

## **ECDA7004: Guidance Notes for Assignment 2**

The second assignment for the module ECDA7004: *Cognitive Aspects of Bilingualism* asks students to critically discuss educational, social, economic, and political issues which might arise from the implications of any supposed cognitive advantages associated with being bilingual.

If, for the moment, the premise of the “bilingual advantage” is accepted, then it could be argued that the general public are being deprived of its benefits due to inaction on the part of educational or political institutions. That said, the change which would be required to make the bilingual advantage available to everyone could be considerable.

Looking at each of the above elements in turn, the following bullet points note some potential obstacles:

### **Educational:**

1. The human resources which would be required to implement *any* kind of bilingual programme available to all:
2. Determining the particular “bilingual model” to be used regardless of the languages chosen:
3. Choosing how many, and which, languages should be available as part of a bilingual offer:
4. The production of the necessary teaching materials to support the languages in question:
5. The motivation of learners towards what they might see as much effort for little reward.

### **Social:**

1. Attitudes amongst monoglot speakers of majority languages towards other languages could be negative:
2. Attitudes amongst speakers of minority languages towards their own languages could equally be negative:
3. Public perceptions of problems associated with “carrying” two languages in one’s head would need to be tackled:
4. Potential threats to social cohesion as perceived by the general public.

### **Economic:**

1. Costs of training a workforce to implement bilingual models would be considerable:
2. Costs of producing the necessary teaching materials would also be costly:
3. The change of policy could require an associated publicity campaign.

## Political:

1. Bilingual education could be at odds with a “national unity” ideology:
2. The promotion of bilingualism could be seen as a low priority cause and a waste of public money:
3. There may be reservations that public reaction to any such policy could be negative, and be potentially damaging for those who introduced it:
4. The supposed cognitive advantages of bilingualism could be seen as rather “fringe” – metalinguistic awareness is unlikely to be a vote winner!

Of course, the above issues do not occur in a linear fashion. A politician with an educational portfolio, for example, would no doubt have to consider all four of the above elements simultaneously. Nor does it follow that they would in most cases complement each other. Tensions might easily occur between economic and educational considerations for instance, *even if* the educational benefits were fully accepted. The quote by Baker (2017: 370) acknowledges this.

The emphasis placed on bilingual education will therefore largely reflect the dominant political ideology of the state in question, along with how it perceives the dimensions noted by Ruiz (1984), namely:

- Language as a problem
- Language as a right
- Language as a resource

The first two of these, apart from being diametrically opposed to each other, are also based largely on *principle* (whereby cost is seen as an irrelevance) rather than the *pragmatism* implied in the third. It is often the case that *principles are fine if you can afford them*. The “language as a resource” dimension attempts to align the cognitive benefits of being bilingual with practical outcomes.

Perhaps one of the largest obstacles to the implementation of mainstream bilingual education is its perception as being divisive or at odds with “national unity”. An oft-used mantra is that everyone speaking the same language is the best means of ensuring “equality for all”. Other languages therefore need to be discarded to enable this noble aim, which may be considered to be far more important than any “bilingual advantage”. Indeed, in some cases the actual intentional *eradication* of languages may be seen as a worthy cause. This was certainly the case in France following the French revolution and is an attitude which still persists there in the present day. There are, of course, many other nation-states which have followed similar patterns, and considering some of these based on personal experience (albeit backed up with references) could be an interesting component of an individual’s assignment.

To the dimensions proposed by Ruiz can be added the **ideologies** noted by Bourhis (2001), and the *policies* identified by Wiley (2015) viz:

- a **pluralist ideology**, reflected in *promotion-oriented policies*:
- a **civic ideology**, adopting *tolerance-oriented policies*:
- an **assimilationist ideology**, pursuing *restricted-oriented policies*:
- an **ethnist ideology**, demonstrating *repression-oriented policies*.

As seen above, these **ideologies** and *policies* can often be married together.

The suggestion that bilingual programmes are “considerably more cost-effective” than monolingual ones (E.I.F.E.2., 1989:17) may be true in the case of operating the one rather than the other *at the same scale as the current provision*. However, bilingual provision is invariably a “non-mainstream” pursuit and turning it into a mainstream one would undoubtedly result in considerable cost implications.

Although the bilingual advantage may be genuine and supported by the bulk of evidence in the field, it would still have to fight its corner against the myriad other causes deemed to be equally worthy by their supporters. Imagine, for example, being a politician eager to promote the mainstreaming of bilingual education based on the following assertions:

“Bilinguals are more sensitive to semantic relations  
between words, are more advanced in understanding  
the arbitrary assignment of names to referants, are better  
able to treat sentence structure analytically, are better at  
restructuring a perceptual situation, have greater social  
sensitivity and greater ability to react flexibly to cognitive  
feedback, are better at rule discovery tasks and have more  
divergent thinking.” (Grosjean, 1982: 223)

This stance would have to be considered in the context of all the others making similar arguments for the importance of science, maths, history, geography, art, music, physical education and so on. It could of course be argued that all of the previous subjects could be taught bilingually, however it would require the necessary resources to enable it.

Possibly a more fruitful line of argument would be that indicated by Bialystok’s research (2005) suggesting that bilingualism delays the onset of dementia by

four years. Apart from the understandable fear of dementia amongst the general public, the economic costs of dealing with the consequences of an increasingly aging population are considerable. An economic case could therefore be made on the basis of a proactive rather than reactive stance to an ever-growing public health issue.

An assignment based upon a discussion of the educational, social, economic, and political issues related to the cognitive aspects of bilingualism would need to consider matters such as those mentioned above. There are various ways in which such an assignment might be structured, such as dividing the content into sections covering the educational, the social, the economic, and the political in turn, or alternatively by subdividing it in accordance with the dimensions, ideologies, and policies of Ruiz, Bourhis and Wiley. These are but two possibilities of many.