

**Bilingualism and Special Education:
Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy,
(1984), Clevedon. UK, Multilingual
Matters, 0-905028-13-9**

By Steve Cooke

It was a cold wet Wednesday evening in Walthamstow. I was making my way to Waltham Forest College to attend an open lecture. All I knew about the guest lecturer was that he had written a book which I had not so much read as devoured earlier that year. Despite my enthusiasm for the book, I remember that, because of my stereotypical views of academics (now of course re-constructed), I was expecting an elderly professor to speak about matters of great interest in a somewhat dry and uninteresting manner. Instead a young, charismatic and endlessly enthusiastic man kept a smallish audience spellbound for an hour and a half.

The man was, of course, Jim Cummins. What on earth was Jim Cummins doing in Walthamstow speaking to a group of ESL, bilingual and community language teachers from north-east London? The answer to this question lies in the persuasive powers of the amazing Norma Brewer. She had somehow managed to get Jim to fit this engagement in between appearing at more celebrated venues.

The year before I had taken the RSA Dip TESL course at the College under the inspirational tutelage of Norma and her equally inspirational colleague Helen Jones. Norma had virtually made it compulsory for course members to read this 'new' book from Multilingual Matters. Once I started reading the book, I did nothing in my spare moments for the next week or so but read it. Why did I find that I had to read this academic book as if it were an unputdownable edge of the seat thriller?

I suppose that inevitably there is some question of context involved here. For me the combination of my work in an East London secondary school, the RSA course, and the educational spirit of the times was a very potent one. In short it was an exciting time for me and a dynamic period for ESL and Multicultural Education. The waves created by the Bullock Report were still rippling through the curriculum; the Centre for Urban Education Studies (CUES) in Lambeth was very active and productive; Krashen, Duly and Burt's *Language Two* was on the bookshelves; Josie Levine was writing thought provoking but practical papers on moving ESL into the mainstream; the Swann Report was due out; anti-racist as well as multicultural education was on the agenda.

Despite the political environment (Thatcher's second term of office, etc.), it was a time when it felt as though developments in the education of minority ethnic

students were not only possible but somehow inevitable. Although it was not easy to persuade everybody or, at times, anybody in a school to take up a new idea, strategy or methodology, there seemed to be a strong sense of collective conviction amongst many ESL practitioners that there was a necessary and viable way forward out of the 'broom cupboard' and into the mainstream.

The publication of *Bilingualism and Special Education* at this time, contributed a body of theory which enabled me and, I imagine, countless others to begin to make sense of the social, political, linguistic and academic aspects of education and its relationship to minority ethnic communities.

It's all there: common underlying proficiency, the threshold hypothesis, the quadrant, BICS and CALP and so on. Imagine suddenly encountering all these concepts for the first time in the space of a week. I think it's probably fair to say that it turned my educational world upside down. I didn't understand everything that I read, but I understood enough to know that the book had some very far reaching implications. It seems to me that I spent the at least the next ten years really understanding what the implications were. It is as if, for me at least, understanding operates at two levels; a kind of intellectual level and then a practical /operational level where you start trying to understand and refine your own practice in the light of the new connections and concepts that theories generate.

The thing about a good theory is that it allows you to comprehend, order and analyse all the complexities of a phenomenon, in this case the interactions taking place amongst the education system, educators, minority ethnic students and their parents / care givers. In the introduction Cummins says:

This common underlying proficiency model permits a variety of seemingly contradictory data to be integrated and provides a partial basis for prediction and planning with respect to the education of minority students. (page 6)

To some extent a good theory also enables you to understand why, what amounts to an intuition that something is right or beneficial, actually works in practice.

The book itself, begins by critically examining the impact on minority students of assessment procedures and the assumptions contained within such procedures. Numerous quotes from referrals and reports on specific children illustrate how their bilingual background is ignored or seen as a deficit. Low verbal IQ scores are accounted for by suggestions of 'within child' deficiencies or parental shortcomings. Cummins goes on to examine the validity of standardised tests and the notion of 'learning disabilities'. He says:

The assumption that students (bilingual or monolingual) underachieve because they are “learning disabled” or have low IQs deflects attention from the educational programme and preserves inappropriate pedagogy from critical scrutiny. (page 5)

The book goes on to make a strong case for the development of bilingual programmes not only by reference to case studies but through exploring the nature of language proficiency and its relationship to academic development. This exploration allows Cummins to make the distinction between conversational and academic acquisition of language and therefore propose that cognitive / academic language skills are transferable across languages because of the existence of a common underlying proficiency. The logic of this position is therefore that the strong promotion of literacy in L1 enables students to be more successful in acquiring academic English and achieving in curriculum subjects.

The consideration of language proficiency also yields ‘Cummins’ Quadrant’ which famously distinguishes between context embedded and context reduced use of language and instruction. Cummins says:

The more context embedded the initial L2 input, the more comprehensible it is likely to be, and paradoxically, the more successful in ultimately developing L2 skills in context reduced situations. (page 141)

He goes on in further chapters to examine critically pedagogy which emphasises ‘disembedded subskills of language and literacy’ and to propose instead that minority students need instead to ‘become actively involved in *using* (his emphasis) language for meaningful self-defined purposes.’

In 2004, perhaps this all sounds like old hat. For me this is one reason why *Bilingualism and Special Education* is a landmark book. It has been so influential in shaping so much practice and thinking about practice in the field that even practitioners who have never read a word written by Cummins have a great deal of his thinking in their consciousness.

In the end though, however objective I try to be about the value of this book, I can’t avoid the personal memories it evokes of those years in the 1980s when, thanks to school students, colleagues, RSA tutors and various authors, my own horizons were irrevocably broadened.

Generally speaking, I don’t consider myself as one of those people who consistently find themselves in the right place at the right time, but Walthamstow in 1984/5 was for me the right place at the right time and what’s more I was reading the right book and attending the right lecture.