

Conclusion

Political and public reaction to research-based evidence of the cognitive benefits of bilingual/ multilingual education will, inevitably, vary from country to country, depending on sociolinguistic issues discussed in module ECDA-7011: Societal Bilingualism but, crucially, is directly related to educational *policy-making* and specifically to the provision of bilingual or multilingual education. In fact, despite being studied as an independent module, the cognitive benefits of bilingualism can, arguably, be said to underpin aspects covered in other modules of this MA course. This can be illustrated by a series of questions:

Bilingualism allegedly provides children with cognitive and intellectual advantages; therefore, should such advantages be made available to *all* children regardless of socio-economic and ethnic background?

If so how do we achieve this?

Which models of so-called ‘bilingual/ multilingual’ education can secure these advantages?

What will be the *economic* costs of adopting alternative models of education in order to ensure effective bilingual proficiency?

What will be the economic costs for *not* doing so?

What will be the medium to long-term *social* benefits *generally* from providing effective bilingual education?

What will be the medium to long-term *social and economic* benefits to *individual citizens* from receiving effective bilingual education?

What will be the medium to long-term *political, educational, social and economic* benefits to respective *governments* from providing effective bilingual education to their citizens?

What will be the *global* advantages to mankind from the provision of effective bilingual education to citizens by respective governments?

The evidence which supports the cognitive benefits of being bilingual is substantial and has been emphasised for many years. In 1978, Albert & Obler maintained that:

Bilinguals mature earlier than monolinguals both in terms of cerebral lateralisation for language and in acquiring skills for linguistic abstraction. Bilinguals have better developed auditory language skills.....
(Albert & Obler, 1978).

Grosjean (1982) expressed it quite comprehensively as follows:

Bilinguals are more sensitive to semantic relations

between words, are more advanced in understanding the arbitrary assignment of names to referents, 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)

Reference has already been made to the general lack of publicity afforded to research in the cognitive benefits of being bilingual / multilingual. Clearly, research evidence is contrary to a common perception and fallacy still widespread amongst the general public (especially in dominantly English-speaking countries) that the development of second language proficiency can only be obtained at the expense of the first. Such evidence is, therefore, available to dispel the fears of those reluctant to commit their children to anything other than monolingual education. Arguably, this evidence has been politically too sensitive for ‘general release’ up until now, its dissemination hampered by political ideology involving issues of racial assimilation and integration rather than cultural pluralism. Such an ideology has reflected a desire to maintain political equilibrium and to avoid conflict which, ironically, can often serve to feed the conflict which it seeks to avoid. In the British context, it has also led to the dearth of linguistic resources which can undermine economic prosperity, as highlighted by the two reports from the British Academy mentioned at the beginning. However, the recent positive evidence of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism deserves and requires far wider publicity in future. It is the lack of publicity given to such evidence which prevents the adoption of empirical-rational and normative-re-educative strategies to promote changes in attitudes towards bilingualism amongst the general public. It was factual ignorance which once prompted the comment: “What we don’t understand, we fear; what we fear, *we reject*.”

Baker (2000: 66-67) quotes a question often asked by parents which suggests a continuing negative perception and an uncertainty about bilingual education amongst some:

“Will my child’s thinking be affected by being bilingual?”

The answer is “yes”, and probably for the better. The presence of two languages in the operating system of the brain is likely to produce a more richly-fed thinking engine.

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