

Conclusion

An extremely significant perspective on the effectiveness of bilingual education, especially in times of austerity when governments tend to evaluate the benefits of public services in terms of *cost-savings*, is the *economic* evaluation of heritage language education provided by Dutcher & Tucker (1996) which is discussed in Baker (2017: 262). A World Bank paper examining international evidence gathered from a wide range of countries on the use of first and second languages in elementary education concluded that the linguistic development of the *mother tongue* is crucial to cognitive development and to furthering the acquisition of a second language. As Baker (2011: 274) shows, this has significant implications for language models such as mainstream and transitional bilingual education in that they are “internationally less effective in developing a child’s thinking abilities” and, furthermore, “[w]hen such development is slowed considerably by learning in a second language (e.g. submersion), then the second language will in itself be learnt more slowly”. The significance of the Dutcher & Tucker (1996) review is the *economic* savings created by ‘strong’ forms of bilingual education for the education system *generally* and for wider society, concluding that:

strong forms of bilingual education create cost savings for the education system and for society. For example, such bilingual education provides higher levels of achievement in fewer years of study. Student progress is faster, and higher achievement benefits society by less unemployment and a more skilled workforce. (Baker, 2017: 262)

The Dutcher & Tucker (1996) review highlights the fact that bilingual education which makes use of the mother tongue makes *economic* sense in terms of cost-effectiveness and should, therefore, be an essential consideration in the formulation of government educational policy since the ramifications can include lower drop-out rates, higher academic performance, a better skilled work-force and lower levels of unemployment. Dutcher (2004) refers to the case of Guatemala whose bilingual education policy resulted in a range of economic benefits and cost-savings. Sierra & Olaziregi (1989:17) testify to the same advantages:

At a time when education systems everywhere are experiencing financial restraint, economic aspects of language planning need to be taken into account. Immersion or bilingual programmes...need cost no more than [monolingual] programs but they produce dramatically better results. In other words, they are considerably more cost-effective.

However, Baker (2017: 263) again emphasises that all models of bilingual education are underpinned by opposing political ideologies which reminds us of the “driving forces” and “restraining forces” in Lewin’s (1951) “force-field” theory discussed in module ECDA-7011: Societal Bilingualism. Consequently, any discussion and consideration regarding the *effectiveness* of various models is ultimately about measuring their outcomes against their fundamental *political* aims, in which education only plays a subsidiary part.

Baker (2017: 263) raises the issue of the impact of educational research on language policies and in terms of informing and influencing policy-making. However, due to the innumerable variables that impact on the implementation of various language programmes, Cummins (1999, 2000b) seems to argue that it is only research which coalesces into *theory* which can inform policy-making rather than reviews of a range of individual studies, or that “it is *theory* rather than the individual research findings that permits the generation of predictions about program outcomes under different conditions”. Students of module ECDA-7003: Research Methodology, however, might argue that this seems to be contrary to the view of Bassey (1981) who, maintaining that the number of generalisations which can emanate from educational research are very few in number, argues that the *reliability* of an individual research study to other cases is more beneficial than its generalisability. The wide range of variables which Baker (2017: 264-68) discusses and which impact on bilingual education research seem to support Bassey’s standpoint. Such a situation makes the reliability of research in bilingual education always open to questioning and any conclusions vulnerable to what can often be blatant prejudiced, political opposition. Such variables include:

- The sample of children. The huge range of variables which impact on pupil performance both *within* and *outside* school, make the *generalisability* of results from one group to another impossible.
- Interacting factors, which Baker (2017) deals with separately from those related to the sample of children but which, inevitably, can overlap: parental motivation and socio-economic background being the most obvious. Mackey (1976) mentions that, even within the confines of the classroom, up to 3,000 variables can be associated with teaching and learning. These variables can be categorised as *input*, *contextual*, *process* and *outcomes* which can only be investigated properly by means of a ‘glass box’ model of research, including *observation* methodology, as opposed to a ‘black box’

model which only measures a narrow range of outcomes and fails to examine the *interaction* of the variables involved in the teaching and learning process. Consequently, “[t]here can be as much variation in outcomes *inside* a particular bilingual education programme...as *between* different types of programme...” (italics added) (Baker, 2017:265).

- The measures of success. For example, can or should the success of bilingual education be measured *only* in terms of competence in two languages? What about cognitive benefits, its effects across the whole curriculum, its contribution to inter-cultural relationships and social cohesion as well as its long-term economic advantages? What *criteria* should be applied to such measurements and who judges the *validity* of those criteria when judgement cannot be neutral and free of subjective values and political ideology?
- The style of the research. This links with the wide range of variables involved in bilingual education research and which can be difficult or impossible to control, thus resulting in a reductionist approach to research which places emphasis on *measurable* and *quantitative* outcomes to the virtual exclusion of *qualitative* data. Baker (2017: 267-268) also refers to some of the limitations of research methodology which were discussed in module ECDA-7003 and which can invalidate data and make them unreliable.
- The researchers themselves. Although it cannot be argued that all research on bilingual education is invalid, yet, “no educational research can be totally value-free, neutral or objective” (p.268) since researchers, consciously or otherwise, can often be directly or indirectly influenced by, or committed to, certain values and beliefs, be they social, political and /or religious. As Baker states: “There is a fine line between research and advocacy which some attempt not to cross; others cross it very quickly”.

Despite such limitations, Baker (2017: 263) raises a fundamental issue related to the impact of educational research on public policy-making which is that the formulation of policies by politicians is rarely based on theory or research but is subject to the forces of ideology, pragmatism, conflicting interests as well as the influence of stakeholders. Evidence to support a particular political opinion or ideology can also often be found by highlighting the conclusions of a particular research study. Therefore, if research ever does succeed in having an input into policy-making, it can often be ‘cherry-picked’ to support a particular convenient viewpoint and, consequently, misconstrued.

Despite the weight of research evidence which seems to support the educational, social, political and economic benefits of adopting ‘strong’ forms of bilingual education and which could enable politicians and civil servants alike to evaluate such advantages objectively and (as far as is humanly possible) without ideological prejudice, yet it seems that, for the time being at least, one must accept that politics proves to be stronger. Therefore, as Baker (2017: 263) states, since “research cannot provide evidence-based policy, only evidence-informed policy”, it seems that “the researcher/ policy-maker relationship is not one of ‘truth speaking to power’ or ‘science providing evidence-based decisions’”. Whereas this may not be true of the field of medical science, it is certainly true of education, and of bilingual education in particular, the difference being, it seems, that ill-informed policy-making in education can damage lives, but is not life-threatening. However, as Baker (2017) reminds us:

... change will always occur in bilingual education policy and provision. Nothing is static. While there will be periods when bilingual policy is criticized, forbidden and rejected, there will be reactions, with the possibility of more accepting periods ahead. There is no certainty in the future history of bilingual education, only uncertainty and change. Yet uncertainty and change provide occasional opportunities for bilingual education to progress.

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