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Bilingualism or Bilingual Support? Ethnic minority bilingual children in English Primary schools

Mahendra K. VERMA

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of debate in favour of or against “English-only” in the education of linguistically diverse populations. The inner city schools in Great Britain - in England, Scotland and Wales - have undergone a radical visual, linguistic and cultural transformation in the last four decades with the arrival in the predominantly English-speaking community, of the new immigrants and refugees, and their children. The third generation children born in this country continue to arrive in the nursery and primary classrooms with fluency in the heritage language but many of them lack an adequate level of competence in English to cope with the demands of the National Curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to examine the tension in the language planning ethos embedded in the National Curriculum between fostering “bilingualism” and promoting “English” via “bilingual support”. This paper is based on a critical appraisal of several government language education related documents for England; a sociolinguistic analysis of the results of a major project Working With Bilingual Children, and subsequent mini-projects which investigated the conceptualisation of “bilingualism” and “bilingual support” in relation to the ethnic minority children in primary schools in England.

This paper aims to critically examine the body of debate in favour of or against “English and bilingual support only” that is currently dominating the education of linguistically diverse ethnic minority children in primary classrooms in England. Inner city primary schools have undergone a radical visual, linguistic and cultural change in the last four decades with the arrival of new groups of immigrants, refugees and their children. Many of these schools have an overwhelming population of English as a second language (ESL) speaking children ranging from 45% to 90%. Most of these bilingual / potential bilingual children have competencies in their heritage languages and English in varying degrees. MILLS (1995) describes the range of their linguistic abilities:

“Some children have abilities which are only apparent in one language. Many of us have had experience of meeting children who are monosyllabic in English but can carry out lengthy and involved conversations in another tongue, or children who are very able in English but who can not communicate well in their first language. Similarly, some children have abilities which transfer across language boundaries; they can describe, report incidents, and tell stories in two languages.” (MILLS, 1995, 144)

In the 1970s the language education of these ethnic minority children was based on “English-only” ideology. There was a general belief among ESL teachers and educationalists that the acquisition of ESL by ethnic minority children was simply a matter of “picking it up”:

“Many of the teachers consulted in the course of the survey said that in the “normal” class situation the non-English speaking children learn English simply by picking it up, and *can speak it within three months of their arrival.*” (Schools Council Working Paper, 31, 1970, 27)

This magic acquisition period of three months, however, did not reflect the language experience of a vast majority of children who needed specialist ESL help. It is clear from a report of the Department of Education and Science, *A Language for Life* (The Bullock Report, 1975) that some ethnic minority children even after studying for two years in primary schools entered the secondary school with serious English language difficulties as far as fluency and accuracy was concerned. Most minority children needed longer, and some required more time than the primary stage offered.

In spite of the emphasis on the acquisition of ESL from the early years the Bullock Report (1975) also recognised the value of the heritage language of the ethnic minority children and said that their (potential) bilingualism was:

“...an asset, ... something to be nurtured, and one of the agencies which should nurture it is the school... the school should... help maintain and deepen (pupils) knowledge of their mother tongues” (Bullock, 1975, 249)

“No child should be expected to cast off the language 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. ... The school that really welcomes in its immigrant parents must also be prepared to welcome their languages.” (Bullock, 1975, 286-294)

This ethos of pluralism and bilingualism has since been eroded by the underlying monolingual beliefs, policies and practices in education in England. The subsequent developments in education with the publication of the Swann Report (Education for All, 1985), the Education Reform Act (1988), the Kingman Report (1988), the Cox Report (1989), English in the National Curriculum (1995) and other DFE (1995) and SCAA (1996a, 1996b) documents universally recognised the value of bilingualism but rejected even the idea of any form of bilingual education for ethnic minority children. The Swann Report exhibits inherent contradictions as do the reports and recommendations that followed it. On the one hand, Swann superficially imitated the Bullock Report's recognition of the positive value of heritage languages and advocated equality of access to education and equal freedom and opportunity. On the other hand, he excluded heritage languages from pedagogic use for the cognitive and bilingual development of minority children in the primary classroom.

“The ethnic majority community in a truly pluralist society can not expect to remain untouched and unchanged by the presence of ethnic minority groups - indeed the concept of pluralism implies seeing the very diversity of such a society... and the variety of

languages and language forms as an enrichment of the experiences of all those within it.” (SWANN, 1985, 1, 4-5)

“It has been suggested that mother tongue provision can help ameliorate the difficulties facing non-English speaking pupils entering school for the first time. It must however be recognised we believe that such provision can at best serve only to delay rather than overcome the trauma for these pupils of entering an English speaking environment” (SWANN, 1985, 7:3.17, 407)

FITZPATRICK's (1981, 1987) MOTET (Mother Tongue and English Teaching Project) research disproved Swann's prediction and concluded:

“The experimental groups overall did better than the controls in English and Panjabi tests of communication but there was little difference in overall English performance. ... With regard to the children's acquisition of English, it is clear that the amount of time spent on learning English in school (in this case full or half time) bears no relationship to the overall performance in English. ... As far as Panjabi was concerned, the clear *superiority* in performance of the experimental groups was accompanied by indications of a transfer of higher level ability to more complex tasks in English.” (FITZPATRICK, 1987, 109)

HAMERS and BLANC (1989) commented on Swann's misinterpretation of the available research data:

“... the Swann Report completely misrepresented research data on mother-tongue teaching and bilingual education and concluded that education should provide better ESL programs, but the mother-tongue education should be the responsibility of ethnolinguistic minorities. These conclusions, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, were reached on exclusively ideological grounds they completely disregard the existing empirical evidence on bilingual education, and in particular the consequences for minority children of teaching exclusively through the mainstream language.” (HAMERS & BLANC, 1989, 192)

Swann went further and challenged the ethnic community to prove the “true” nature of the “mother tongue”.

“If a language is truly the mother tongue of a community and is the language needed for parent/child interaction... or for access to the religious and cultural heritage of the community, then we believe it will survive and flourish regardless of the provision made for its teaching and/or usage within mainstream schools.” (SWANN, 1985, 7:3.17, 408)

On the misconceived recommendation of Swann, pupils' heritage languages were included in the modern foreign languages curriculum alongside the major European Union languages which are taught as *ab initio* languages. Although the curriculum recognised that the presence of these languages (referred to as “community languages”) “opened up interesting and challenging opportunities for language learning” they did not offer these languages alongside English in the primary classroom. The rationale for treating heritage mother tongues as “foreign” languages was perhaps based on the assumption that in the third generation ethnic minority communities there will be a pattern of language shift from heritage languages as mother tongues to English as mother tongue. The curriculum for modern foreign languages is based on the assumption that learners start *ab initio* whereas the heritage language learners go to the community languages voluntary classes with varying degrees of competence in

the target language i.e. their heritage language. The positioning and shaping of heritage languages and their ethnic learners on the foreign language potter's wheel has been pedagogically and culturally unsound. This strategy does, however, contribute to the educational and linguistic planning for non-preservation in the National Curriculum.

In addition to transforming “mother tongues” into “foreign languages”, Swann established the supremacy of English and the English curriculum:

“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 learning English.” (SWANN, 1985, 7:3.17, 407)

“... the English language is a central unifying factor in "being British" and is the key to participation on equal terms as a full member of this society.” (SWANN, 1985, 7.1.1, 385)

This was reinforced by The Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English (The Kingman Report, 1988) and English for Ages 5-11 (The Cox Report, 1988) when they said that ethnic minority children should “be given every possible opportunity to function effectively in an English-speaking society”.

“Teachers should be helping children whose first language is not English to acquire accents in English which will enable them to be understood easily.” (KINGMAN, 1988, 43)

KINGMAN (1988) mistakenly assumed English to be part of the home language experience of all children and said:

“In the school curriculum English is unique; the child begins to acquire language before school. Without it no other processes of thought and study can take place, and it continues to be central throughout life.” (KINGMAN, 1988: 4)

The cognitive processes of the Panjabi Sikh child in pre-school years are supported by Panjabi in most cases, not English. She is a competent and successful communicator in her heritage language. In Chomsky's Universal Grammatical terms she has “a mental representation of language, with the parameters set to the values of her native language.” She is cognitively mature to solve problems and deal with abstract concepts. The final report of the National Curriculum Mathematics Working Group was more aware of this reality and sensitive to offering equality of opportunity in assessment:

“Pupils with poor command of English may need to be tested in their mother tongue if their mathematical attainment is to be fairly assessed.” (DES/NCC, 1989, 12)

Both the Kingman and Cox Reports were “primarily concerned with children who speak English as a mother tongue” and it was not within their terms of reference “to consider English as a second language provision in detail”. However, following in the footsteps of Swann, they too, the minority

community felt, offered some superficial and pedagogically impractical support to heritage languages.

“It should be the duty of all teachers to instil in their pupils a civilized respect for other languages and an understanding of the relations between other languages and English. It should be made clear to English speaking pupils that classmates whose first language is Bengali or Cantonese ... have languages as systematic and rule-governed as their own.” (COX, 1988, 43)

An analysis of a wide variety of language policy documents from across the primary schools in the inner cities in England demonstrated the schools' positive attitudes toward heritage languages and cultures and a common concern for the English language development of ethnic minority children. Local Education Authorities' response to bilingual pupils' educational and language needs generally includes a positive attitude toward the mother tongue and the contribution it can make in the acquisition of ESL.

“Bilingual children are, of course, learning and developing new skills and concepts across at least two languages. It is important that learning can be transferred from one language to the other and that each language supports the other. The language development and cognitive development of bilingual children will, therefore, benefit considerably from the use of the home language in the school alongside English.” (CLEVELAND, 1992, 17)

A typical school language policy document, however, does not emphasise the linguistic advantages of developing the first language in the acquisition of the second language. Instead, it recognises the national curriculum constraints and candidly states the limited role and function of heritage mother tongues.

“The talk which is offered to the children in their first language promotes a sense of security and familiarity... All children whose first language is not English need to use their mother tongue freely in play with peers and in other situations. Children whose English is limited and who are sometimes confused or distressed about a particular situation need to have the importance of a bilingual assistant. It is important that respect is shown to a child's first language.” (School [A], 1997, 7)

The value of the use of heritage mother tongues in the classroom is perceived in terms of the “respect” they deserve rather than as the potential the school could harness to make bilingualism a reality and contribute to the reversal of language shift. Another example is that of a mismatch between an LEA's policy (in Yorkshire) and that of one of its schools, which has a sizeable number of children who on arrival had a mother tongue other than English (Panjabi and Urdu). On the basis of its face value the LEA has a very positive policy on bilingualism:

1. Bilingualism should be valued and maintained.
2. Bilingual children be given the opportunity to learn to read and write in their mother tongue at the earliest stage.
3. Mother tongue skills of bilingual children be recognised as valuable channels for supporting the learning of the second language and their overall intellectual development.

4. Employment of bilingual teachers to be a key strategy for meeting the needs of bilingual children.
5. Closer links be developed between the black communities and schools and colleges to support and develop the learning of English and maintenance of mother tongues.

One of the schools in this LEA clearly states its views on bilingualism.

The most effective way of developing bilingualism is to reinforce a child's first language and its concepts and transfer both to the learning of the second language.

Although there is emphasis on providing the facility to develop literacy (and presumably oracy) in heritage languages, there are no apparent curriculum plans to defy the national curriculum constraints and help minority children develop and sustain bilingualism. The most important aspect of the policies is the recognition of the pedagogical value of the use of the mother tongue in making the ESL lessons less stressful. It is clearly evident from the *ofsted* (Office for Standards in Education) report (1994):

“Bilingual teachers and classroom assistants helped to raise the achievement of pupils in the early stages of learning English by explaining concepts in the pupils' first languages to help them follow the rest of the lesson.” (OFSTED, 1994, 5)

The most important aspect of this quote from the *ofsted* report is the significance attached to the contribution of the heritage language and the bilingual staff as handrails which supported the mainstream teacher in delivering the national curriculum and the non-English proficient potential bilinguals in their “early stages of learning English”.

The change from the “withdrawal classes” to “moving into the mainstream” has been pedagogically and socio-culturally the right policy that resulted from the recommendations of the Calderdale Report (1986) and the Swann Report (1985) for the education of bilingual children. As a result both bilingual pupils and bilingual support staff moved into the classroom alongside the class teacher and the English pupils in many schools. The supposed end of the marginalisation of bilingual support staff has been achieved in some schools due to the benefits gained from the government guided “Partnership” policy, which encourages joint planning, teaching and evaluation (BOURNE and MCPAKE, 1991). JUPP (1996) describes the essentials of the concepts of “language support” and “partnership” succinctly:

“The language support teacher contributes a language development perspective, suggesting approaches to presentation and tasks which support the second language learner. This partnership approach is beneficial ... for bilingual children who are at an early stage of acquiring English ...

Language support involves decisions not just about *what* to teach, but *when* to teach various aspects of a topic in relation to the week-by-week plan drawn up by the class teachers involved ...

Language support teachers in the UK seek to incorporate home languages into topic work wherever possible, believing that pupils benefit from the recognition of their mother-tongues in English-medium schools.” (JUPP, 1996, 42, 49-51)

The main aim of the policy is to offer opportunities to the “support teachers” to work out a role for themselves in the mainstream classroom alongside the class teacher who could now jointly monitor language use in the classroom and explore the early stage development of children's linguistic skills in English. According to Blair and Bourne:

“In primary schools, bilingual support staff had a clear role in alerting teachers to concerns about bilingual children.” (BLAIR & BOURNE, 1998, 71)

The critical thing to note is that heritage languages are “incorporated” in English and Science lessons only “wherever possible” and one could add “whenever required”. In their research project on the role and strategies of bilingual support staff in Primary Schools VERMA, CORRIGAN and FIRTH (1993) found that only 10 per cent of LEAs encouraged the teaching of heritage languages and that this was only “where necessary”. The results showed that although many schools felt that heritage languages should be a priority and their profile should be raised in actual practice it was ESL that proved to be most significant. As soon as pupils begin to effectively meet the cognitive challenge of coping with the class teacher's talk in English without the aid of the crutches of the mother tongue and the support teacher, their roles come to an end. It soon becomes obvious to the pupils and the community that the legitimacy of the heritage language becomes tenuous, whereas English emerges as the only legitimate language in the curriculum. Monica Heller stated:

“By understanding what constitutes legitimate language in a bilingual classroom, we can see whose interests are favoured and whose are marginalized and how bilingual education contributes to the welfare of minority groups.” (Heller, 1996, 157)

This is reflected in SCAA's response to the issue of the relationship between induction into English and the common culture on the one hand and the role of the school in relation to minority (heritage) languages and cultures on the other by

“leaving space outside the statutory curriculum (estimated at 20 percent of school time for five to 14 year olds) to be used entirely at the school's discretion, for additional teaching that might include minority languages.” (SCAA, 1996, 5)

The legitimacy of minority languages is defined by their place in the “space outside” and by a “school's discretion”.

The important issue to discuss is whether “mainstreaming”, “partnership teaching” and “bilingual schooling” in any guise or form would foster and develop bilingualism. In other words, the question to be addressed is whether

“mainstreaming” and “bilingual support” amount to supporting “bilingualism”. A system of “bilingual schooling” and “bilingual support” which does not create an environment for the bilingual development of minority children within the national curriculum will not help in the reversal of language shift that is beginning to affect the third and fourth generations in minority communities. SWANN (1985), KINGMAN (1988), COX (1989) and even SCAA's (School Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 1996a) discussion paper on teaching EAL (English as an additional language) are replete with the rhetoric of all pupils', including ethnic minority pupils', “entitlement” and “rights” to the full National Curriculum programmes of study and of the enriching role of mother tongue heritage languages in the classroom. However, sustaining and developing bilingualism as in the Welsh National Curriculum is not the task assigned to support staff. Even the Dearing Report (1994) side-stepped the issue of bilingual development of ethnic minority children. In the case of Welsh children, however, it recommended that the “development of English and Welsh should be seen as mutually supportive”. Bilingual support i.e. English language support in the mainstream for ethnic minority pupils is a pedagogical and political principle which, according to JUPP (1996), is based on the belief reflected in the ENCA report (1992) that there is a correlation between the differential underachievement across South Asians and Caribbeans and those with a home language other than English.

“A major factor in some of these differences was the fact the home language of many of the children from different ethnic origins was not English.” (ENCA, 1992, 101)

The principle and practice of bilingual support interprets the linguistic needs of ethnic minority children exclusively in terms of their English language needs. This successfully aids and abets the erosion of the bilingual potential that the child brings from home into school (HESTER 1994, VERMA 1991, 1995/96, 1996). In the words of RABAN-BISBY (1995)

“If we attempt to funnel the richness and diversity of our classrooms into an inflexible mono-cultural curriculum framed in a rigid adherence to, for instance, Standard English for all purposes... then we deny everything we know about the way people learn and we shall, at best, marginalise and at worst, destroy the voices of our pupils - and their voices demand and deserve our attention.” (RABAN-BISBY, 1995, 63)

The disregard of bilingualism and the opposition to any version of additive bilingual education is claimed not to be educationally unsound for ethnic minority children. Talking about her research experience in an English dominant-French minority educational context in Ontario Monica Heller reported a similar situation:

“... it is actually *monolingual* education, but a monolingual education that takes place in a bilingual, frequently multilingual, context...” (HELLER, 1996, 157)

The present bilingual or multilingual context in infant and primary classrooms with an “English language driven bilingual support only” ethos will not survive beyond the second or third generation. This policy of monolingual education does offer ethnic minority children the opportunity (wherever possible!) to study their heritage languages as modern foreign languages alongside French or any other indigenous major EU language. In doing so, however, they are encouraged to embrace what is part of their heritage and roots as something new and foreign.

In this paper I have drawn attention to the rhetoric about bilingualism via “bilingual support” and the reality of these as facilitators of monolingualism. SCAA (1996) does not mince its words in its appraisal of these children's right to be treated as “bilinguals”:

“Despite the presence of languages other than English in pupils' home backgrounds, it is not always the case that these pupils are “bilinguals”. For all these reasons, the descriptive term “EAL” has been adopted.” (SCAA, 1996, 2)

Irrespective of the different claimed ideologies which have given birth to different labels: ESL, ESOL and EAL, the underlying ideology, with a common agreed agenda to promote the dominant language and devalue the heritage language, is evident in the National Curriculum, and occasionally in the attitudes of schools too. SCAA (1996) said:

“At the core of all pupils' entitlement to this curriculum is the English language, the teaching of which continues to be a dominant purpose of our state schools.” (SCAA, 1996, 5)

At the heart of this public pronouncement on the importance of English is the difficulty English education has had in accepting the educational advantages of a non-transitional bilingual programme. ESL / EAL could coexist with heritage languages in the curriculum as they do with Welsh and Gaelic. Ellis said:

“ESL can become a part of a bilingual programme as easily as it has been a part of a monolingual programme.” (ELLIS, 1985, 21)

I conclude my assessment of the empty rhetoric of “bilingualism” and “bilingual support” in the National Curriculum and related documents by sharing HAMERS and BLANC's (1989) interpretation of such situations:

“A major problem with education for ethnolinguistic minority children is the so-called «cognitive handicap» attributed to their bilinguality, or what CUMMINS (1981, 1984) calls the *myth of bilingual handicap*. ... In this myth the overt goal of L2 education is to teach L2 to the minority child in order to give him equal chances, the covert goal being to assimilate him; therefore, L1 is devalorized ...” (HAMERS & BLANC, 1989, 204)

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