

Isolated bilingual learners

More and more EAL learners are being placed in schools that have little or no previous history of dealing with children whose first language is not English, let alone those who may arrive marked by trauma and loss. Research (Davies, 2005) indicates that 16 per cent of learners of English as an additional language (EAL) in England are currently educated in areas where less than six per cent of all pupils are learning EAL. Staff have struggled to cope in the face of such new demands and in the absence of adequate training but there have been some notable successes. A positive, 'can-do' attitude seems to characterise those that have fared best. For example, in the Ofsted (2003) report 'The education of asylum-seeker pupils', one headteacher of a school with a roll of just 100 pupils received 26 asylum-seeker pupils and commented that it 'had been better than a training video on inclusion'. Can there be a better test of how well a student teacher's placement school's policy on inclusion and equality of opportunity operates?

Isolated bilingual learners means learners whose first language is not English and who are learning in schools and settings where few (if any) other pupils share their first language; English as an additional language acquisition needs; ethnic, religious or cultural heritages. These learners are not a homogenous group. They will have very different linguistic, educational, ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Thus the term 'isolated bilingual learner' would include;

- A 15 year old Somali pupil recently admitted to Year 11 living with a foster family in a small village in rural Wales
- A reception year boy from a Saudi Arabian university family living close to a university town in the south west of England
- A Year 2 Brazilian girl, adopted at five by a Dutch couple who subsequently divorced and who is now living with her Dutch mother and her new English father in a northern market town
- A Year 9 Bangladeshi pupil who has just moved to rural Scotland from a school in Tower Hamlets
- A 5 year old Turkish pupil with symptoms of Aspergers starting school in the Home Counties

The settings these learners attend and the areas in which they live are similarly diverse. Isolated bilingual learners are not confined to rural areas. They also live in urban or semi-urban areas of shire authorities, in the suburbs or in 'mainly white' boroughs within multi-ethnic cities and conurbations. Or they may attend an almost 'totally white' school within an area of high linguistic and ethnic diversity. Or they may be the only speaker of their first language in a multilingual primary school. There are significant differences between these situations which impact on the bilingual pupil's learning environment.

Bilingual learners can be 'isolated' in a number of ways;

- **linguistically isolated** in that few (if any) learners in their setting share their first language(s); for example children of refugee or asylum seeking families who have been relocated to mainly monolingual areas distant from other members of their language community or families from language communities with a very small UK presence
- **educationally isolated** in that few (if any) learners in their setting are acquiring EAL or share a similar educational history; for example children of overseas health professionals recruited to a hospital in a largely rural area or children from refugee and asylum seeking families housed in 'hard to let' mainly white housing estates
- **culturally and socially isolated** in that few (if any) learners in their setting share their ethnic, religious or cultural affiliations; for example children of economically successful ethnic minority families who have moved into 'mainly white' high income commuter belts close to multi-ethnic cities, or children from entrepreneurial ethnic minority families providing services in rural areas.

Bilingual learners in mainly monolingual areas are likely to be isolated in all these ways whilst learners in more diverse areas and settings may share some aspects of this isolation. There are however differences between the situation for bilingual learners in mainly monolingual settings and bilingual learners from low incidence language or ethnic groups in otherwise multilingual and multi-ethnic populations. These differences are not absolute and will involve interplay between the immediate environment of the school and the wider environment – for example the largely monolingual primary school in a multi-ethnic area or conversely the isolated multilingual secondary school in a 'mainly white' local authority.

It would be foolhardy to ignore the potential tensions inherent in such a situation, however, and for many staff in such a school it may involve an uncomfortable adjustment. This will impact on the student teacher, too. It can be very difficult to resist embedded school practices but this should be regarded as an opportunity for development rather than as a threat to tradition.

Even in the most isolated situations, there are potential sources of help. The [local authority EAL or EMA service](#) should be able to provide or buy in appropriate expertise such as peripatetic EAL specialists, bilingual assistants, refugee advisors and so on as well as holding information on other useful contacts such as refugee centres.

The internet is a vast resource and there are very helpful email lists (such as [eal-bilingual](#)) to join and from where the student teacher can seek advice and share experiences with other colleagues. In addition [EMAOnline](#), [Multiverse](#), and [featured local authority websites](#) contain a mine of information, resources, and links.

Author

Frank Monaghan

Last updated 26th February, 2008

References

Davies, N. (ed) (2005) Naldic Working Paper 8 *Teaching Isolated Bilingual Learners of English as an Additional Language*, Luton:NALDIC

A guide to supporting EAL learners who are linguistically isolated.

DfES (2005) *Aiming High: Meeting the needs of newly arrived learners of English as an additional language (EAL)* London: DfES Retrieved 26th February 2008 from http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/inclusion/newarrivals/pns_incl138105newarrivals.pdf

Ofsted HMI 453 (2003) *The education of asylum-seeker pupils*. Retrieved on 11th September, 2005 from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubs.summary&id=3418>

Copyright NALDIC 2011