
New Publications ... Nuwe Publikasies

Reviews

Bilingual learners and the mainstream curriculum edited by Josie Levine. London: Farmer Press, 1990. R90.65.

Most of the articles in this book have appeared in whole or part in earlier versions. The first part gives an overview of the development of the teaching of English as a second language to bilingual learners in the UK, the second section reflects the individual classroom experiences of a few teachers and the final section addresses some of the vexed questions in bilingual education, including what the writers consider is the only methodological option in teaching language.

The book is focused on practice and expresses an unequivocal commitment to an "interactive, equal opportunities mode of learning/teaching". For the authors the evidence is overwhelming that mainstreaming of bilingual pupils is both preferable and more effective than withdrawing them. (The term "bilingual" as used in this book does not suggest equal proficiency nor any judgement about range or quality of linguistic skills (p.5), and sees English not as a displacing language but "an additional language in ... pupils' lives" (p.2). The term also encompasses multilingual pupils). What the book does in effect is firmly to challenge what it terms as the "disabling monolingual notions" which insisted that bilingual pupils be withdrawn from the mainstream, or that their own mother tongue development should be sacrificed in the interests of developing the target language. Their work has played a role in influencing British policy with regard to multilingual education.

However, while some situations in South Africa are comparable to those reflected in the book, the context of the findings in the book is significantly different. This must be noted at the outset. The children are in a minority in a community where the dominant language is the language used in the school. Furthermore, the classrooms reflected in these studies seem to be restricted to small groups of children. Even if South Africa were to adopt a similar policy to Namibia as far as the official language medium is concerned, even in part, the likely scenario is of schools in which the majority of pupils will be learning through a language other than their mother tongue in large classes. The experience reflected in the book cannot be transferred to a South African situation.

Nevertheless, the book does have considerable value for educational planners, researchers working in the field of both bilingual and multilingual education, or teachers wishing to engage in action research in South Africa. The introduction of "open schools" has, in any case, extended the range of schools in which there is a need to find solutions to the problems experienced by pupils who have to be educated through the medium of a language other than their own mother tongue. In the short term there is a need to meet the needs of those pupils whose background or cultural environment seems to place them at a disadvantage as compared with other pupils.

Even bearing in mind the disparate situations involved, a possible lesson to be drawn from the book is that South African schools run on traditionally racial grounds could be entrenching disadvantage where an attempt is made to delay using the eventual language of instruction until greater competence is reached or where the introduction of

the language of instruction is at the expense of the the mother tongue. The authors firmly reject the ideas that

a person must have considerable facility in an additional language before it is possible to undertake school learning in it;

new language learning is hindered by continued use and development alongside it of one's first, more familiar, language;

This stand places them in controversial territory in South Africa where the debate about medium of instruction at schools is by no means resolved. It seems that the experience reflected in the book should at least be considered: when bilingual or multilingual pupils of mixed ability are engaged in focusing on and collaborating in learning tasks, learning is fostered and autonomy and self-confidence are encouraged. For Levine there is no option

- the concern of the book [is] ... to demonstrate some of the ways in which to the benefit of all, a mixed ability, equal opportunities (race, class, gender) educational environment can be, and needs to be continued to be promoted and developed (p.1).

In her view separating groups on language and cultural lines fails to take advantage of the opportunity to provide a richer learner environment for learners and thereby accelerate learning.

There is a further insight to be gained from the book. While subscribing to "communicative" teaching approaches themselves, the authors, I feel, have some firm challenges to offer the proponents of communicative teaching in South Africa. They point to the value of reciprocal/cooperative learning strategies but emphasise the essential need (as the other half of the learning equation) for there to be the willingness to struggle to arrive at essential learning.

...in advocating these kinds of interactive learning environments, the supporting arguments, in their efforts to counteract the deeply embedded and overriding transmission model of learning, have tended to emphasise the mutuality/reciprocity half of the language acquisition/language development equation; that is, the other half that can be glossed as 'we come to understand content and propositions, learn linguistic forms, vocabulary and skills, and come best to put them to appropriate use, in a developing process based in trust'. This is undoubtedly true, but it is not the whole story. The willingness to struggle to arrive at relative understandings within ourselves and of others, and to express our wishes and ideas, is just as fundamental an ingredient of successful learning and language learning through interaction as is the basis in trust. It is trust that forms the basis of the willingness to struggle.

Furthermore, teachers should not abrogate their role. Rather their active participation in structuring the learning development of pupils ("less experienced individuals") is central to successful progress.

... it is [this] interaction that both represents the forms and meanings of particular and cultural and intellectual activities - including language development - to the learner, and also is the means by which these forms and meanings come to be negotiated by learners and enter into learners' use. (p.290)

Although the authors are critical of their own methodological decisions, the book tends at times to self-indulgence. Helen Davitt's article, for instance, entitled "Political and moral contexts in English and ESL teaching" is often naive and even crudely self-

righteous - even if the materials and the ensuing activities do provide challenges designed to foster the development of "language, thought, skills, intellect, and moral and political understanding. Nevertheless, the book is a remarkable record of the extent to which teachers in the classroom can significantly contribute to and help develop curriculum and pedagogic theory. It may well succeed in encouraging practice in South Africa which is well-grounded in theory, and which contributes to the continuing development of educational theory. Certainly it does offer clear and carefully documented accounts of the strategies adopted (see Figure 2.1: A Schedule of Useful language Linked Strategies to Support Curriculum Learning). I consider that this is a book that should be on the shelves of libraries in tertiary institutions and education departments.

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