanent functional literacy, the value of education for those who may permanently interrupt their schooling at an early age, and the power of language to foster national identity and cohesiveness?
- Are the language(s) selected for instruction written, codified, standardized, and elaborated?
- Is there a well-developed curriculum for the various levels and stages of formal education (i.e., a framework that specifies fairly explicitly a set of language, content, cognitive, and affective objectives that are then tied to or illustrated by exemplary techniques, activities, and supported by written materials)?
- Are sufficient core *and* reference materials available for teachers and for students in the language(s) of instruction? If not, are there trained individuals available who can prepare such materials?
- Is there a sufficient number of trained and experienced teachers who are fluent speakers of the language(s) of instruction *and* who are trained to teach via that language(s)?

Questions such as these (see Tucker 1991, 1998) must be considered by community leaders as they consider the implementation of any innovative language education program.

As Courtney Cazden, Catherine E. Snow, and Cornelia Heise-Baigorria (1990: 48) noted in their report for UNICEF, “despite the centrality of language achievements in the developmental agenda of the [child], language issues are rarely in the forefront of thinking about how to plan environments for young children. . . . The prevalence of multilingualism in the world adds a particular urgency to the recommendation to attend” to the quality of language instruction available to the child.

The cumulative evidence from research conducted over the last three decades at sites around the world demonstrates conclusively that cognitive, social, personal, and economic benefits accrue to the individual who has an opportunity to develop a high degree of bilingual proficiency when compared with a monolingual counterpart. The message for educators is clear (see also Tucker 1990): Draw upon community resources and involve diverse stakeholders in all phases of program planning and implementation, implement carefully planned and well articulated sequences of study, utilize trained, committed teachers, and begin innovative language education programs that will lead to bilingual or multilingual proficiency for participants as early as possible. The graduates of such programs should be culturally rich, linguistically competent, and socially sensitive individuals prepared to participate actively in our increasingly global economy.

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