

Language and Literacy Teaching for Indigenous Education: A Bilingual Approach by Norbert Francis and Job Reyhner, Multilingual Matters 2002

I am a visual learner; so when I read a book, I like to mark what I feel to be the more significant passages with underlining, asterisks, double scoring... This book now has many such marks on its pages.

The 'indigenous' of the title refers to the indigenous Indian peoples of North and Central Americas. On the surface, this might feel somewhat remote from the minority ethnic groups that we have here in Britain. But actually, the subject could not be more topical. Many of us will have been grappling with how to make clear to mainstream policy makers the language development needs of EAL pupils in the context of a National Literacy Strategy that claims to meet the needs of all learners. Even more taxing has been to find opportunities for making use of the first language in helping to develop second language literacy, cognitive academic proficiency and to raise attainment. This book addresses all these issues: literacy, academic achievement, raising attainment. How topical can it be?

The book focuses on the Native American indigenous languages where oral tradition is the mode of communication and where the written scripts have had to be 'invented' for many of the languages. These languages represent one end of the continuum of minority languages vis-à-vis issues related to bilingual education of ethnic minority pupils and vis-à-vis the role of the first language in second language cognitive and academic development for ethnic minority pupils. The point for us is, if it is possible to use the first language of minority groups which only have an oral tradition to promote literacy and academic success in the second language, it ought to be even more possible for other ethnic minority pupils whose language has a literacy tradition. 'The idea that language and literacy can be enriched with the inclusion of indigenous languages is what this book is about.' (p vii, Preface)

The book not only discusses but shows how to make use of those languages with only oral traditions to bring about academic success for the indigenous Native American Indians of the US and Central America. The reader can easily extrapolate from that the wider implications

for the ethnic minority languages we have in Britain. Over here we have similar concerns, albeit in a different context, about lack of resources, lack of opportunities to develop L1 literacy unless pupils attend supplementary classes, about the use of the home language in the classroom which is mainly oral and which is mainly implemented by Bilingual Classroom Assistants and focused on the early years only. There are also concerns about the place of oracy which, until recently, has taken a backseat in the Literacy Strategy.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing several chapters. Part One is devoted to describing the current state of indigenous languages in the US and Central America. Part Two, the longer part, is devoted to an overview of classroom language activities, curriculum, materials and methods that can contribute to more inclusive teaching in schools. This second part shows how tapping into the largely unexploited resources offered by additive bilingualism can contribute to the academic success of ethnic minority students. Part Two, with its coverage of second language teaching, literacy development, teaching strategies, methods and materials, and language assessment, would, therefore, be of more interest to teachers. Other helpful features of the book include additional readings listed at the end of each chapter, comprehensive notes for each chapter at the back, a study guide to the notes, and a detailed glossary of terms.

The main thrust of the book, and the major theme running all through Part Two, is the use of L1 – even in its oral form - as a tool for developing cognitively demanding, higher order, thinking and academic use of language. In looking at languages of the indigenous peoples of North and Central America which are largely oral in tradition, Francis and Reyhner are primarily focusing on expanding the use of the indigenous oral language beyond 'conversational, familiar, everyday, interpersonal communication' to developing skills in using language in 'extra-familial, academic-type discourses...that require degrees of abstraction and independence from situational and interpersonal context (of the direct face-to-face variety) to which the indigenous languages have been restricted in large part' (p. 58-59). One can see some parallels with the situation of some ethnic minority pupils here in Britain and their use of L1 at home.

The authors argue cogently that even languages without a written system have a range of oral genres – oral discourses – that share many of the characteristics of academic ability. Therefore, children who have had the benefit of *extensive* contact with these oral genres and opportunities to engage in *sustained and continuous oral discourses* will have acquired and stored CALP-type language proficiencies, which, because they are higher order language proficiencies and not language specific, they will be able to apply to school and literacy-related tasks in the second language. The strength of the book lies in the examples given so that the arguments for the indigenous/first language are not just theoretical but are supported by illustrations. For example, Francis and Reyhner show that indigenous oral languages have a strong narrative tradition which contains opportunities to develop prediction strategies, inference, analysing and contrasting character traits, knowledge of story structure etc, which can then be transferred to the second language. I found these points speak directly to my experiences. These are precisely the skills that many of the early years pupils who have been referred to me for mother-tongue assessment need to develop in order to make progress (as measured by their attainment levels in literacy) in the mainstream classroom.

The authors also draw attention to the fact that in oral languages, ceremonial language or religious rituals contain metaphoric language, specific wording, and patterns that stand for ideas and concepts. These elements provide opportunities to direct children's attention to how language forms themselves are important. The ability to attend to language itself and reflect on language use is one of the building blocks of academic language use. We know that. What is so useful about this book is that the authors have shown how it is possible to develop this ability through making use of opportunities in the oral forms in the first language. They have succeeded in reminding us to look for the range of oral discourses in L1 that support CALP development and to put the CALP back into oral language development.

The authors touch perceptively on the ambivalent attitudes of some bilingual teachers, who themselves are influenced by institutional attitudes, towards the place of ethnic minority languages in school. Their attitudes can be contributory factors to the lowly status of ethnic minority languages as languages fit for academic purposes,

particularly for reading and writing. In my research into the use of the first language in mainstream schools, I have found that this attitude certainly existed – not so much amongst bilingual support staff, but amongst mainstream classroom and subject teachers who themselves are bilingual.

More importantly, though, this book is about what can be done, and what is possible. For those of us who are trying to forge a pathway for the professionalisation of Bilingual Support, the book provides us with all the justifications, rationale, practical implications and possibilities needed to put together a case for our context. It shows us how we can move forward in this field. It sets out clearly all the issues related to the use of L1 in mainstream schooling. It should enable us to articulate more cogently what exactly bilingual support is supposed to be in the classroom, and what the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of bilingual support should be. It should help us to work out what should constitute pedagogy that is based on a bilingual approach, as opposed to pedagogy that is based on a monolingual EAL approach.

Finally, for those of us engaged in mother-tongue assessment, we need to take note of the chapter on language assessment. It covers comprehensively the why, how and what of first language assessment that I found relate very much to our context. I would strongly recommend that we review any assessment procedure we have devised to ensure that it addresses the issues raised in that chapter. Otherwise, as an assessment instrument, it may be of limited use and limited efficacy for what we really want it to do.

There have been many books extolling the benefits of bilingualism. This is the first book that not only looks at the benefits of the first language in the teaching and learning of a second language, but also at **how** oral discourses – and what type of oral discourses – in the first language can be used to develop literacy and academic achievement in the second language. The strength of the book is not so much that it dwells in depth on the relationship between L1 and L2 academic achievement rather than on L1 maintenance for its own sake or for identity purposes; but that it makes the link between using the oral forms of a minority first language with the development of literacy and academic achievement in the second, majority, language. Above all, it speaks directly to our context where pupils' home language is restricted mainly to oral use

in the classroom and to the early years (when the foundation for CALP needs to be built) and offers plenty of pointers to take us forward in this field.

At a stroke, the book covers all the topical issues that we are grappling with right now in our schools: literacy, the place of oracy, ethnic minority education, bilingualism, academic achievement, inclusion. It is a timely book and a must read for those who are working to develop the field of dual language support in this country.

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