The cultural and linguistic resources of advanced bilingual learners: A case study of four bilingual learners in a multilingual London school

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the cultural and linguistic resources of advanced bilingual learners in the United Kingdom with reference to a case study of four ten year olds of bilingual backgrounds studying in a multilingual London school. I argue that rather than viewing such children as a ‘problem’, as typically happens, schools might make fuller use of the pedagogic potential that such children represent. The study describes conversations with the children against the background of both home and school domains to offer a window on a rich repertoire of linguistic and cultural practices which are frequently invisible within the school setting. The paper concludes with proposals as to how schools might maximise the knowledge and skills of advanced bilingual learners in more constructive and creative ways than is currently the case.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the cultural and linguistic resources of English as an additional language (EAL) children, known in the United Kingdom (UK) as ‘advanced bilingual learners’ because they have been in the country for at least five years. Indeed, some have been born in the UK. There are two typical responses to this group of established bilingual learners. The first is to ‘treat them all the same’, to assume that they are both similar to each other and are fully integrated into mainstream school life, educationally and socially. A second, contrasting position is to emphasise their difference from their EMT (English as Mother Tongue) peers. Moreover, difference is equated with difficulty. ‘Immigrant identity, very often linked to ethnic minority identity … is strongly associated with language problems’ (Blommaert, Creve and Willaert forthcoming: 2).

I want to argue in this paper that neither of these responses does full justice to the nature of EAL children’s cultural and linguistic resources,
which are interwoven in complex ways. Drawing on a case study of four children, I shall suggest that the unique histories and rich language backgrounds of the children afford them distinctive perspectives on knowledge and learning, which constitute a resource for themselves and fellow pupils. While many schools already acknowledge these resources, national language and literacy policies, such as the British National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 2000), still tend to emphasise a monolingual ethos. They offer what Blommaert, Creve and Willaert (forthcoming: 15) call ‘a monoglot image of the linguistic regime’ – a regime that does not offer spaces for children of non-mainstream backgrounds to show their skills and knowledge to best advantage. I hope to show, through vignettes of the children’s talk about text, the nature of some of these resources, which may go unacknowledged in the dominant monoglot linguistic regime. I also wish to point to the diversity within minority ethnic children. Each of the four children here has different resources and experiences to bring to schooling.

**Background to the study**

The study on which this paper is based investigated the manner in which bilingual children were responding to the National Literacy Strategy (cf Wallace forthcoming). At the time of my study, the strategy was a relatively recently implemented government initiative which involved one hour’s structured literacy tuition each day (cf DfEE 2000), divided into approximately fifteen minutes shared text work; fifteen minutes focused word work, with a heavy emphasis on phonics over the first two or three years of primary school; twenty minutes of group and independent work; and a ten-minute final ‘plenary’ session of whole class work. As Leung (2001) notes, this tuition involves fairly rigid and prescribed rules of engagement. This may make it difficult for learners with different language and literacy traditions and resources to participate fully in the event. Moreover, one searches in vain through the successive National Literacy Strategy evaluations of recent years (for example, Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) 2000, 2001 and 2002) for any mention of ways in which bilingual children might bring resources, as opposed to disadvantages, to the Literacy Hour. There is a continuing emphasis on ‘difficulty’ and underperformance, as the following section suggests:

Some objectives [of the National Literacy Strategy framework] are seen as particularly difficult for these pupils:

- Amongst word-level objectives, especially those related to vocabulary extension, such as proverbs and idioms
• Amongst sentence-level objectives, those related to active/passive verbs, verb tenses, complex sentences

• Amongst text-level objectives, especially those related to the development of inferential and evaluative reading skills and the retrieval of information beyond the literal.  

(OFSTED 2001: 30)

I recorded and analysed conversations about literacy and the Literacy Hour with the children – two boys and two girls – in a multilingual primary school in West London, which I visited once a week over one school year. While my initial focus was on the impact of the Literacy Hour on the children’s understanding of literacy, as time went on I became more interested in the children’s responses ‘beyond literacy’ in its school sense, that is the way in which their talk with me was interwoven with discourses and experiences drawn from many cultural sources.

Research question and methodology

My question for this paper is: what kinds of distinctive knowledge and skills are available to advanced bilingual learners and how might schools draw on these in productive ways? As we might expect, many of the children’s skills and resources are shared with their mainstream-culture peers. However others, as I aim to show below through the vignettes of their lives at home and at school, are unique to them as members of non-mainstream cultures and language groups.

The school: Hollyoake Primary School is a successful, well-established school in a West London borough. Ninety-eight per cent of the children are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The children come from settled, second or third generation families of mainly Punjabi Sikh backgrounds, with increasing numbers of more recent arrivals from places such as Somalia and Kosovo. The children have varying degrees of knowledge of, and proficiency in, languages other than English.

The four children in the study, all aged between nine and ten, in a Year 5 class volunteered for this opportunity for ‘talk around text’. This precluded any kind of selection based on perceived ability: Essa, one of the four children in the study, was considered to be among the most able children in the class, while the other three ranged from average to ‘struggling’. Although I was not aiming at representativeness, in many ways the children reflected the range of language and ethnic backgrounds of the children in the class, all of whom were from Black or Asian families, that is from the Indian subcontinent, Central Asian countries such as Iraq, and African countries such as Somalia.
Varsha: Varsha was born in Britain. Her family is Hindu and mainly English-speaking, although some Punjabi is used in the home. Her father speaks a number of languages and is literate in Hindi. Varsha understands Punjabi but cannot speak it.

Jamila: Jamila’s family is Muslim. Her family came as refugees from Kabul in Afghanistan when she was four months old. She speaks Pashto at home, where she says that she ‘is not allowed’ to speak English. She goes to the mosque every day after school.

Mamoon: Mamoon’s family is Muslim and from South Yemen. He speaks Arabic with his mother and father and cousin but mainly English with his brother and sister. He claims that he can speak Arabic but not read it. He came to England when he was three or four – he is a little unclear how old he was.

Essa: Essa was born in Britain. His parents are Muslim and Somali. His mother comes from Africa and his father lived for some years in the United States (US). Both English and Somali are used in the home and Essa speaks both languages but cannot read Somali.

I talked to the children in pairs for half an hour each week, following the Literacy Hour, which I also observed. Jamila and Varsha were already friends. The boys became closer during the year, as a result of our shared conversations. Joint sessions with Essa seemed to bring out the best in Mamoon, who was initially shy and nervous. His association with Essa, a popular class member, gave him confidence and enhanced status.

My picture of the children is created from their own talk in the course of conversations that followed the Literacy Hour. Some conversations centred specifically around the literacy lesson, while others were only loosely anchored in school life. Yet others related beyond school to family narratives and practices. I begin in Part A with these conversations about family, religion and politics in the home domain, as a backdrop to the more school-oriented talk in Part B.

A The children at home

FAMILY NARRATIVES

Family stories emerge spontaneously when triggered by particular texts. For instance, as the two girls and I read a dual language, Bosnian/English, story from Bosnia about refugees from that region, Jamila volunteers that her family came to Britain as refugees from Afghanistan: Miss, my dad was an officer, Miss, he was running and they were trying to kill him. And he had to travel from there to another country. Miss, you know big mountains – he used to run in them, he had to run in them, he couldn’t go airplanes or cars and his feet
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were, like, fat (I offer the word ‘swollen’ here). She also makes reference to the attempt at the time to save the statue that was later that year destroyed by the Taliban: You know in Afghanistan, you know, from Egypt there is a model of Tutankhamen from Egypt’s God and the people from London and Egypt are going to try and persuade them (not to destroy it).

The children also allude to family roles: Essa talks equally of his mother and father as literacy mediators at home – his father buys the latest Harry Potter book for him, he writes letters to his mother and the whole family visits the library. In Mamoon’s family literacy is strongly male-mediated. His uncle is the major literacy broker – the one he asks for help with reading at home. However, he is only available to help in summer, when he comes to stay from his home in Yemen. Mamoon is convinced that JK Rowling, the author of Harry Potter, is a man because ‘mens are better cos, Miss, they’ve got good handwriting, like my dad’! However, he takes the trouble to check this out so that the next time we meet he agrees that JK Rowling is a woman, after all, ‘with hair like Miss H’!

Language Repertoires

All the children speak more than one language at home except Varsha who understands but does not speak Punjabi and is the most English-dominant of the children, although she talks of her father reading a number of languages and translating a story she has written into Hindi. Mamoon speaks Yemeni Arabic to his parents, English to his brother, and both languages to his sister. Jamila, like the other children, considers her English is best. Arabic is reserved for religious contexts. She is emphatic, however, that ‘Arabic doesn’t help English’. Moreover, she claims: I don’t know Arabic, I just read it. Speaking English is actively prohibited at home. Jamila says, ‘my dad will hit me’, before offering the qualification, ‘well, my uncle will’!

Jamila is the only one of the children who switches readily into her home language, Pashto. She does so in order to tell us a story in her language (one of a genre of funny stories about a character called Mullah Masadeen: ‘he’s very funny’, says Jamila). She first tells the story in Pashto and then immediately translates it into English for the benefit of Varsha and myself:

There was once a man called Mullah Masadeen. His wife told him go and buy some rice. He got it and he was passing the road to go home and the car goes deed deed deed [beep beep beep] for him to move – and in our language deed deed means ‘throw it on the ground’. So he just made it fall everywhere and when he went home his wife goes: ‘Where’s my rice?’ and he said: ‘Well, the car told me to deed deed it and I had to deed it’. And his wife told him to go and get rice again.
Essa paints a picture of his family as taking a relaxed attitude to the use of both English and Somali at home, with neither, it seems, strongly preferred by his parents. Indeed, his father reads in three languages, he says: Maltese, English and Somali. He is the only one of the children to suggest that in his family there is very fluent code-switching: *One minute they speak English, the next minute they speak Somali.*

**RELIGION**

Religion plays a major part in the lives of two of the children: Jamila and Mamoon. Jamila spends long hours at the mosque, which involves a considerable amount of text study. She says: *In one year I finished ten books.* About the Koran, she says: *You’re supposed to take lots of care of it. It’s supposed to be above you, above your legs. I have to go somewhere else to read. I go to this lady’s house.* What is striking, however, is not so much the children’s affiliation to their own religions as the strong sense of respect and awareness of other religions and belief systems and, on the part of the girls in particular, an interest in biblical stories. These are frequently the reading of choice when asked to bring something along to read and talk about for our weekly conversations. Related to this is an awareness of discrimination more widely, against people of different faiths or colour. Varsha at one point mentions ‘skin colour’ as one factor in prejudice. I am told on one occasion that I should have another girl in our conversation group because I have not got a Sikh represented. And the language used to express respect for diversity is quite sophisticated. Varsha says: *They’ve got different beliefs.* I include here a fragment of a conversation that arises in the context of the girls’ interest in reading biblical stories.

\begin{verbatim}
C: Do you think it’s important to read about other religions?
J: Yes, it’s very important.
C: Why’s that?
J: … it’s sad to be, like, rude to somebody … Miss, when you learn about other religions it’s good when you grow up, Miss … teach you to respect other religions … and you shouldn’t be racist.
V: Respect all religions.
\end{verbatim}

**POLITICS**

Both Mamoon and Essa are very well informed about current affairs and topical news stories, both international and domestic. They are very animated about the current conflict in the Middle East when we look though papers and magazines, such as *Time Magazine.* Do you know why they are fighting, I ask? Mamoon answers: *For their land. My Mum told me.*
This wider interest extends beyond the situation in the Middle East to UK and US politics. Both boys talk knowledgeably about the British general election that took place during the year of the study in 2001, and the US elections of the same year, about which Essa shows a remarkable degree of detailed knowledge. They have noticed the posters and placards, which are part of local hustings at election time in the immediate community. They note who their parents like or dislike in national politics. Essa on one occasion says: My dad likes Charles Kennedy. He’s really impressive. The children’s talk is mediated both by the texts I have brought, such as the manifestos of the three main political parties and local and national newspapers, and, importantly, by the boys’ experiences of talk at home about political issues.

B The children in conversation around the Literacy Hour class

In a related paper (Wallace forthcoming) I discuss the children’s demeanour and behaviour within the Literacy Hour class. I note, for instance, how the two girls regularly sit together near the back of the class, preferring to work in close synchrony – even reading aloud texts in harmony. Their writing, meanwhile, focuses on mechanical aspects such as neatness, with a great deal of rubbing out. Mamoon also is seated on the periphery of the classroom, rarely putting himself forward to respond to questions, while Essa is an active and confident member of the class. In contrast to the others, he regularly volunteers responses and appears unabashed by failure. As my focus in this paper is on the children’s language and literacy repertoires more widely, I shall feature some examples of the children’s talk around text in our conversations, which, while triggered by the shared Literacy Hour experience, frequently went far beyond it.

‘Poaching’: Essa and Mamoon

The first conversation documented here arises when Essa describes how he learns new words through reading, itself, rather than consulting a dictionary. He then proceeds to a summary of part of the story he alludes to, which, it emerges, is from a book by Roald Dahl.

E: When I first started reading this book I didn’t know what the word meant, like poaching, but then I found out.

C: How did you find out?

M: Dictionary.

C: The book itself. Or a dictionary?
E: The book itself.

Essa goes on to elaborate:
E: In poaching there’s an art to it. You know, they’re catching pheasants – birds – and you can’t use a gun because the keepers will catch you in the woods so there has to be, you know, another way … So one of the method is – method number one – is, you know, get a horse hair out of a horse’s tail and then you put, like, you get the string and you put raisins through them so that when the pheasants eat one you pull it and then just grab it. I like method number two cos method number one’s complicated, so number two is a type of a paper cone and then you put glue inside it and you stick the raisins on it and then the pheasant sticks his head into it and then it gets stuck and his eyes are glued to the paper and they just stand there.

C: (to Mamoon) Do you know what pheasants are?
M: No.
C: (to Essa) Could you explain what pheasants are?
E: They’re some type of pigeons – birds. They’re related to the bird family. A type of bird.
C: It’s a rather beautiful bird.
E: Yes, it’s red and green.

We see how Essa recontextualises the narrative he recalls from private reading for pleasure to produce academic, school-specific register. In this way he shows considerable skill in bridging the gap from home reading to school discourse. At the same time he draws on a classificatory system of the kind which Bernstein claims is typical of middle-class rather than working-class children (Bernstein 1996: 33–4), in talking of ‘type of pigeons’ and ‘related to the bird family’.

In the two vignettes below we see the children talking about or enacting private literacy practices. While the potential exists for the kind of recontextualising (cf Bernstein 1996) that Essa achieves so effortlessly, the skill evidenced by Mamoon, Jamila and Varsha is less readily available as cultural capital for schooling.

**Bedtime story writing: Varsha and Jamila**

C: Do you ever do any writing yourself? Do you write stories yourself?
V: Yeh, at home in my note pad.
C: What kind of stories would you write?
J: I write – I got a pad.
C: Let Varsha finish. What sort of stories do you write?
V: Ghost stories.
C: And what sort of stories do you write, Jamila?
J: Miss, do you know everyday when I’m, like, not sleeping but I go
every day nine o’clock to bed cos my house is just past the road and I
go nine o’clock to bed and at eight o’clock I start writing. I got a little
pad – a book and, Miss, I write ghost stories, creepy stories and, Miss,
I go to my dad and then if he’s nice he gives me money to buy stuff …
a … an …?
C: How long are these stories you write?
J: About … just a page or something – no, like two or two and a half
pages.
V: I like to write my stories. If they’re ones that I like, really like, then I
write about five or six pages. If I don’t like the story I just make a short
ending.
C: You don’t show these to Miss H at school, do you? No. Why not?
J: I don’t …? (laughs)
C: These are just stories for you that you write for yourself?
J: Miss, at home, yes. If I just write my story and I don’t have time to rub
it out … I just do it exciting and then at the end I just do a quick
poem and I do the blurb next to the poem.
V: Yeh, blurb at the back, I do it. I get my papers and when it is at the
back I don’t do a picture – I just do the blurb.
J: When my sister cries I have to read it to her.
C: So you write a story that you read to your sister.
J: Yeh, I write and then she – I say, ‘I don’t have time to read it cos I’m
gonna get late for bed’ but she just cries, ‘I want to listen to it’.

Here the children are talking about personal, contextually embedded
literacy events. Jamila is writing the stories for herself; it is her sister who
demands they be read aloud to her, showing, incidentally, the role of
siblings as co-constructors of literacy events described by Gregory (1996).
Second, although Jamila, of all the children, most readily moves between
her first language, Pashto, and English, she chooses to write privately in
English, not her mother tongue. English was, it will be recalled, vetoed
in the home; thus it may serve as a private language in that domain of use.
That is, there is not a readily predictable home/school differentiation of
function by language. What is striking, in the light of the small amount
of writing ever produced by the girls in the Literacy Hour class, is the enjoy-
ment of writing at length, and liberation from the chore of ‘rubbing out’
which occupies much classroom time, as noted above.
**Limericks: Essa and Mamoon**

C: Have you ever heard of a limerick?
E: Yeh.
C: Do you know any limericks?
E: About a funny poem, I think.
C: They are always funny … They usually begin in a particular way. So if you were saying a limerick about me you might say, ‘There was a young lady from Ealing, who walked upsidedown on the ceiling, and then she fell down …’
E: She fell down because she wasn’t a human being …
C: There’s got to be a particular kind of rhythm. You have to have two rhymes in the middle. If we were doing a limerick about Mamoon, what might we say?
M: There was a person called Mamoon who saw a baboon.
C: Who swallowed a baboon?
M: Who saw …
C: Who saw a baboon.
E: There was a boy called Mamoon who saw a baboon, he liked him so much but then he found out that the monkey was Dutch.
C: There was a young boy called Mamoon, who accidentally swallowed a baboon.
E: He liked that meal so much.
C: (repeats) He liked the meal so much.
E: He found out that the baboon was Dutch.
M: No, and then he found out it was his lunch!
C: Do you know what syllables are?
M: Yes, it's like in a poem.
C: If I say ‘Mamoon’, how many syllables are there in the word ‘Mamoon’?
C: So, you’ve got to have the same number of syllables. So if we had, there was a young boy called Mamoon, who …
M: I’ve got a new one.
C: Just let me finish this one. He had it for lunch but then …
E: No, he liked it so much and …
C: He liked it so much …
M: Then ate another lunch.
Here all three participants are active in the creation of limericks. I move out of pedagogic mode, actually saying to Mamoon, ‘just let me finish this one’, as we compete for turns and contributions. It is noticeable that this is a performance in which, atypically, Mamoon outshines Essa. He initiates creatively and is able to draw on some Literacy Hour metalanguage, such as syllables, to enhance his literacy performance by gaining understanding that a regular number of syllables will help to produce the limerick rhythm. This is very different from Mamoon’s characteristically diffident, even silent, stance in class. We see some evidence here of what Hammond and Gibbons describe as the ‘joint participation in tasks where all participants are actively involved in negotiating meaning’ (2001: 12). We also see some evidence of what Philip Pullman, the children’s author, in a recent challenge to the prescriptions of the national curriculum (of which the National Literacy Strategy is a major part), calls the ‘joy of fooling around with words’ (2005: 22).

DISCUSSION: MAXIMISING RESOURCES

Essa has made the breakthrough to schooled literacy, drawing largely on his personal resources as an enthusiastic reader and writer. Although the other children are, so far, less successful in the formal schooled situation, their ‘off task talk’, largely invisible in the classroom, reveals rich linguistic and cultural resources. These represent pedagogic potential both for themselves and their L1 or L2 peers. We can sum this up in terms of both knowledge and skill.

Knowledge

I write at a time of growing emphasis in the UK on citizenship education and teaching political literacy. John Crace, in the Guardian newspaper (2005: 6), records that a major speech was given on January 17 on citizenship by the chief inspector of schools, David Bell. At the same time a recent poll, carried out to coincide with this, found that only one in ten 14 to 16 year olds know who Charles Kennedy is (the leader of Britain’s Liberal Democratic Party). It will be recalled that Kennedy was the favoured choice for Prime Minister of Essa’s father. The two boys in the case study, both younger than this age group polled, had a very high level of knowledge and interest about political matters. It is impossible to speculate how typical this is of minority families in general, but it raises the possibility that such children would be able to make a particularly strong contribution to citizenship classes. The girls, perhaps conforming to gender expectations, were less knowledgeable about politics but showed intense interest in Holocaust Week, which took place during my observations in the school.
Skill

While Essa’s effective display of the explanation genre in his ‘poaching’ account shows him assembling all the key features of the genre to include register-specific language, the other children need more prompting. However, Mamoon proves himself a skilful creator of limericks, even though this particular poetic sub-genre makes an official appearance in the National Literacy Strategy only in Year 6. Jamila demonstrates a skill that makes no appearance at all in the National Literacy Strategy, that of spontaneous translation. It takes exceptional skill to perform in this manner. Yet this is a talent that is liable to go unnoticed in the classroom where such linguistic dexterity is typically under-valued.

Conclusion: Some implications for practice

I shall sum these up under creativity, cultural resources and language awareness.

Creativity. The four children in my study all responded well to opportunities to be creative with language, as we see from the ‘limerick’ episode. Indeed, it may be that children from multilingual environments, who are therefore more language aware, are more open to linguistic creativity and play. As the Literacy Hour opens up to the need to offer children richer creative possibilities, as is currently being proposed, the resources of advanced bilingual learners may come to the fore.

Cultural resources. Second, the children’s diverse cultural practices and personal histories might be engaged with more fully, not so as to exoticise but so as to acknowledge the kind of empathy and understanding which arises from the experience of difference and marginalisation. The intense interest in religion suggests not that schools should focus on specific faiths such as Islam but that we provide opportunities to engage more widely with matters of faith and belief, across the curriculum. This was also suggested in the case of the boys’ knowledge of contemporary current affairs, both domestically and internationally.

Language awareness. Finally, the children show a high degree of language awareness, so that even if all are not skilled bilinguals like Jamila, they are aware of what symbolises and accompanies language choice to a greater extent than mainstream children. In this sense the children represent a challenge to the monoglot ethos, which assumes a monolingual, usually English-speaking, world. The notion of variability of language is a feature of the National Literacy Strategy, though under-emphasised in many classrooms. It is undoubtedly potentially valuable for literacy development and a notion that is particularly relevant to bilingual children.
In short, I have hoped to show through the vignettes of four children in one London school that, while much educational discourse continues to view EAL children as either invisible – just like us – or different in problematic ways, minority ethnic and bilingual children bring a rich background of knowledge and cultural resources to schooling. These could be more directly acknowledged and built upon not only within the Literacy Hour but across other school subjects to develop a curriculum that both reflects and takes full advantage of the diversity in contemporary urban schools.

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