

“Contexts of meaning”: Assessing bilingual pupils’ comprehension of text

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> Aim

To investigate how the literacy hour, as interpreted and taught within this school, effectively supports the reading development of beginner bilingual children, and in particular their comprehension of the weekly whole class shared reading text.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

Three pairs of year one children, each consisting of a bilingual and monolingual child, were asked comprehension questions on the weekly literacy hour shared reading text over a period of six weeks. Six texts were used. Three were fiction and three were non-fiction.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Two out of the three bilingual children within the target group gained only partial and fragmented understanding of the shared reading texts in comparison with the monolingual children who had no significant difficulties with comprehension of the texts.
- Comprehension and uptake of text were generally determined by the level of vocabulary demands within the text, rather than the genre (i.e. fiction/non-fiction).
- The evidence suggested that:
 - beginner bilingual children were unable to comprehend fully the shared reading texts used for whole class reading and literacy work in the literacy hour;
 - the language needs of these children could be met by providing time outside of the literacy hour to undertake activities related to the shared reading text; and
 - mother tongue teaching supported bilingual children’s comprehension of shared reading texts in English, their second language.

Background

The children selected for this case study attended Chater Infants School in Watford, Hertfordshire. Sixty-five per cent of the school's pupils are bilingual and their mother tongue is Pahari which is a dialect of Punjabi. They are thus learning English as an additional language. Their families originate mainly from the area of Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan and are a settled homogenous community living within the catchment area of the school. About 5% of the school's pupils are from other ethnic minority backgrounds and 30% of the school's pupils are of a white British background.

Six pupils who were in their second term of Year 1 were selected for this study. They were put into three pairs, each consisting of a monolingual and bilingual child. The children were paired for general reading ability, based on teacher assessment using National Curriculum levels, and were performing at high, middle and low levels.

Names	Gender	Age	Performance
Zaid – b*	Male	6	High
John – m*	Male	5	High
Naima – b	Female	5	Middle
Gemma – m	Female	5	Middle
Saiqa – b	Female	6	Low
Christopher – m	Male	5	Low

* - b – bilingual child
* - m – monolingual child

All three bilingual children's language skills in English were assessed as being at Phase B on a five-point scale starting from A (lowest) to E (highest). Therefore, their English language skills were at an early stage and were typical of most bilingual children within the year one age range in this school.

The Research Project

The initial question was triggered by an awareness that bilingual children, even when they can decode the text successfully, can have difficulty in fully understanding text. Research was undertaken by Kline (1999) and Landon (1999) in which comparisons were made between bilingual and monolingual children in their use of reading strategies. It was found that bilingual children were less likely to use semantic cues than monolingual children, and more likely to have comprehension difficulties when reading than monolingual children. We asked how the National Literacy Strategy could be taught in a manner that provided inclusion for bilingual children. We decided to collect evidence focusing on bilingual children's uptake and comprehension of texts used in the literacy hour. The evidence would be based on a comparison of bilingual and monolingual children using comprehension questions to measure their understanding of shared reading texts.

Procedures

The evidence was collected over a period of six weeks. Each of the target children was exposed to the literacy hour text every day for a week. The text was used for reading with the whole class on most days. All of the teaching was based on learning objectives set out in the National Literacy Strategy for Year 1 children.

Naima (middle group) and Saiqa (lower group), two of the target bilingual children, had daily teaching in the literacy hour for a week, in a small mother tongue teaching group, once every three weeks. One of the aims of this group was to teach oracy and literacy skills in the children's first language. This was based on the assumption that this would support the development of their oracy and literacy skills in their second language. At the end of each week on Friday afternoon, the six target children were asked a set of comprehension questions about the text in English. In addition, the three bilingual children were subsequently asked the same questions in their first language after having the text translated to them in Pahari.

What types of questions were used?

We decided to use a three-level question methodology with each category of questioning designed to be more demanding than the last.

Local questions – these questions required the target children to recall single facts from the text.

Global questions – these questions required the target children to recall and group together factual information from a text. For example, the children were asked to recall the different materials used in the construction of a house in a non-fiction text on building houses.

Inferential questions – these questions required the target children to read a meaning into a text, basing this on information they had assimilated from it.

Analysis of the data

The children's answers to questions were analysed in detail to look for patterns and trends within their responses. Additionally a scoring system was devised to help give an overall picture.

Comprehension and uptake of text were measured by separating the demonstration of basic comprehension of the questions and the production of language that expressed the level and degree of uptake of text.

Research Findings

Was there a significant difference between the monolingual and bilingual children in their comprehension of texts?

The three monolingual children and one of the bilingual children, Naima (middle group), consistently showed better comprehension and uptake of texts than two of the bilingual children, Zaid (higher group) and Saiqa (lower group).

Did bilingual children respond to all types of texts (i.e. fiction/ non-fiction) as well as their monolingual peers?

The children's comprehension and uptake of text were affected by the level of vocabulary demands within the text rather than the genre. All the children performed better on the texts that used simpler language than those which had more complex vocabulary demands. Once again the monolingual children and Naima understood and were able to recall a wider range of vocabulary when answering questions than Zaid and Saiqa.

Did the bilingual children respond to all types of comprehension questions in comparison with their monolingual peers?

An analysis of the totality of the children's scores revealed that they found the recall and production of language, when answering global and inference questions the most difficult. The three monolingual children and Naima had occasional difficulties with these questions. Again Zaid and Saiqa did not score well on these question categories.

Were the bilingual children able to demonstrate better comprehension of text in their mother tongue, when the text has been translated? Were there differences in their responses in their first and second language?

It was apparent that the bilingual children's comprehension of the texts in their first and second languages, was influenced by their own particular stage of bilingual language development.

Naima

Of the three bilingual children, Naima (middle group) consistently demonstrated the best comprehension and uptake of text in Pahari and she used the most Pahari in her answers. Naima's answers to questions in English were often brief and succinct but accurate. Her performance was as strong and often better in Pahari. In her mother tongue her answers were less hesitant and more fluent with greater detail. Naima had good language skills in both languages and these appeared to be supporting her comprehension of texts in English and Pahari.

Zaid

Zaid (higher group) performed at the same level or slightly worse in Pahari than he did in English. He usually replied in English to questions that were put to him in Pahari. Zaid's social language in English appeared to mask a weakness in his language base in his first and second language. This caused him difficulty with reading comprehension in both languages, despite his proficiency at decoding text when reading.

Saiqa

Saiqa (lower group) demonstrated better comprehension in Pahari than in English on three texts but she performed poorly in Pahari on the three, more complex, texts. This may have been because her English language skills were still at an early stage. Therefore, answers to questions on the texts with wider vocabulary demands were difficult for her to translate back, from English into Pahari.

How did the children's comprehension skills relate to their perceived academic ability?

- Saiqa (lower group) was judged to be a fairly typical bilingual child within the Year 1 age range in the school, in terms of her academic achievement. She was still at an early stage in her acquisition of English and had significant problems understanding and recalling language in the literacy hour texts. Her monolingual partner, Christopher, had no comparable comprehension difficulties even though he too was at a very early stage of decoding print.
- Zaid, on the other hand, was considered to be an above average child in his overall academic performance at school but he, too, struggled with comprehension of the texts. This led us to suppose that there may be many beginner bilingual children who are only gaining partial understanding of the literacy hour shared reading texts. This suggests that the text level learning objectives within the National Literacy Strategy which aim to teach reading comprehension were not fully meeting the particular needs of these and possibly many other bilingual children.
- Although Naima was placed in the middle performance pair and was not able to decode print as effectively as Zaid (higher group), her language skills helped her to perform better than him with reading comprehension. Her strong performance seemed to be founded on her secure language base in both languages, in which she was able to transfer oracy skills from one language to the other. This led us to conclude that maintenance and support of the first language of a bilingual child may be an essential step to developing the child's second language and this is an area for further investigation.

Teaching implications

How can the literacy hour be taught so that it provides inclusion for bilingual children?

To maximise the impact of the literacy hour on the development of oracy and reading comprehension skills in bilingual children, more time was needed than was currently available within the literacy hour structure. We found that when time outside of the literacy hour was allocated the children could undertake activities related to the shared reading text. This gave them opportunities to use and rehearse the language in a meaningful context. As an example of this intervention strategy, each class teacher in Year 1 now has a weekly topic afternoon during which the children make pictures, books, puppets or models which are then used in the literacy hour as the starting point for role play, writing and other activities linked with NLS learning objectives. This strategy has been shown to help the children make more sense of the shared reading texts. Most of the activities during the topic lessons are based on art, and design and technology but there are also some topic lessons based on history and geography if that is more appropriate to the focus of the literacy hour text.

Our results suggested that development and support of the child's first language might be an essential step in the development of the second. To ensure that Bilingual children have a secure language base in their first language, mother tongue teaching is now taking place in this school to support and enable the development of bilingual children's oracy and literacy skills in English.

Further Reading

Gregory, E. (1996) *Making Sense of a New World*, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Cummins, J. (1996) *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*, California Association for Bilingual Education

Kline, T. & Cozens, B. (1999) *The analysis of aspects of classroom texts that challenge children when learning to read in their second language: a pilot study* – Literacies in Schools and Community, NALDIC

Landon, J. (1999) *Early intervention with bilingual learners. Towards to Research Agenda* – Literacies in School and Community, NALDIC

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Publication number TPU0656 /06-01

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