

The Bilingual Learner

Any discussion of bilingualism and the bilingual learner must also take into consideration the individual learner. As children learn language they also learn through language about relationships and social structures. They begin to learn about the culture into which they are born. It is through language, in the everyday interactions with the family, peers and school, that culture is transmitted to the child. In this context the learner's sense of identity develops and language is central to this process. However, what happens when that culture is overlaid with other cultural influences, as happens in larger urban areas where diverse populations mix and change? From the historical perspective, a bilingual learner could be defined in terms of the cultures in which he or she functions, with the home language and culture playing a significant role in his or her life. Teachers may describe their learners as Indian, Polish or Somalian as a proxy label to indicate their bilingualism and biculturalism. But how do teachers define the child of Chinese or Pakistani heritage who has grown up in London or Birmingham, who identifies with the peer group and youth culture and for whom the heritage culture is one that is associated with grandparents and history? Notions of cultural identity that are part of the debate and discussion of bilingualism must change along with our changing society.

Large numbers of ethnic minority pupils in British schools have spent a significant proportion of their lives in Britain and use everyday colloquial English with ease. Many of these pupils may have reached a 'plateau' in which they do not seem able to make further progress in English. Current systems in education continue to identify such pupils as one-dimensional bilinguals speaking a minority language at home whilst learning English at school. These concepts may be little help for teachers in developing adequate teaching approaches and strategies. Harris (1997) argues that we should rethink the 'romantic' notion of bilingualism and take a more realistic look at what we call 'bilingual learners' in face of the multilingual and multiethnic youth who inhabit a world where language, culture and ethnicity are fluid and change from generation to generation. His interviews with pupils about their language use reveal a complex linguistic and cultural picture of these bilingual and plurilingual pupils:

"My first language is English. I read, write, speak and think in English. I also speak Gujarati because my mum and dad are Gujarati first language speakers...my mum speaks to me in Gujarati and I answer back in English, which is common."

"I know Punjabi, Urdu, Swahili, German, English and Arabic. I can speak Punjabi perfectly and understand it very well. I know a lot of German, and I know how to speak it, and understand it and write it mainly. I know Arabic very little but can write a little bit of it."

The series of [pupil portraits](#) written by serving teachers provide further accounts of the language affiliations and learning of bilingual learners in schools.

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References

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