

The educational, social, economic and political implications of the alleged cognitive benefits of bilingualism

In discussing and analysing various aspects of cognition related to bilingualism and multilingualism, references have already been made to some of the possible educational, social, political and economic implications of the research. Separating and disentangling these aspects from each other by allocating them to discrete categories is, of course, impossible since language is a dimension which cuts across each of them and binds them together.

The second assignment of this module, however, requires students to consider whether or not the findings of research into cognitive issues and the alleged consequential benefits have implications of various kinds. Whereas, some of these findings may well be considered to have implications on a world-wide scale and, therefore, are worthy of *universal* recognition and implementation, reference to more *localised contexts* also within a student's experience might well enrich the discussion. This might also provide a more balanced and pragmatic perspective on what research can *realistically* effect and achieve within the confines of various political ideologies and language policies as discussed by Bourhis (2001) and Wiley (2002, 2015) respectively (see ECDA-7011: Societal Bilingualism).

Attempting to cover the inevitable wide spectrum of issues on a *global* scale is, obviously, an impossible task for the confines of this Guidance Handbook. However, providing a wide perspective by highlighting some additional issues to those previously mentioned in passing will allow students to ponder further on aspects which might have a particular personal relevance or which may be considered worthy of further application at their respective local and /or national levels. **Students are strongly recommended to read Chapters 9, 10, 17, 18 and 19 in the publication which accompanies this course, “Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism” (Baker, 2017)** which relate cognitive aspects of bilingualism to a range of educational, social, political and economic dimensions and provide specific illustrative examples.

Bilingual education has been a source of conflict over time in many parts of the world which clearly illustrates that it has a fundamental *political* dimension. Baker (2017: 370) states:

...bilingualism and bilingual education, whatever form they take, cannot be properly understood unless connected to ideologies and politics in society...calls for and against bilingual education are surrounded and underpinned by

basic beliefs about minority languages and cultures, linguistic and cultural diversity, immigration and immigrants, equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, empowerment, affirmative action, the rights of individuals and the rights of language minority groups, assimilation and integration, desegregation and discrimination, pluralism and multiculturalism, diversity and discord,...social division and social cohesion.

Separating education from politics can be extremely difficult even in the most linguistically and culturally homogenous contexts. Bilingual education provision within *bicultural* contexts, however, can easily become embroiled in political and socio-cultural dimensions of the nature discussed in module ECDA-7011: Societal Bilingualism. Cognitive aspects in particular have generated widespread discussion and disagreement over the years which, as we have already seen, although based on methodologically deficient research and uninformed prejudice, nevertheless serves to remind us of the direct influence of the interaction between public *perception*, *attitudes* and *beliefs* and its consequential transformational power in terms of human *behaviour*.

What is often believed to be the right of parents to make a ‘free’, independent and *informed* judgement when choosing the ‘right’ model of education for their children is often subject to the influence of a range of unstable external political, social and economic contextual factors which can act as both driving-forces and restraining-forces (Lewin, 1951) *for* and *against* making certain decisions (see Module ECDA-7011: Societal Bilingualism). Rather than being ‘free’ to make choices, therefore, individuals can be unconsciously influenced by a multitude of factors, with the inevitable result that such a ‘choice’ can unknowingly be based on deeply entrenched attitudes and behaviours. With regard to languages, Ruiz (1984) places public perception of bilingualism / multilingualism on three political dimensions:

- language as a problem
- language as a right
- language as a resource

Chapter 17 in Baker (2017), which students are advised to read, is structured on a discussion of these three dimensions which surround bilingual education and which, arguably, mirror the “force-field theory” of Lewin (1951) (‘driving forces’ and ‘restraining forces’ corresponding to ‘language as a right’ and ‘language as a problem’ respectively).

As was mentioned in module ECDA-7011, the first two dimensions are diametrically opposed, the rights of one linguistic group often being construed as creating a problem for another. However, a crucial and discerning statement in Baker (2017: 370) is that education can be “both part of the solution and part of the problem”, the reason being that:

Behind bilingual education are *varying and conflicting philosophies of what education is for*. Sociocultural, political and economic issues are ever present...
(Baker, 1993), (italics added)

All forms of education, arguably, are underpinned by some kind of basic philosophy. However, as in the case of religious denominational education for example, by virtue of being *non-mainstream*, bilingual education often sets itself apart in public perception. Unlike monolingual mainstream education, therefore, (especially in a major dominant language), bilingual education is often perceived as carrying additional ‘baggage’; bilingual schools being seen not as establishments which simply transmit knowledge as much as transmitting a particular *kind* of knowledge which may often be contrary to parents’ wishes or educational philosophy. Such ‘baggage’, therefore, is often perceived as being *political* in nature, and the instruction provided can be erroneously construed as having an ulterior politico-linguistic ‘raison d’être’ rather than purely ‘educational’ aims.

Various nations across the world currently strive to promote and revitalize their indigenous languages within their respective education systems. Positive research evidence of the benefits of bilingual education emanating from certain countries could be cynically construed by some as being part of a *politically* biased effort to secure the revitalisation of a minority or endangered language. Often being smaller nations or minority groups which exist within larger dominant nations and hegemonic political contexts, the perception of bilingual education as being underpinned by an almost subversive political ideology can be inevitable. Valdes et al. (2006) refer to the connection which is made in the United States of America between the teaching of languages other than English and non-American ideas, a reaction summed up in the publication *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety* (Crawford, 2000). Chapter 9 of Baker (2017), *Historical Introduction to Bilingual Education: The United States*) provides evidence of this kind of perception. However, the history of bilingual education in the USA also seems to illustrate all three of Ruiz’s (1984) political dimensions. As Baker (2017: 382) states: “The political debate over the place of English in the US illustrates how languages can

alternatively be seen as a problem, right or resource". Whereas the Bilingual Education Act (1968) and 'No Child Left Behind'(2001) legislation represent 'language as a right' and 'language as a problem' respectively, the words of Ovando (1990: 354) crystallize the 'language as a resource' concept of bilingualism which can provide a range of social and economic benefits:

On the one hand we encourage and promote the study of foreign languages for English monolinguals, at great cost and with great inefficiency. At the same time we destroy the linguistic gifts that children from non-English language backgrounds bring to our schools.

Ricento (2009) broadens the criticism to include the United Kingdom by referring to the irony of unsuccessfully attempting to teach the very languages which immigrant children are encouraged to forget. Stubbs (1991), however, accuses the UK of being Eurocentric in its choice of foreign languages within the education system and of adopting a 'caste system' with regard to many Asian languages already spoken at home by children of immigrant families. This ambivalent attitude towards promoting bilingualism and multilingualism within the education system is summed up in the title of Stubbs' (1991) critical article of language policy within the United Kingdom: *Educational language planning in England and Wales: Multicultural rhetoric and assimilationist assumptions*.

The 'melting-pot' assimilationist ideology of the United States, which is often couched in an altruistic doctrine of racial *equality* and *opportunity* for all, is equally prevalent in the United Kingdom. This was manifest in a well-known enquiry into the education of children from ethnic minority groups known as the Swann Report (1985) *Education for All: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* which concluded:

We believe that essential to equality of opportunity, to academic success and, more broadly, to participation on equal terms as a full member of society, is a good command of *English* and that first priority in language learning by all pupils must therefore be given to the learning of English. (Swann Report, 1985: Paragraph 3.16)

The linguistic, religious and cultural identities of ethnic minority communities should be fostered but we cannot

support the arguments put forward for the introduction of programmes of bilingual education in maintained schools (Swann Report, 1985: Paragraph 3.15)

This enquiry was partly fuelled by a notorious speech made by Enoch Powell in his address to the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre (commonly called the "Rivers of Blood" speech) on April 20th, 1968 criticising Commonwealth immigration, as well as proposed anti-discrimination legislation in the United Kingdom.

Chapter 15 of Baker (2017) entitled *Support and Assessment of Special Needs, Assessment and Exceptional Bilingual Students* discusses some assessment issues which are underpinned unashamedly by overt political ideologies and states clearly:

The root cause tends to be a bias against language minorities that is endemic in many societies and is substantiated by unfair tests... By being biased against bilinguals in a cultural and linguistic form, and by a failure to incorporate an understanding of the cognitive constitution of individuals, assessment confirms and perpetuates various discriminatory perceptions about language minority children. (Baker, 2017: 348)

Both the United States of America and the United Kingdom are referred to as examples where assessment provides evidence of discrimination and prejudice against linguistic minorities. However, rather than being the root cause of discrimination, it often reflects far more ingrained and entrenched ethnocentric cultural attitudes. The truth, of course, is that the problem is one of a *political* and *socio-cultural* nature rather than linguistic *per se*, where language is perceived as a source of potential social conflict, national or regional disunity and a threat to social cohesion.

Whereas 'language as a right' and 'language as a problem' represent diametrically opposed political dimensions surrounding bilingual education, Ruiz (1984), however, illustrates how perceiving and treating languages as a *resource* can act as a conciliatory and cohesive force which can provide educational, social and economic advantages, but which also requires a *political* change in approach and attitude. But how can such a change be brought about?