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THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN SUPPORTING PLURILINGUALISM IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS: INSIGHTS FROM LONDON

Abstract: For educators working in diverse contexts, where they encounter many different languages, a key question is: How can an educator be able to actively support bilingual/multilingual learners to maintain home languages and to support all learners to develop plurilingual skills, if they themselves have no knowledge of languages used by their learners? Many educators see this issue as a significant obstacle for engaging with plurilingual practices in their own school communities and classrooms.

This paper will address that question through an analysis of good practice examples and relevant initiatives in London, as a global city. The theoretical part of this paper will draw on conceptualization of plurilingualism and plurilingual practices as defined by the Council of Europe. Based on the analysis of examples of good practice in London, this paper aims to provide guidance on the role educators have in: supporting bilingual/multilingual learners to integrate their home languages into their learning, create opportunities to develop plurilingual skills for all learners, including those who identify as monolingual, and develop practices which encourage all learners to use their linguistic background as resource for teaching and learning. Examples of good practice come from London as one of the lead global cities, which is characterized by hyper diversity and has 233 world languages recorded in its schools.

Keywords: Plurilingualism, Plurilingual practices, Role of teachers, Home languages

Introduction

This article is aimed at practitioners, researchers and training providers in education looking to gain insights into well-established classroom initiatives which exemplify how teachers can support development of plurilingual skills for all learners in their learning communities. The main focus of this article's analysis is the fact that in diverse contexts teachers cannot be skilled users of all languages their learners use, in some cases teachers may not be at all familiar with many languages used in their school communities. It is therefore not surprising to find that teachers experience linguistic diversity as something they are not able to work with and support.

A select number of classroom practice examples from London schools challenges these views by showcasing different roles teachers may take in order to overcome language barriers and develop plurilingual classroom practices. In the conclusions, further readings and recommendations are provided for those wishing to explore this topic further.

Context

According to the latest figures London has a population of 9 million (<https://www.trustfor-london.org.uk/data/geography-population>).

Global Cities Index (<https://www.kearney.com/global-cities/2021>) ranking, which is based on five criteria, places London as the second global city in the world. Two landmark studies map the linguistic diversity of London: Multilingual Capital (Baker & Eversley, 2000) and Language Capital (Eversley et al, 2010). Collected data shows that well over 50 percent of the school children in inner London classify as bilingual and in individual schools it can be as high as 70 to over 90 percent. It needs to be emphasized that the broad and inclusive definition of bilingualism used in this study and by London schools to collect relevant data being: ‘exposure to more than one language at home or in the community’, is necessary and suitable to the context where there are many different types of bilingualism with various degrees of competencies in languages used. Language Capital (2010) lists 233 languages recorded as used by school children. The main challenge is that many bilingual/multilingual children often experience their home languages as of little value in the education system and perceive them of value only within their communities (The Nuffield Foundation, 2000, Mehmedbegovic, 2008, 2009).

Despite many challenges experienced by educators in this hyper diverse top ranked global city and a main site of multiple migration waves, pockets of excellent practice have been developing in many schools. This article aims to outline four such initiatives which exemplify approaches to linguistic and cultural resources for the benefit of individual and communities.

Key Concepts

Plurilingualism and Plurilingual Skills

I would like to begin this section by arguing that the concept of plurilingualism, as introduced and promoted by the Council of Europe (2001) provides a significant shift in terms of understanding and conceptualizing language teaching and learning, as well as developing innovative models of practice, which include all linguistic experiences of our learners as resources for learning languages used as medium of education or target foreign languages.

How is this shift achieved? It is helpful to begin by reflecting on the goals of language learning as positioned by the post-second world war trends in linguistics and language learning, although the concept of ‘native speaker’ originates in the 19th century and has close links with the concept: one nation, one language, one state (Hackert, 2012).

Language learning trends set in the 1960-ties have imposed an idealized goal that still dominates what is expected of language learning and which is impossible to achieve for most learners: ‘native speaker like competence’ (Paikeday, 1985). As many will know from their own experience, even those who live immersed for decades in another language and culture often have a recognizable difference in their language production, that makes the native speakers ask: ‘Where are you from?’. Achieving native like competence through foreign language learning only in one’s country of origin is a goal that makes many language learners and teachers experience a sense of failure. In a synthesis of relevant theories (Calvino, 2011) reaches the same conclusion: ‘We can observe either from the Psycholinguistic Issues as for the Sociolinguistic and Discourse Issues perspectives that there are several difficulties which may account for the hindering of the acquisition of native-like competence in Second Language Acquisition. These obstacles, which are most of the time difficult to overcome, lead us to the conclusion that it might be difficult not to say impossible to happen that a non-native speaker achieves native-like competence’.

In a study conducted in London, one participant, who at the time was working as a head teacher, reported learning a language in school as an extremely negative experience: ‘I remember learning French in school and being left with a profound feeling of failure’ (Mehmedbegovic et al, 2015). This sentiment reflects experiences of many learners who after learning a foreign language in school for 6 – 8 years feel they do not have even basic confidence to engage in a conversation

in the target language or in a similar task. These types of experiences are reflected in the decreasing numbers of learners opting to study languages, which we have been seeing across different stages of education in the UK. 'Entry rates for modern languages have declined steadily, at both GCSE and A-Level, since the early 2000s. GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) entry data, for example, show that the combined total number of pupils taking French, German, Spanish and other Modern Languages last year was almost half that of 2001 (Fisher et al, 2022)'.

A specific challenge in Anglophone contexts is also that the power of English as the current global language is widely interpreted as: 'English is enough'. This perception that English speakers do not need to speak other languages is based on the dominance of English unrivalled by any other language in our history. David Crystal (2000) highlighted its unparalleled power at the beginning of the new millennium by saying: 'No other language has been spoken by some many people in so many places ... one in four of the human race is competent in English'. Over two decades later its power and domination are prominently continuing to be on the increase.

Comparative European Union Data collected in 2012 placed the UK, at the time, as the third on the list of EU member states with a population 'least likely' to be able to speak a foreign language. According to the survey, 61% of the UK population could only speak one language. The only EU member states with a higher percentage were Hungary (65%) and Italy (62%) (European Commission, 2012). Considering that the most up to date British Council Language Trends (2022) are reporting decline in study visits and language immersion for the UK students in other countries, student exchanges and availability of language assistants from different countries, there can be no realistic expectation that the UK has improved its ranking since the EU report was published in 2012.

Plurilingualism recognizes an all-encompassing communication competence that is made up of different languages that one person has been exposed to and acknowledges the partial nature of the knowledge anyone can have of one language, be it their mother tongue or not. Therefore plurilingualism removes the ideal of the native speaker as the ultimate achievement and replaces it with the aim of an effective pluralistic communicator who draws on his/her varied repertoire of linguistic and cultural knowledge in, a flexible, creative and individual way (European Council, 2001).

Plurilingual practices in education are further defined in Coste et al (2009) as:

'The school's first duty regarding languages and cultures is therefore, partly contrary to its formerly established functions, to contribute to: the drawing up of a plurilingual and pluricultural learner profile, familiarization with the resources enabling this profile to be further developed, progressive mastery of the means permitting dynamic management of this multiple competence and recognition and upgrading of the knowledge and skills thus acquired.'

The following examples of good practice shed light specifically on types of resources which can be utilized to develop plurilingual practices in schools and what roles teachers can take in managing the processes involved in developing plurilingual skills.

Examples of Good Practice

Translation Nation Initiative, Stephen Spender Trust

Translation Nation Outline: The Translation Nation (<https://www.all-languages.org.uk/news/translation-nation>) project introduces children at primary school to translation. It promotes inclusivity of all languages and uniquely links community languages with a curriculum focus on literacy including listening skills and the use of phonics. Translation Nation aims to inspire children at

primary school to begin a lifelong exploration of literature from around the world, an enjoyment and appreciation of literary English as well as taking pride in the many languages that have become part of the community. Outcome: Translation Nation is a celebration of the languages spoken in Primary schools in England. By sharing their languages with their peers, students become fascinated by the different worlds that language can create and develop a respect for those with linguistic ability. Parents are able to find new ground on which to communicate with their children and build a bridge between their childhood and their child's. Schools are able to offer parents different ways of becoming involved within the school community and teachers become inspired to adopt more creative ways to engage with their students. The project is a partnership between Eastside Educational Trust and the Stephen Spender Trust. Translation Nation brings together the expertise of Eastside's work in educational settings and Stephen Spender Trust's commitment to literature in translation.

Bilingual Learning for Second and Third Generation Bangladeshi Children: Language, Culture and Curriculum

This was an action research project based in two primary schools in Tower Hamlets (Kerner et al, 2008). It examines how second and third generation British Bangladeshi children learn bilingually in after-school community language classes and investigates the benefits that can be gained if children use Sylheti/Bengali alongside English in the mainstream classroom. Year 2, 4 and 6 children were visited at their after-school Bengali classes to find out how they learned language, literacy and mathematics in their mother tongue. With the help of community class teachers, primary teachers and bilingual assistants, the research team then devised bilingual activities that children could do in mainstream school to link with the curriculum.

Children found it difficult to use Sylheti/Bengali in the classroom, although they were accustomed to using it in the playground and at community class, where they switched between languages. Children wanted to be able to use Bangla for learning in school and felt it was an important part of their identity. Working in both languages can enhance children's learning, through conceptual transfer, use of translation, developing metalinguistic awareness and drawing on cultural knowledge.

Second and third generation children still have bilingual skills, but are in danger of losing them unless they have sufficient support to develop home language. In addition to community language classes, children need to do academic work bilingually in mainstream school in order to fully develop concepts and skills in their home language as well as English. Only then will they achieve the full benefits of bilingual learning.

Using Dual Language Books to Support Bilingualism and Biliteracy in English and Albanian

This action research project explored the ways in which dual language books can be used in England to support bilingual pupils in school, in a context in which the languages of the home rarely feature on the curriculum (Sneddon, 2008). In the context of a project in which an education authority provided dual language books to primary schools, two mothers used Albanian/English story books to teach their six- year-old daughters to read in Albanian. The study reports on how the mothers and their children used both texts to transfer skills from one language to another, to negotiate meaning in both languages and to compare reading strategies.

At the end of the school year the girls, as well as reading in Albanian, were reading in English with the best in their class. They were developing fluency in Albanian and using it more in the home. Their mothers had become closely involved in their daughters' schooling and reported improvements in their own English literacy skills. The teacher's role was crucial: by providing support and resources to parents she enabled them to help their children become additive bilinguals in a situation in which they were beginning to lose the active use of their first language.

Autobiographical Approaches: Developing Intercultural and Plurilingual Skills

This autobiographical approach was developed by the author of this article and introduced to several London schools as a part of the structured speaking and listening curriculum unit (Mehmedbegovic, 2012). The key element of this approach is a teacher led presentation of his/her own model narrative based on multimedia elements: a soundtrack, a photograph, a poem, a video clip, just to name a few types of multimedia elements. This model is used for learners to gain insights into developing their own autobiographical writing and oral presentations using: photographs, films, music and literature. Following the model lesson, students worked with their class teachers for three weeks on researching their backgrounds, talking to their family members, collecting multimedia elements and developing a presentation which was based on a poster with written text and visual elements. Learners who are bilingual/multilingual are encouraged to write and present using their different languages. On the day scheduled for pupils' presentations, there were a number of guests in the classroom: head of year, where possible head teacher, school governor. These guests were invited with the intention to give children a sense of special occasion and having a real audience. Each pupil was then invited to present their own narrative. Children said in their feedback:

“Doing a presentation in front of my class and guests, made me feel like I was a teacher!”

“A lot of the stories I heard during family gatherings, only started making sense when I did this project.”

The teachers on the other hand say: ‘children who never put their hand up, kept asking when they can present their narratives’ and ‘children with special educational needs, were more eager to share their cultures’.

At the European level a project based on personal memories has been developed in order to bring different generations together and emphasize the importance of individual experiences. Although the London project presented in this chapter has no direct links with this bigger initiative at the European level, there are many common features. The European Memories Initiative (<https://europeanmemories.net>) makes a case for developing an understanding of history which is not only about accumulating pieces of information, but having a personal insight into emotions and thinking of individuals caught up in the processes of upheaval and change.

The Council of Europe published ‘The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters’ in 2009. This document is essentially a toolkit for reflecting on one’s experiences of otherness. The reflection process is guided by a sequence of questions based on relevant research and it is adapted for different age range. The aim of this toolkit is to provide educators and young people with means of reaching a better understanding of the self and others. Its goal is to support the development of relevant skills and intercultural competencies. It has multiple possibilities of use: as a self-reflection or self-assessment tools, not shared with anybody; for one-to-one work and confidential sharing, or for collaborative learning in classroom or group settings. In terms of its place in the learning cycles or curricula, this approach can be built in at regular intervals with the intention of following the process of developing awareness and skills or it can be used as a response to a positive or negative event (study visit or a racial incident).

Role of Teachers in Supporting Plurilingualism: Commonalities and Implications across Different Initiatives

Considering the four initiatives outlined above, it can be identified that there is a division on the two initiatives where the teachers engage with supporting children from many different linguistic backgrounds: Translation Nation and Autobiographical Approaches and the two initiatives

where the teachers are focused on one specific type of linguistic background and type of bilingualism: Sylheti/Bangla-English bilingualism and Albanian-English bilingualism. This reflects well London context in which a small number of local authorities, such as Tower Hamlets where the Sylheti/Bangla-English initiative took place, have high concentration of children with a particular linguistic background, whereas most of inner London local authorities have a high level of diversity and in many schools, there will commonly be between 40 – 70 languages used by pupils (Eversley et al, 2010). However, in all four initiatives the teachers leading the projects in mainstream schools are not users of the languages they are supporting their pupils to use as a part of structured teaching and learning activities.

In these initiatives there are different ways used in which the linguistic barriers between pupils and teachers are bridged. In Translation Nation teachers work in partnership with community workers and professional translators who can engage with pupils in their home languages. In the initiative with the bilingual Albanian-English books, the partners are mothers. In Autobiographical Approaches pupils are encouraged to present their narratives bilingually, in writing and orally, and they themselves act as the experts on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This initiative is of particular importance and interest for this topic since it is an example where teachers do not depend on bringing in external partners, that may require funding, or parents, who may not be available. This initiative exemplifies how teachers can utilize their learners as the main resources for supporting plurilingualism in classrooms and empower them by allocating them the role of experts on their linguistic and cultural background. The comment of a learner, who reflected on his experience during this initiative by saying: 'I felt like I was a teacher' (Mehmedbegovic, 2012), perfectly encapsulates how learners recognize the significance of being given center stage in the classroom to present his narrative and to provide insights into his linguistic and cultural background. Utilizing bilingual/multilingual learners as the main resources to support plurilingualism in classrooms has multiple advantages: firstly teachers are fully in control of planning relevant activities without any limitations which occur when working with external partners, mainly funding and availability; secondly by structuring opportunities for their learners to take the role of experts on their cultures and languages many important pedagogical aspects are achieved: learners acquire the role of the leaders of plurilingual learning in their classrooms, which can be expected to have a positive impact on higher self-esteem, enhanced engagement and therefore better academic achievement.

The most important implication, that we can draw from all these examples, is that the awareness needs to be raised amongst educators that through working in partnership with parents, community workers and other types of professionals, such as translators, and by empowering learners as leaders of plurilingual learning in classrooms, plurilingual initiatives and projects can be planned and delivered with great success. The teacher takes on the role of a facilitator and where appropriate joins in as a learner, with the aims of acquiring cultural and linguistic knowledge relevant to his class and school community. In the words of Jim Cummins through such classroom practices teachers provide 'an affirmative mirror' (Cummins, 2000) to linguistic and cultural capital of their learners.

Previous research also shows that the teachers who experience seeing their learners complete tasks in their home languages with competence and expressiveness, have higher expectations of these learners in their mainstream classes too. Being new to English in a school, can often be interpreted as a special educational need and it has been documented, in a review of research into practices with children with English as an Additional Language in the context of schools in England, that children new to English are often registered as special needs and placed into low ability classes even though they are simply at a natural stage of acquiring a new language (Andrews, 2009). Seeing learners who struggle to complete a simple task in an English classroom, perform at a high level of competence in another language, for example in a play or a poetry reading, teachers have described as seeing their learners demonstrate a 'hidden talent' which then changes their perception of their overall ability (Mehmedbegovic, 2011).

Therefore planning for and facilitating opportunities as a part of curriculum time for children to utilise their home languages as a resource for their own learning, but also as a resource which supports development of plurilingual skills of all children and adults belonging to that learning community, has a wider impact and implications on equality of opportunity and participation of learners, inclusive classroom practices and ultimately social justice. Learners who are inappropriately identified as special needs and inappropriately placed in low ability sets are described by some educators as: ‘children with no language’, ‘severe EAL’ and ‘children with bilingual problems’ (Mehmedbegovic, 2011). Although we need to acknowledge that all teachers work with the best intentions for their pupils, this kind of terminology shows a lack of understanding of plurilingual learners and plurilingual practices.

A recent research report provides evidence that teachers in England have developed classroom practices which are inclusive of home cultures, but home languages are still seen as an aspect unavoidably left out for the reasons discussed above:

‘Another commonly used strategy by the class teachers was making reference to EAL students’ home cultures. Many teachers reported that they could not ‘do much about languages’, since they did not speak them. However, they found it a lot easier to make reference to EAL students’ home cultures, particularly in activities involving history, environment, weather, festivals and religions’ (Arnot et al, 2014).

This dichotomy of classroom practices where diverse cultures are explored and well integrated in the school environment, for example through displays, assemblies and school events, whereas diverse languages used by learners in a school might only appear in a tokenistic way such as welcome signs at the school entrance, demonstrates an urgent need for the relevant professional development of teachers and school leaders. Educators in different roles need opportunities to gain insights into ways to engage with linguistic diversity in their contexts in creative ways as facilitators of plurilingual development for all members of their learning community. The most important shift in thinking which this professional development needs to provide is for educators to overcome a well-established perception, expressed above as: ‘we could not do much about languages, if we do not speak them’ (ibid, 2014).

Conclusion and Further Readings

The range of initiatives outlined in this article exemplifies different approaches and roles educators can consider in order to develop plurilingual practices in their classrooms, even though they may not have any knowledge of languages their pupils use. The examples given in this article, are only a select small sample of good practice from London schools. The author of this article has developed a website: Healthy Linguistic Diet, <http://healthylinguisticdiet.com/>, which provides further examples of good practice and relevant publications.

Healthy Linguistic Diet approach is based on interdisciplinary research and aims to provide a gradual way into developing plurilingual practices based on the analogy between physical and mental health. Regular physical activity and a healthy diet are important factors in maintaining physical health. In the same way, the learning of languages and their regular use provide essential mental exercise, leading to a better brain health and an increase in “cognitive reserve” resulting in a later onset of dementia and an improved cognitive outcome after a stroke (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). Healthy Linguistic Diet model has been successfully implemented as a regional strategy in Italy (Cinganotto et al, 2022).

As final words of advice and recommendations for all those educators wishing to support plurilingualism and develop plurilingual practices in their own classrooms, the most important starting points for transforming own practice are:

- Educators do not need to be skilled user of languages their learners use in order to provide to support their utilization in their classroom and provide ‘an affirmative mirror’;
- Children and adults (teaching assistants, parents) in your school community are our most valuable resources, consider how they can be utilized and empowered for the benefit of developing plurilingualism;
- Good practice can be developed by taking small, but regular steps – for example: by introducing one classroom activity per day which supports development of plurilingual skills or one homework a week with the same aim.

To evaluate your own classroom and practice you can reflect on these three questions:

- Does my classroom reflect my learners – for example: in terms of bilingual/multilingual reference book or displays?
- Is every learner in my classroom encouraged and given regular structured opportunities to invest his/her language background fully in the process of developing plurilingual skills?
- Are all languages learners bring into the classroom experienced as useful resources for all?

Educators prepared to invest time and efforts into developing plurilingual practices and use of home languages in mainstream classroom can expect to see positive impact on academic achievement across the curriculum, as documented in various studies, Cummins (2000) lists 160 studies conducted in different countries with learners from different socio-economic background.

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EVALUATION OF SCHOOL – AGE STUDENTS THROUGH A PORTFOLIO

Abstract: The article examines the successful use of student's portfolio as a tool for assessing at all educational stages in school and the benefits for students and teachers. The problem of qualitative assessment of students' achievements is considered, so that it reflects the set goals as much as possible. The emphasis is on the usefulness of applying the portfolio method and self-assessment. Development of critical thinking, related to cooperation and independence, influenced by interests in life situations, which will develop students' competencies and social skills. The formative assessment of the educational process is commented and obligatory – assessment for the purposes of the programme.

Keywords: Student's portfolio, Assessment, Formative assessment, Self-assessment