Education for biliteracy: Maximising the linguistic potential of diverse learners in Australia’s primary schools

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The development of literacy in languages other than English is frequently overlooked in schools, despite the need for students to develop a suite of ‘multiliterate’ skills. One school’s bilingual learning arrangements – designed to support students (over 90 per cent of whom are learning English as an additional language) in the development of English and two other languages – are reported on in this article. Student achievement data reveal high levels of English-language achievement over time in students learning bilingually. Student and parent questionnaire and interview data reveal that bilingual learning is viewed as highly important for social, familial, educational and identity-related reasons, though the degree to which languages other than English require ongoing school support divides parent opinion. Ultimately, this article reveals that much needed academic language proficiency in English need not be at the cost of supporting students’ emergent bilingualism and biliteracy. As such, bilingual education programs such as that reported on here offer models for schools seeking to maximise students’ language and literacy potential, enhance their identity construction, and respond to the literacy challenges of the 21st century.

Language and literacy in the contemporary primary school

A fundamental and well-recognised pedagogical role of schools and teachers in English-speaking countries is that of supporting students to develop language and literacy skills that facilitate participation in a broad range of powerful textual practices that require academic language proficiency in English (Cummins, 2000; Delpit, 1988; Gee, 2002). Currently, in Australian schools, the notion of language proficiency has become synonymous with mastery of skills related to reading, writing, speaking and listening in English. Literacy in languages other than English (LOTE), while championed in recent policy statements at both the national (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2005) and state levels (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), 2008), has rarely been so overshadowed by an emphasis on English literacy in school curriculum and
classroom pedagogy. The prioritisation of literacy development in English, and the marginalisation of LOTE and English as a Second Language (ESL) considerations has been experienced not only in Australia (see Lo Bianco, 2002; McKay, 2001), but, to varying degrees, in other English-dominant countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) documenting the rejection of linguistic pluralism in the broader international context.

There are several reasons for this valorisation of English literacy in countries like Australia, despite its rich reserves of multilingual ability and potential within schools and the broader community (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Clyne & Kipp, 2002; Department of Education and Training (Victoria), 2006). Curriculum standards and pedagogical frameworks, developed by the various Australian State and Territory Departments of Education and, recently, at the national level (National Curriculum Board, 2008), link English literacy to personal fulfilment, academic success, post-school options and an informed citizenry. The place of English literacy teaching and learning as a major pedagogical priority and the core business of schools has been consolidated by Federal inquiries into literacy teaching in Australian schools (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005a, 2005b); increasingly high stakes assessment regimes, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the Achievement Improvement Monitor in Victoria, and the Basic Skills Test in New South Wales; accountability pressures on teachers to assist students to speedily reach English proficiency benchmarks in the early years of schooling; and public perceptions of ‘literacy crisis’ and ‘falling standards’, inflamed by writers in the corporate media (for a full critique of these discourses, see Snyder, 2008).

Concurrently, definitions of literacy have expanded in line with young peoples’ broadening repertoire of textual practices, mediated and necessitated by rapid technological change. This has led to wide recognition that literacy pedagogy must support the development of the ‘multiliterate’ individual who can read, view, use, critique and create a diverse range of texts (see Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Freebody, 2001; New London Group, 1996; Unsworth, 2002; Zammit & Downes, 2002). Despite Lo Bianco’s argument that ‘a multiliteracies pedagogy cannot but be multilingual’ (2000: 105), linguistic pluralism is frequently overlooked in conceptualising the multiliterate individual and, subsequently, in schools’ instructional support for students’ expanding repertoire of literacy practices.

The study reported here investigated a bilingual school context comprising, in very large numbers, students from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. How the school’s commitment to significant hours of instruction in languages other than English was reconciled with the broader educational context that emphasises students’ English literacy development underpinned this investigation.
Bilingual and multilingual pathways to proficiency in English

Bilingual education – school or classroom contexts where students learn in two languages for approximately equal amounts of in-school time (Romaine, 1995) or where a non-dominant language is used as the medium of instruction during a substantial part of the school day (Corson, 2001; Cummins & Corson, 1997) – is rare in Australia. In the state of Victoria, where the investigation reported here was conducted, only 15 from a total of more than 1600 government schools offer bilingual education programs in which:

- instruction in at least two curriculum areas occurs in the target languages; and
- face-to-face teaching in the target languages takes place for at least 7.5 hours per week.

Only four of these schools cater primarily for students from language backgrounds other than English, highlighting how English literacy imperatives dominate the curricula, even in linguistically and culturally diverse school contexts. In Indigenous education, the English literacy emphasis is even more apparent. In October 2008, the government of the Northern Territory effectively eliminated bilingual education in that part of Australia after more than 30 years of operation, by mandating that the first four hours of each school day be taught in English (see Northern Territory Government, 2008).

Essentially, education supporting bilingualism and biliteracy – defined here as the ability to perform communicative and academic functions involving reading, writing, speaking and listening in two languages (see Baker, 2006; Clyne, 2005; Cummins, 2000; Hornberger, 2003) – remains contentious, particularly when the first languages of immigrant, refugee and Indigenous students are the focus of classroom support. Lo Bianco (2000) has observed that mastery of high status, essentially non-immigrant languages has been seen as a skill that contributes positively to society,

however, when the languages are less foreign, when emotional attachment and mastery may be high, their study, public use, and maintenance ‘threaten civilisation’. (Lo Bianco, 2000:99)

The tension surrounding these differing bilingual contexts has been likened to a ‘skill versus sedition’ dichotomy (Lo Bianco, 1999, 2000). Hakuta and McLaughlin (1996) refer to the same tension in United States contexts as being evidence of ‘elite versus folk bilingualism.’

Yet, it has been argued both in Australia (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 1994; Clyne, 2001; Lo Bianco, 2002) and internationally (Blackledge, 1994; Cummins, 2001; Wong Fillmore, 2000) that the necessity for students to develop advanced skills in English need not be at the expense of their development of academic language proficiency in languages other than English, especially when many students enter primary school classrooms with emergent or established oracy
and literacy skills in another language. Despite Luke, Comber and O’Brien (1996:32) having noted that ‘cultural hybridity, shifting and multiple identities, and multilingualism are social facts of 21st century life, visible every day in classrooms and playgrounds’, Clyne (2005) has remarked that the significant linguistic and cultural resources brought to school by these diverse learners are frequently under-recognised or undervalued.

It is argued that failure to affirm and support students’ linguistic resources constitutes a disregard for these students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ (see Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). When taken further, the systemic and systematic suppression of the minority language knowledge has been conceptualised as an act of symbolic violence (see Bourdieu, 1991) and as evidence of coercive power relations operating in school and societal contexts (Cummins, 2000). As such, squandering of these language resources has been seen as a loss for these students on a personal level, as well as a loss to society (Clyne, 2005).

The benefits of the development of bilingual or multilingual ability – both for students from English-speaking backgrounds, as well as those for whom English is not the main language of the home – have been argued for, in terms of cognitive advantages and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001; Carlisle, Beeman, Davis, & Spharim, 1999; Galambos & Hakuta, 1988), intercultural knowledge (Crozet, 2003; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999), and identity enhancement (Cummins, 2000; Nieto, 2000). Yet, the bilingual or multilingual pathway to proficiency in English is contentious and the debate frequently heated. As such, research into this pluralistic model of language and literacy provision is greatly needed.

The research study being reported here investigated student learning of English, alongside Mandarin and Vietnamese, within bilingual programs at one inner city primary school in Melbourne, Australia. In terms of bilingual learning opportunities offered almost exclusively to students for whom English was not the language of the home, it posed the questions:

To what extent does the provision of a bilingual education program meet the language and learning needs of a group of primary school-aged English-language learners, in terms of:

- these students’ perceptions of their language and learning needs;
- their parents’ perceptions of their children’s language and learning needs;
- their teachers’ perceptions of their students’ language and learning needs; and
- government targets for student achievement?

It sought to reveal the English learning outcomes achieved by bilingually educated students, as well as exploring their attitudes about bilingual learning. The perspectives of their parents and their teachers were likewise investigated. The tensions and challenges experienced by teachers working within this program have been reported elsewhere (Molyneux, 2006). Here in this article,
data related to the students’ learning outcomes and their perspectives of bilingual learning are reported on, alongside the attitudes of their parents. All too rarely are the voices of students, parents and teachers sufficiently foregrounded in bilingual research. When, for example, the perspectives of bilingual students have been sought, highly illuminating understandings have emerged about their language use and attitudes (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Martin-Jones & Bhatt, 1998; Oliver & Purdie, 1998; Saxena, 2000; Sneddon, 2000; Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002); and their views on effective learning arrangements (Collins & Harrison, 1998; Smith, 1999; Soto, 2002), identity construction (Martin & Stuart-Smith, 1998; Miller, 2003; Short & Carrington, 1999), and power differentials between majority and minority languages and cultures (Clachar, 1997; Galguerra, 1998).

The research study and school context
The school site being reported upon here is a Victorian government primary school of 180 students located in inner city Melbourne. Since the early 1980s, this school has offered bilingual learning opportunities to its students, of whom over 90 percent are from immigrant and refugee backgrounds where the home language is not English. The languages of instruction within the school’s two-pronged bilingual education program – Vietnamese-English and Mandarin-English – are strongly linked to the students’ in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. Data collected around these students’ language use that have been reported elsewhere (Molyneux, 2004) reveal these students inhabit highly multilingual lifeworlds where ‘translanguaging’ (Baker, 2003, 2006), codeswitching (Myers-Scotton, 1997), and linguistic transfer (Cummins & Swain, 1986) are daily realities of students’ educational and social language interactions.

At the time of the study, the school’s bilingual education programs were timetabled in the first two or three years of school (Years Prep to 2 for the Mandarin-English program; Years Prep and 1 for the Vietnamese-English program), students learning for half the school week in English, and the other half in either Mandarin or Vietnamese. Most, though not all, students in these bilingual programs were native speakers of Vietnamese or a variety of Chinese (predominantly Hakka), and the aim of these two bilingual programs, as stated in school policy documents, was that students’ linguistic and cognitive development and identity construction would best be served when both languages in the students’ emerging repertoire are supported and extended.

Students who undertook instruction in the languages of the bilingual programs were taught in separate classrooms according to medium of instruction. All the teachers involved in the bilingual programs collaboratively planned language and literacy focus areas (such as specific genres of writing or vocabulary to be developed), numeracy investigations, and integrated curriculum topics. All language classrooms consistently applied pedagogical
approaches incorporating inquiry-based learning, flexible grouping arrangements, and instruction in line with the Early Years Literacy Program (Department of Education (Victoria), 1998; Department of Education Employment and Training (Victoria), 2000; Hill & Crevola, 1999). In planning for instruction in each of the three languages (English, Mandarin or Vietnamese), teachers needed to be mindful of the diverse prior experiences of students in each of these languages. As a result, skilful teaching around supporting oral language, phonological awareness, orthographic understanding (involving pinyin in Mandarin classes), conversational fluency and academic language ability required strategic differentiation in terms of student grouping and program planning. As an integrated curriculum, inquiry model underpinned teaching and learning at all year levels at the school, regardless of medium of instruction, students were placed in the situation of learning each of the languages, while learning content in each of the languages.

Students in Years Prep to 2 who were not involved in bilingual learning at the school were able to undertake two hours of LOTE instruction per week in Mandarin, Vietnamese, or Turkish (another language of community interest, but not offered as a full bilingual program). These classes took more of a language-object focus (Clyne, 1986), though connections were made to classroom topics to build language and conceptual awareness. A similar focus characterised LOTE instruction for students in Years 3–6, where a diminished time allocation amounting to 2–3 hours per week was devoted to the teaching of Mandarin, Vietnamese or Turkish.

In this investigation, extensive research data were gathered. This involved the collection of:

- **student data**: language use and language attitudes questionnaires were obtained from 143 of the school’s 180 students. These were followed up by individually administered statement sorting tasks with 62 bilingually educated students, and individual and group interviews involving 56 students;
- **parent data**: questionnaires were completed by 54 parents, 20 of whom attended group interview sessions undertaken in either Vietnamese or Hakka;
- **teacher data**: questionnaires were completed by 13 of the 15 staff in total; and
- **student achievement data**: analysis of bilingually educated students’ achievement in English at the end of their Preparatory Year, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6.

This diverse range of data allowed for some quantitative analysis, along with considerable amounts of qualitative analysis of these stakeholders’ perspectives on education for bilingualism and biliteracy. While tensions and uncertainties around this form of educational provision emerged from
the data, enormous goodwill towards the bilingual program characterised the responses from the different cohorts of research participants. Bilingual education received additional validation from analysis of records of bilingually educated students’ achievement which revealed their success in developing academic language proficiency across the dimensions of English, in addition to advanced skills in another language.

I begin reporting the results of this investigation by detailing the English-language achievement of bilingually educated students in the study. Then, key issues that emerged from the student and parent data are discussed. These relate to the students’ attitudes towards learning bilingually, and parent perspectives on the duration of the program and the degree to which foundational bilingualism or advanced biliteracy should be an explicit goal of the program.

**Students’ English language achievement**

While student learning took place in three languages within this school’s two-pronged bilingual program, it was the English language achievement that this study specifically investigated. Arguments against bilingual education for students from non-dominant language backgrounds frequently centre on how reduced time learning English often results in diminished student knowledge of English (Rossell, 2004; Rossell & Baker, 1996), semilingualism, or even illiteracy in two languages (Barry, 2001). While this ‘time-on-task’ argument has been widely rebutted (Cummins, 2000; Ramírez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2002), counter-arguments persist and, as a result, were responded to in this investigation’s research design.

In this study, data collected around student achievement in English reveal that those students who undertook bilingual education at this school made steady gains over the seven years of the primary education towards government mandated benchmarks in English, as measured by the curriculum standards of the time (Board of Studies (Victoria), 2000a, 2000b). The following table (Table 1) reveals the increasing number of bilingually educated students reaching or exceeding English proficiency targets appropriate to their year level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage Meeting Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>66% reading and speaking and listening, 50% writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>100% reading and speaking and listening, 50% writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>100% reading and speaking and listening, 50% writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What these data reveal is that bilingually-educated students at the research school increasingly meet English learning targets as they get older. By the end of Year 2, two-thirds of bilingually educated students meet English-language benchmarks in reading and speaking and listening, and half meet the targets for writing. These percentages are maintained or increased at Year 4, and increased to encompass all the bilingually educated students still at the school by Year 6. Even the most cautious interpretation of these results would reveal that, in terms of English-language acquisition and proficiency, these students, as a group, experience no academic disadvantage in being taught bilingually for two to three years in the early years of their primary schooling. And, while
It could be argued that the increased time spent in English-medium classrooms in Years 3–6 has resulted in higher levels of proficiency in that language, the considerable research revealing that quality bilingual instruction supports both languages of instruction (for example, Cummins, 1991, 2000; May, Hill, & Tiakiwai, 2004; Ramírez et al., 1991; Slavin & Cheung, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 2002) is reinforced here. In addition, the student achievement data reported here are consistent with international research highlighting the 5–7 year period needed for minority language background students to achieve academic language proficiency in the majority language (Collier, 1989, 1995; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Ovando & Collier, 1998).

### Table 1

**Student achievement data:**

| Totals & percentages of Years Prep, Two, Four & Six bilingually-educated students assessed at or above year level English-language targets (n=67) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Year Level** | **Speaking & Listening** | **Writing** | **Reading** |
| | **Chinese** | **Vietnamese** | **Chinese** | **Vietnamese** | **Chinese** | **Vietnamese** |
| | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** |
| Year Prep | 0 – 2 | 28.5 | 0 – 2 | 28.5 | 0 – 2 | 28.5 | 0 – 2 | 28.5 |
| (N = 19: 12 Ch.; 7 Viet.) | | | | | | | | |
| Year Two | 6 | 40 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 33.3 | 3 | 50 | 9 | 60 | 4 | 66.6 |
| (N = 21: 15 Ch.; 6 Viet.) | | | | | | | | |
| Year Four | 5 | 45.4 | 4 | 66.6 | 7 | 63.6 | 4 | 66.6 | 6 | 54.5 | 5 | 83.3 |
| (N = 17: 11 Ch.; 6 Viet.) | | | | | | | | |
| Year Six | 6 | 75 | 2 | 100 | 6 | 75 | 2 | 100 | 6 | 75 | 2 | 100 |
| (N = 10: 8 Ch.; 2 Viet.) | | | | | | | | |

‘Most people only speak one language’:

**Students’ language attitudes**

The attitudes about learning, maintaining and developing their home languages and English were sought from 123 Years Prep to Six students from language backgrounds other than English. These perspectives were sought both from students having undertaken bilingual learning at the school as well as those who attended the LOTE classes. Of these students, 65 students were from Chinese-language backgrounds, 42 were from Vietnamese speaking backgrounds, and 16 were speakers of other languages at home. Data were obtained through a questionnaire that asked students to rate the level of importance they attach to speaking, reading and writing in English and their
various home languages. Using picture cards representing these dimensions of language, the students positioned these on a three-point continuum, choosing one of the following categories: ‘not important’, ‘important’ and ‘very important’. The elicitation devices helped clarify what was being asked of them, in addition to facilitating discussion.

In rating their attitudes to languages of the home and those towards English, students emphasised that speaking, reading and writing in English were vitally important, with around a 15 percent point difference between those rating English across these dimensions as ‘very important’ compared to their home language. The following table (Table 2) highlights the levels of importance the students attached to developing the ability to read, write and speak in English and in their home languages.

Table 2
Language attitudes questionnaire:
Importance of different modes of language in L1 and English:
Totals and percentages of all Years Prep to Six students (n=123)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Dimension</th>
<th>not important</th>
<th>important</th>
<th>very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking your home language</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking English</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading in your home language</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading in English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in your home language</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When probed on their reasons for rating English proficiency more highly than their home languages, some students expressed satisfaction with current levels of home language knowledge, while perceiving shortcomings or deficiencies in their abilities in English. For example, the following student commented on the need for a strong understanding of English in terms of advancing his primary school learning.

If I don’t know English, I won’t understand what G. [classroom teacher] is talking about. I don’t have to talk Chinese with teachers, so I don’t need it as much.

(Year 5 Chinese background boy).
A younger student understood and articulated the social consequences of an inability to speak or understand English.

**Researcher:** Why is it important to learn English?

**Student:** Because we are born in Australia.

**Researcher:** And if you didn’t know how to speak English…?

**Student:** Someone has to translate for us.

*(Year 3 Vietnamese background girl).*

Students’ awareness of their parents’ lack of English also figured as a reason for their opinion that speaking, reading and writing English was ‘important’ or ‘very important.’

Maybe if my Mum has to go to hospital and she can’t speak English, I have to translate for her. ... I’d be lucky to be bilingual because most people only speak one language.

*(Year 5 Vietnamese background girl).*

Students reported a decreased use of home languages and increased use of English over the duration of their schooling, and this is reflected in the following student’s comments.

For me, I don’t need to use Vietnamese so much. But for English, I need to read and write and I want to learn more.

*(Year 6 Vietnamese background girl).*

While the importance of English proficiency is clearly articulated in students’ reporting of their language attitudes, so too is knowledge of their home languages and, in a separate statement sort, 83 percent of these students for whom English and one (or more) languages featured in their home lives agreed with the statement that ‘Both English and [the student’s home language] are equally important to learn.’

In order to probe students’ reasons for stating that knowledge of two languages was desirable, 62 Years 3–6 students – all but six of whom had undertaken a full bilingual education program at the school – were questioned further drawing on data collection techniques used in a study of Gaelic speakers conducted by Dorian (1981). Using Dorian’s model, student participants were asked to respond to twelve statements reflecting different reasons why being bilingual might be an advantage. These statements (presented in the first column in the following table (Table 3), relate to notions and perceptions...
of family communication and social necessity, intrinsic enjoyment in dual language knowledge and use, possible future benefits, cognitive advantages, and self-esteem and identity enhancement. As Table 3 reveals, these students saw multiple benefits in being bilingual.

As revealed by this table, students most frequently identified bilingual benefits with family communication and social necessity, providing many examples of when such linguistic knowledge is deployed.

It helps me translate things for my Mum and grandma.

*(Year Five Chinese-background boy)*

It means I can talk to my relatives and cousins in Taiwan.

*(Year Four Chinese-background girl)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowing two languages is good because ...</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... I need both to communicate with family and friends.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it helps me understand the things I learn.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it helps me succeed at school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it helps me feel proud of being Australian.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... I need both when I go to the shops, restaurants or other places.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it might help me get a good job.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it might help me at secondary school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it makes me more clever.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it helps me feel proud of my family background.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... I enjoy being able to do things in more than one language.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... I enjoy learning in both.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... it helps me think better.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It helps me translate things for my Mum and grandma.

*(Year Five Chinese-background boy)*

It means I can talk to my relatives and cousins in Taiwan.

*(Year Four Chinese-background girl)*
Possible future benefits in being bilingual were also identified by students undertaking this task. What emerges seems to be an increasing awareness, as students get older, of the paramount importance of English proficiency, coupled with a developing understanding that bilingual ability assists school learning, and may assist secondary school achievement in the future. The following two student statements highlight this appreciation of the advantages of sound bilingual abilities.

We live in Australia. English is the most important language to learn. ... They [bilingual people] can talk to more people than people who only speak one language.

(Year 5 Chinese-background girl)

I want to learn both to go to secondary school. I hope I can use Chinese at secondary school.

(Year 5 Chinese-background boy)

In addition to a sense of pride in being bilingual young Australians, a strong sense of linguistic, cultural and ethnic identification with the country of family origin emerged from these data. In many cases, students’ comments embodied an emerging bicultural identity, as the following quotes highlight.

You need to know English. And if you’re Vietnamese, you have to know your own language. So when anyone asks you something or talks to you, you know how to answer.

(Year 4 Vietnamese-background girl)

When I go to Vietnam I can talk to my grandparents ... I need to learn Vietnamese so I can understand them. ... English is very important because I was born in Australia. I need to learn English so I can do things when I’m older.

(Year 3 Vietnamese-background boy)

While students saw their bilingualism as beneficial in terms of family cohesion, building knowledge and succeeding at school, and identity related reasons, they were less certain about whether bilingual learning assisted their ability to think better or feel more clever. There were few examples of students explicitly giving examples of how bilingualism supported their learning. As such, the following comment about linguistic transfer made by a Year 4 girl was uncommon:

So when you learn English, and then in Chinese they ask you a question, then you can think back to when you went to English class, and that might give you ideas.

(Year 4 Chinese-background student on learning bilingually when she started school)

Interestingly, many students in the study expressed a desire for a bilingual education program of longer duration than the one they had experienced. In
total, 73 percent of the 62 Years 3–6 students interviewed responded that they would have preferred the program to continue beyond their first two or three years of primary school. Stressing the need to continue to improve their LOTE skills, in one group interview a Year 6 student remarked, with some intentional overstatement, that ‘the Preps are better than us in Chinese’.

Education for more than just low-level foundational bilingualism, but for a more expansive biliteracy clearly has resonance and relevance for such learners. Student interview data also revealed general consensus that, while learning bilingually constituted more effort and hard work over the duration of the programs, the linguistic and identity-enhancing outcomes were more than sufficient compensation. As such, while unambiguously recognising English as a necessity for their school success and post-school options, biliteracy was perceived by many students as a resource to be valued and nurtured. The data obtained from parents also highlighted the value these stakeholders attach to bilingual education at this school. However, tensions around the program’s goals and duration were uncovered.

**Bilingualism and biliteracy: Parents’ perspectives**

Parent questionnaire data (distributed in Chinese, Vietnamese and English) were received from 54 respondents. Follow-up parent interviews were conducted through the use of interpreters, allowing a total of 20 parents to voice their feelings on bilingual learning in their favoured languages with only minimal brokering from the researcher. Both the questionnaires and group interviews sought parents’ perspectives on:

- the importance of the teaching of the three languages of instruction in the bilingual program;
- how effectively these languages are taught; and
- whether the bilingual program should be extended beyond the early years of school.

In terms of the importance the parents placed on bilingual learning opportunities, the following table (Table 4) drawn from parent questionnaire data makes clear that the school’s obligation to teach English outweighed that of teaching Mandarin or Vietnamese, even though these languages were seen as important – albeit to varying degrees.

What these results indicate is recognition on the part of parents that English – the language in which, in the main, these parents possess low levels of proficiency – needs to be well taught by the school for their students’ future academic and post-study lives. Many parents felt that other mechanisms for supporting the students’ knowledge of Vietnamese and Mandarin could be deployed as they got older: weekend Victorian School of Languages options, for example.

The question as to whether the school’s bilingual learning opportunities
should be extended beyond the early years of schooling revealed parents to be divided between those who believed fostering foundational levels of bilingualism was sufficient at the school level, and those who expressed a desire for their children to be formally educated to achieve more advanced levels of biliteracy. The following table (Table 5) indicates the responses from parents of Vietnamese and Chinese backgrounds to the issue of the duration of bilingual learning at the school.

**Table 5**

**Parent questionnaire: Extension of bilingual program**

_Question:_ Do you believe the bilingual program whereby the students learn half time in English, half time in Mandarin/Vietnamese should be extended to the upper grades?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Total Parent Response (N = 50)</th>
<th>Chinese-background parent response (N = 26)</th>
<th>Vietnamese-background parent response (N = 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>35 or 70%</td>
<td>13 or 50%</td>
<td>22 or 92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>15 or 30%</td>
<td>13 or 50%</td>
<td>2 or 8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of this data collection, the Vietnamese-English bilingual program ran for a shorter period than the Mandarin-English one, thereby possibly explaining the more emphatic demand for a program of longer duration. Low levels of language shift within the broader Vietnamese community (see Clyne, 2005) may also be a significant factor. In any case, these data highlight that the issue of the duration of the bilingual arrangements and the extent to which students’ Mandarin or Vietnamese language learning needs to be
developed (foundational bilingualism or full biliteracy) is perceived very differently by parents at the school. Discursive questionnaire data and those obtained through group consultations revealed that many parents harboured two wishes for their children’s language development: that they maintain and develop their home languages and that they develop maximum control over English. Some parents, concerned that bilingual learning might interfere with their children’s development of academic language proficiency in English, noted the increased linguistic demands and curriculum complexity as their children’s school education progressed. The following parent’s comments illustrate this prioritisation of English.

   English is the main subject. So we worry that later on their English will be further behind compared to other children. ... Because in later years, the subjects get harder and the children need more time to learn English.

   (Translation of Chinese-background parent’s comments)

   In terms of those parents who supported a longer program leading to enhanced biliteracy, issues of identity, cultural maintenance, family cohesion and future employment prospects were evident, as the following questionnaire comments highlight:

   The kids have the opportunity to know more about the culture, the history of the subject they are doing [when learning bilingually].

   (Translation of Vietnamese-background parents’ comments)

   I want my children to be fluent in both Vietnamese and English so I can communicate with them easily in Vietnamese.

   (Translation of Vietnamese-background parents’ comments)

   Because we are Chinese, the Chinese language is important. Maybe in the future, the children will benefit from learning Chinese when going for a job. So that’s why both languages are important for the children.

   (Translation of Chinese-background parents’ comments)

   Such sentiments also characterised the parent group consultations, with fears about linguistic and cultural maintenance often emotionally expressed.

   Of course, once you come to Australia, you have to learn English. But we are Chinese. We can’t forget our language. It comes from our ancestors.

   (Chinese-background parent – translation of original comments)

   It’s better if they know their mother tongue. The more they know, the more they understand their background. The better they love their culture. However poor we Vietnamese are, our minds will always be rich with knowledge and great intellect that need to be maintained and be made a more important aspect. Our children need to know Vietnamese to understand that.

   (Vietnamese-background parent – translation of original comments)
These divergent viewpoints around the duration of the bilingual program and the levels of importance parents attach to the different languages of instruction at the school positions the earlier-mentioned issue of ‘time-on-task’: the amounts of classroom time necessary to support students achieve required levels of academic language proficiency in target languages (see Cummins, 2000; Ramírez et al., 1991) as in unnecessary conflict with the emotional links between language and cultural identity, and the role language plays in diasporic immigrant communities. Ultimately, individual parent priorities come into play here, but increased understandings and discussion at the school level about research informed theory related to bilingual education might go some way towards alleviating tension around program duration and emphasis.

Conclusion: A way forward
This study has highlighted that innovative language programs like bilingual education have relevance and resonance for students and parents in linguistically and culturally diverse school communities. It has shown also that student achievement in English is not sacrificed by taking a stance in favour of linguistic pluralism at the school level. While bilingual education is by no means the only way to become biliterate, and the resource implications for such programs are not insubstantial, such programs can support the expansion of young peoples’ repertoire of textual practices, in ways that link meaningfully to the multilingual, multiliterate lifeworlds our students inhabit. As Cummins (2001) observes, bilingual education can serve to support more collaborative classroom and home-school interactions, serving as ‘microcosms of the kind of caring society that we would like our own children and grandchildren to inherit’ (Cummins, 2001: 305).

References


Sneddon, R. (2000). Language and literacy practices in Gujarati Muslim families. In M. Martin-Jones & K. Jones (Eds.), *Multilingual literacies: Reading and writing different worlds* (pp. 103–126). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.


