

The social and cultural context

The language through which the school curriculum is communicated is not neutral and neither is the selected content of that curriculum. They are defined and shaped by historical and cultural processes and ideas and by a unique set of historical antecedents which vary from country to country. Likewise there is no one 'right' way of teaching and learning – approaches to pedagogy are defined by social and cultural factors at specific points in time and vary from country to country. The content of the curriculum, language and pedagogic approaches will affect the degree to which learners feel they can identify with what is being taught and the degree to which they feel 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in the learning process. Each learner is unique and will bring their own experiences, preferences and learning styles to the learning process. [Case studies of individual learners](#) can prove helpful in understanding the wide range of bilingual learners teachers may meet in schools today.

Home and school cultures

The culture of a school is also influenced by the cultural understandings that the adults who work there bring with them. Pupils have to negotiate meaning and to accommodate new understandings in order to become effective learners. Differences between home and school cultures are well documented (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Nieto, 1999) and there are differences between school cultures in different countries. The home cultures of minority groups may vary from those of the majority group but there will also be an infinite amount of variation within groups. Home cultures will vary according to length of time the family has been settled in the UK, family structures, organisation and practices, social and economic circumstances, literacy practices, the ways in which languages including English are used in the home, religious beliefs etc. In addition home cultures are not static but in a constant process of change and in a dynamic relationship with the majority culture and other minority cultures. (For a further discussion see [The Bilingual Learner](#).) Children's backgrounds and experiences will vary but they will impact on their perceptions of themselves, on their sense of identity, on their sense of belonging and their ability to learn. Teachers cannot know about the home cultures of all the children they teach but they need to understand how the home culture may impact on the child's ability to learn in the context of school and their classroom. Bilingual staff, teachers, teaching assistants, pupils and parents can provide a source of information and expertise. Teachers need to avoid making assumptions based on stereotypical views, be sensitive to different ideas, values and beliefs and seek information about pupils' backgrounds and experiences. Moll refers to the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1992; Moll et al, 1992) that are contained in the communities of pupils and that are waiting to be drawn on to enhance children's learning, bridging the gap between home and school and between pupils and their educators.

Expectations

Parents will have expectations about what schools will provide for their children, however these will not necessarily accord with what schools do provide. These expectations may be based on parents' own educational experiences in this country or in another country, on what they read in the press and on their own values and beliefs. Many parents place a high value on education and place great trust in the educational system and teachers. However, teachers need to be aware that pedagogic practices which they take for granted can be unfamiliar to some parents and cause stress and anxiety for children. Gregory (1996) suggests that all teachers should be aware of the discontinuities as well as the continuities between home and school. She describes a situation when a boy called Tony decides he doesn't want to take books home to read. His teacher visits his home and meets his grandfather who explains that Tony isn't ready to read the books yet because he can't read the words. The grandfather proudly shows the teacher an exercise book with pages of rows of immaculate ideographs which Tony has completed at Chinese Saturday school. He then shows the teacher a scrap of paper with a drawing and some writing on it and says: 'This is from the English school. This is rubbish' Pointing to the corner where 'ToNy' is written he says, 'Look he can't even write his name yet.' Tony's father and grandfather have certain expectations about school and literacy development, which are not those of the English school that Tony is attending. However, it is equally important to be aware of the continuities. Tony already knows a lot about literacy practices through his attendance at Saturday school and this knowledge will assist him in learning to read and write in English providing his teacher draws on and makes links with his prior knowledge and understanding and is sensitive to his needs as a learner of EAL. A number of parents, who feel the UK educational system is failing their children or who wish their children to learn more about their cultural heritage and languages, choose to send their children to Supplementary or Community schools. It is important for teachers to make links with these schools and to pursue an open dialogue with educationalists working in these settings. Many of our educational theories and practices are derived from research in Europe, Australasia or Northern America, a relatively limited area of the world, and it is important to take account of the social and cultural contexts within which children are learning outside the school.

Passive or active language learning

In the 1960s and 1970s the political ideology of 'assimilation' underpinned approaches to minority ethnic people in society and in schools. In schools this coincided with educational discourses influenced by Piagetian theories of

learning which emphasised children learning by assimilating knowledge through experience. This was translated into practice that emphasised learning through discovery and exploration and suggestions that bilingual children would learn a new language by being immersed in a rich language environment. The emphasis was on exposure to language rather than the need for interaction and support in learning. Associated with ideas of assimilation of bilingual pupils (and their families) were negative attitudes to and assumptions about other languages, cultures, values, beliefs and social practices which manifested themselves in xenophobia, stereotyping and discriminatory practices. These assumptions did and still do impact on teaching practices and on children's learning.

More recent educational discourses have been influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1962) who emphasised the influence of social interaction, cultural context and language in cognition and the role of a more experienced person in supporting children's learning through scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He also emphasised the need to make links with prior knowledge and understanding. Cultural knowledge and understanding, linguistic knowledge and understanding and curriculum knowledge and understanding need to be viewed as interdependent and interactive factors if bilingual pupils are to learn effectively in schools. The curriculum needs to reflect the diversity of children's experiences and to actively acknowledge and enable them to draw on these understandings to support their learning. Teachers need to examine their own beliefs and values and their relationships with children, parents and their communities to enable this to happen. The inclusion and personalisation agendas emphasise the need for schools and teachers to analyse and adapt their practices to meet the needs of children rather than expecting children to adapt to a given educational discourse and practice.

What do bilingual pupils need to be able to do

As well as learning English as a means of conducting everyday life, bilingual pupils need to learn the special language and language practices of school and of the curriculum, the social practices including rules and conventions and the means of imparting them, the underlying cultural assumptions embedded in the curriculum and the way it is taught and learnt and the content of the curriculum itself. Bilingual pupils have to accommodate these new meanings into their existing schemata and be able to respond appropriately within the social and cultural context and constraints of the school and the curriculum.

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