Multilingualism in primary schools

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Introduction

More people in the world speak two or more languages than those who speak only one (Grosjean 2010). Bilingualism, therefore, is the norm. Yet surprisingly, when it comes to educating bilingual pupils, many different educational programmes fall short. In this chapter, the focus is on a group of children who are educated through the medium of a majority language at school that is different from their home language. These linguistically diverse children have a home language that is in the minority relative to the language of the wider society, and hence are also often referred to as minority language learners. I will use the term ‘linguistically diverse’ (LD) in this chapter in an attempt to avoid any potential pejorative implications which might be associated with the term ‘minority’. There will be a specific focus on literacy skills in this chapter because a number of studies have demonstrated that some children from LD backgrounds tend to underperform academically relative to their native speaking (or majority language speaking) peers (e.g., Strand et al. 2015). Literacy skills are paramount in academic achievement since children need well-developed reading comprehension skills to access the curriculum, particularly in later primary and secondary school. Additionally, in order to demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum, children need to be able to use their skills in writing effectively. Many children from LD backgrounds tend to have difficulties with reading comprehension and some key aspects of writing. In the UK, for example, a recent analysis of student achievement across the formally assessed levels of education has demonstrated that overall children from linguistically diverse backgrounds consistently underperform relative to monolingual peers on measures of reading (Strand et al. 2015). The good news is that as educators we can do something about it – to try and ameliorate the language, literacy and academic outcomes in this growing population of children around the world.

Historical perspectives

Increased migration and globalization of commerce has meant (among other things) that more people are living in contexts where their native or home languages are not the majority
language of the community. A 2016 European Research Council report indicated that in 2014, 3.8 million people had immigrated into one of the 28 European Union (EU) member states, from both in and outside the EU (Eurostat 2016). Additionally, at the time of writing, there is an ongoing international refugee crisis. This means that despite the fact that some countries have expressed a concern about the numbers of immigrants entering their respective countries (e.g., immigration was one of the main concerns behind the UK’s vote to leave the EU in June 2016), there are few signs that the rate of immigration is going to slow. The UK has consisted of multiple cultural groups and different identities throughout its recorded history. The first ‘Britons’ were an ethnically mixed group of individuals retreating from the ice of the Ice Age – and throughout the ages Britain has always ‘absorbed’ peoples (often from invaders), resulting in a heterogeneous group of diverse peoples (James and Rigby 1997). The case of ancient Britain is but one example. Therefore, the reality of multiple ethnicities and cultural groups living together is an old story and one that has consistently demonstrated how valuable immigration can be to many aspects of society (Dustmann and Frattini 2014).

In 2016, increased immigration has meant that for many countries, a significant proportion of children are being educated in a language that is not their home language. In England, approximately 20% of the primary school population consists of children for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL) (DFE 2016), and in the USA, in the 2012–2013 academic year there were 4.85 million EAL children (Ruiz Soto et al. 2015) – referred to as English Language Learners (ELL) in the US context. These numbers constitute a significant proportion of the school population, and therefore, warrant a close examination of what we can do to ensure that their educational experiences are enabling them to achieve their full potential.

It is important, first, however, to be very clear about who LD learners are and what their linguistic backgrounds are likely to be. The LD population is highly diverse. Just because a child is from a LD background does not mean that they will struggle linguistically or academically. There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that children from linguistically diverse backgrounds not only do as well as their native-speaking peers but often can exceed their peers’ performance. For example, in Strand et al. (2015), EAL pupils were shown to outperform their non-EAL peers at the GCSE examinations on mathematics and modern foreign language. In Scotland, immigrant students also achieve at higher levels on average than their non-immigrant peers in mathematics (OECD 2015). Strand et al. (2015) further demonstrated that ethnicity is a major factor in pupil performance, where some children tagged as EAL in England’s National Pupil Database are not only matched to non-EAL peers but consistently outperform them. Additionally, in England, the children who perform the least well in academic achievement are not those with EAL but are boys from white working class backgrounds (Sammons et al. 2015). These findings highlight that being from a linguistically and culturally diverse background does not a priori mean that the child will struggle academically. There is an international trend, however, illustrating that EAL pupils often do underperform academically relative to non-EAL pupils as identified in international achievement studies such as PISA (Program for International Student Achievement) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Study) (OECD 2012, 2013). There is a real concern, therefore, that many children from ethnic minority backgrounds are not achieving their full academic potential. However, this concern must be tempered by the knowledge that many children from diverse linguistic backgrounds who are emergent bilinguals are at the top of performance scales across a range of subjects around the world.

The other issue that must be noted is that there are many variables that impact whether a child does well at school, not only whether they have another language spoken in the home.
Part of the reason for the heterogeneity in the LD learner population described above will be due to the other factors known to predict academic achievement such as socioeconomic status (SES), level of parents’ education, exposure to books (in the home) and so on (e.g., Sammons et al. 2015). Discussing all of these issues in detail is beyond the scope of this chapter, but again, it is worth remembering that linguistic difficulties may not be the (sole) reason for why a child might underachieve at school.

A final point to make relates to the degree of bilingualism of LD pupils in schools. First, bilingualism as a concept is a difficult one to define. Being bilingual can present as a range of different linguistic skills, where individual bilinguals may or may not be bilingual across all four domains of language (speaking, listening, reading and writing). Furthermore, we know from research investigating language dominance that the notion of a completely balanced bilingual with equal skills across all linguistic domains is elusive at best (see Murphy 2014 for discussion). In the context of the discussion in this chapter, the term ‘bilingual’ refers simply to the notion that a given pupil will have another language in their repertoire. What it does not signify is the nature of that bilingualism (i.e., how proficient the child might be across linguistic skills and within a given language), though this issue is clearly important. Given that LD pupils have another language in the home, usually present from birth, children from linguistically diverse backgrounds have many of the necessary prerequisites in place to become fluently bilingual (i.e., with high levels of proficiency in two languages). The reality, however, for many children from minority language backgrounds is that they don’t actually end up becoming bilingual at all. This is because they often undergo a ‘language shift’ (see Murphy 2014) when they begin to receive formal language arts instruction at school in the majority language. Indeed, many LD pupils do not receive any instruction in or about their home language – unless they participate in a complementary or ‘Saturday’ school. Even attending such schools, however, LD children typically become dominant in the majority language and, given that many of them fail to develop adequate proficiency in their home language, often do not end up becoming fluently bilingual. Montrul (2008; 2009; 2010 and elsewhere) refers to this phenomenon as a case of ‘incomplete acquisition’ where due to limitations in the child’s linguistic environment, they do not go on to completely acquire their home language. This means then that while children from such backgrounds have the potential to become fluent bilinguals, ultimately many do not.

In summary, children from LD backgrounds have a home language that is not the language of the wider society, and importantly, is not the language in which they are educated. This means that for many such children, when they begin formal schooling, their knowledge of the majority language is likely to be under-developed relative to their monolingual peers. However, many LD children experience a language shift from dominance in the home language to dominance in the majority L2 as they progress through their respective educational experiences provided through the medium of the majority language. Some of the educational consequences of this comparable lack of linguistic skill in the majority language when children commence formal education are discussed below.

Critical issues and topics

There is a wide range of areas of critical interest in children from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Given the focus of this chapter is on literacy, some of the issues which are associated with the development of literacy will be highlighted in this section. It is important to note however, that this discussion does not represent an exhaustive account.
One of the first critical issues was mentioned in the preceding section of this chapter – namely, to what extent are children from LD backgrounds bilingual, and to what extent educational provision supports their bilingual development. As explained above, many children experience the language shift which often means that the children would not really be easily identified as ‘bilingual’ in the later school years if the development of their home language is not supported. Related to this issue is whether and to what extent supporting the home language has manifest positive consequences on their majority language development and academic achievement. Cummins (2017 and elsewhere) and indeed many other researchers (in the UK, for example, see Conteh and Brock 2011) have for some time noted how important it is to support the home language of LD pupils in order for them to (a) reach their full potential linguistically and take advantage of their emerging bilingualism, (b) to help and support the development of the majority (L2), (c) to take advantage of the common underlying proficiency – that is, the underlying linguistic and cognitive system that is shared across all languages an individual will learn (Cummins 1991) and, importantly, (d) to valorise the LD pupils’ linguistic identity and culture. These views are more recently associated with the notion of ‘translanguaging’ in the classroom (García and Li Wei 2014), where it is believed that allowing, and indeed encouraging, children from LD backgrounds to use both their languages as they engage with classroom-based activities is advantageous. However, a recent systematic review examining the empirical evidence which has directly examined use of the child’s L1 in the majority language classroom focusing on L2 outcomes has revealed rather mixed results: where some studies revealed no advantage for using the L1, others found advantages, and still others reported lower L2 performance having used the L1 (Chalmers 2017). Future work is necessary, therefore, to examine this issue more critically in the research literature across a range of different educational contexts to further our understanding of the role the L1 can play.

A further related critical issue is the role of the teacher and teacher education. In some contexts where children from linguistically diverse backgrounds all share the same home language (parts of the USA, for example, where many children come from Spanish-speaking homes/communities), teachers can benefit from specific training in how to support their LD pupils. Indeed, there are bilingual education programmes specifically aimed at supporting both languages for bi- or multilingual and monolingual students together (see Murphy 2014 for a discussion). In other contexts, such as the UK, there are so many different languages represented in the LD population that language-specific pedagogy is difficult to develop. Furthermore, it is a reality that the population of pupils in schools is increasingly multilingual, yet in many parts of the world, teacher education speaks to a monolingual norm. The consequence of this approach is then that when a teacher meets pupils from a range of linguistic/cultural backgrounds, they may be (and in many cases are) ill-prepared to meet the needs of all the pupils in their classroom. It is important, therefore, that teacher education programmes around the world, but especially in contexts like the UK with a great deal of linguistic diversity, focus more on developing evidence-based pedagogical approaches which enable teachers to support all their pupils, regardless of their background.

The issue of academic achievement in children from linguistically diverse backgrounds is also directly related to their literacy development. Children from immigrant backgrounds often underperform relative to their non-immigrant peers in international comparative studies of student achievement, and children from minority language backgrounds are typically overrepresented in remedial support programmes (Paradis et al. 2011). For many countries participating in the PISA studies, there is a large gap between first- and second-generation immigrant pupils and non-immigrant pupils on reading and mathematics performance.
International studies such as PISA are, however, somewhat limited as to what they reveal about the language and literacy achievement of young emergent bilingual learners. Fortunately, a considerable amount of research has been carried out in various contexts, most notably the USA and Canada, examining the performance of English Language Learners (ELLs). Specifically, research has been focused on understanding literacy development, as this is such a critical variable underpinning academic achievement. I turn to this research below.

Current contributions and research

Reading skill in minority language learners

In Strand et al. (2015), data on children’s reading performance was compared across the major stages of schooling in England for all children tagged as EAL in the National Pupil Database (i.e., regardless of how proficient they are in English and whether they are first, second or later generations of ethnic minorities). They found that at all levels, children with EAL underperformed on reading outcomes relative to non-EAL pupils. The gap was widest at the very earliest stages of education (when children are at the beginning of their formal educational experience) and narrowed considerably by the final stages of secondary school (GCSE), but even then EAL children’s reading scores were consistently lower than those of non-EAL pupils. Many studies have identified that LD pupils lag behind majority-speaking peers on measures of reading comprehension (e.g., Hutchinson et al. 2003; Burgoyne et al. 2009; Burgoyne et al. 2011) and that some EAL pupils have similar reading comprehension skills as monolingual children with language weaknesses (Bowyer-Crane et al. 2016). The answer as to why this is the case lies in understanding the skills that underpin reading performance. One of the most widely cited models of reading, particularly with relevance to educational contexts, is Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) Simple View of Reading. The basic idea behind this model is that there are two fundamental components to reading: word-decoding skills and language comprehension skills. Let’s first look at word-decoding skills in pupils with EAL.

Word decoding is the ability to map sounds of language (phonemes) onto the letters (graphemes) and is commonly measured by asking children to read single words out loud or even to provide pseudo-words for children to read. If a child can successfully map phonemes on to graphemes, then their single word (and pseudo-word) reading accuracy will be high because they will be able to sound out words accurately and demonstrate their mastery of the basic phonotactic properties of their language. In order to be good at word decoding, children also need to have well developed phonological and syntactic awareness processes (Jongejan et al. 2007), and research has demonstrated that children who have difficulties in these areas also have difficulties with reading comprehension (Kame’enui and Simmons 2001). Phonological awareness (PA) in particular is the knowledge of the sound structure of a language and the ability to analyse and manipulate those sound units – the metalinguistic knowledge of a language (Burt, Holm, and Dodd 1999; Cheung, Chen, Lai, Wong, and Hills 2001; Jongejan et al. 2007). PA includes the linguistic features associated with grapheme and phoneme correspondence (GPC) knowledge (decoding via matching letters and sounds), extending beyond speech sounds into reading, writing and pronunciation. PA is gradually and implicitly acquired through the oral development of a language and the ability to differentiate between sounds and segment the speech stream into appropriate words and chunks for comprehension. PA is very important in the development of decoding skills.
at the word level during the emergent stages of literacy (Lindsey, Manis, and Bailey 2003, p. 482). Explicit teaching of PA (e.g., through GPC instruction) is commonly associated with the beginning of formalised schooling; with the introduction of strategic phonics and literacy teaching.

The development of PA and literacy skills has been examined in children who are linguistically diverse, using standardised and experimental measures, comparing LD and non-LD pupils, and surveying home language use and SES. As mentioned above, for many LD students, the point when they begin formalised schooling constitutes their first major and sustained exposure to the majority language, which can then mean they might not have enough knowledge of the majority language to support their emerging literacy skills due to the context of the majority language-only educational system (Paradis, Emmerzael, and Sorenson Duncan 2010). The role of English language proficiency has been repeatedly demonstrated to be one of the most powerful predictors of an EAL child's later academic achievement (Whiteside et al. 2016; Strand and Demie 2005). LD children often have fewer opportunities for the ‘auditory discrimination of phonemes’ (i.e., they might have less experience with the majority language input), consequently, LD pupils may experience a slower rate of acquisition of GPCs (Verhoeven and Vermeer 2006, p. 726). However, other researchers have suggested that bilingual children have a more advanced phonological sensitivity relative to monolingual children given they have learned (or are learning) two languages. Bilingualism is argued to improve some general cognitive skills during L2 learning due to this dual language processing ‘advantage’ (Diaz 1985; Diaz and Klinger; Bialystok 2002). This advantage may be responsible for the fact that in many studies LD pupils have not been found to have difficulties in decoding skills relative to monolingual peers (Jean and Geva 2009; Lesaux et al. 2008; Lipka and Siegel 2007; Nakamoto et al. 2007; Verhoeven 1990, 2000). There is strong evidence then that children from LD backgrounds tend not to have any difficulties with the decoding aspect of reading skills. If LD children tend to underperform on reading but do not have difficulties in decoding, what then underpins this weaker reading performance in pupils from linguistically diverse backgrounds?

LD children tend to lag behind their majority-speaking peers in measures of reading comprehension despite comparable skills in single word reading accuracy. For example, in studying the development of phonological awareness and literacy skills, Hutchinson, Whiteley, Smith, and Connors (2003) focused on EAL pupils and non-EAL students in North-West England (i.e., bilinguals vs monolingual pupils). Reading accuracy, comprehension and fluency were tested in years two, three, four, and six. Phonological skills of non-word reading, spoonerisms, alliteration, rhyme, rapid naming of pictures and numbers and fluency were tested with the Phonological Assessment Battery (a standardised test of phonological knowledge and skills developed in the UK). The EAL learners had higher scores than their non-EAL peers on accuracy and fluency; however, the non-EAL students scored higher on measures of reading comprehension. Therefore, despite having mastered phonological processing skills, EAL pupils were nonetheless behind in reading comprehension. One of the main reasons put forward for these lags in reading comprehension in EAL pupils is due to under-developed semantic representations (vocabulary knowledge) – the ‘language comprehension’ aspect of the Simple View of Reading model (Gough and Tunmer 1986).

Many studies in the L1 domain, and increasingly in studies of young bilingual pupils, have demonstrated the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension (Nation et al. 2010; Nation et al. 2004; Nation and Snowling 2004). Studies have also shown that children from LD backgrounds tend to have smaller vocabularies in the majority language than their monolingual peers (Bialystok et al. 2010; Cameron 2002). More recent work
has further highlighted the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension in LD children. Babayiğit (2012) recruited EAL and non-EAL primary school students in England and administered a range of vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension assessments. Even after 4 years of formal schooling in England the pupils with EAL tended to underperform relative to non-EAL students on measures of listening and reading comprehension and oral language (i.e., vocabulary). Additionally, vocabulary was a significant predictor of performance on reading comprehension tasks, again replicating previous studies. This research underscores the importance of developing vocabulary knowledge in children with EAL and helps us understand the importance of vocabulary knowledge in developing reading comprehension skills.

In summary, the reading research has demonstrated that children from LD backgrounds tend to have no difficulty with the decoding aspects of reading skills, since their ability to map graphemes on to phonemes and single word reading tasks is either the same or even superior to majority-speaking peers. However, for many (but not all) LD pupils, vocabulary knowledge is less well developed than for their peers, which contributes to comparatively weaker performance in reading comprehension tasks.

Writing skill in minority language learners

The other aspect of literacy skill is writing, and there has been far less research on the writing abilities of LD pupils than on reading. Of course writing is absolutely fundamental for all pupils in order to demonstrate their understanding of different aspects of the curriculum (Dockrell et al. 2014). Writing is also a particular challenge for many pupils, regardless of whether they have English as an additional language or not. Teachers often report that finding effective ways of teaching and assessing writing is difficult (Dockrell et al. 2014). Given how important it is, it is somewhat surprising that less attention has been paid to writing, particularly as reading and writing are mutually supportive (Graham and Hebert 2011).

Writing, like reading, is generally believed to include knowledge and skill across a range of areas which include working memory, handwriting and spelling and executive functions (Berninger and Amtmann 2003; Berninger and Winn 2006). As with reading, writing takes time to develop and is constrained at the earliest stages by the child’s ability to adequately transcribe text onto the page. However, once the child has mastered transcription skills, s/he can then develop higher-level skills such as generating the appropriate content for texts, and organizing and articulating this content in an effective and appropriate manner.

While there is comparatively less research on writing than reading, and less research on the writing development in LD pupils, there have been a few studies which suggest that there are some areas which challenge some LD students. For example, Cameron and Besser (2004) compared the writing performance of EAL pupils in England against that of their non-EAL peers. In particular they focused on two genres: fiction and persuasive writing. Their main findings suggested that EAL pupils were nine percentage points behind their non-EAL peers on the national writing test at Key Stage 2 (end of primary-level education in England). Furthermore, in analyzing their compositions, Cameron and Besser found that the EAL pupils were more likely to make grammatical errors than their non-EAL peers and were less likely to use complex syntax. More recent work examining the writing skills of EAL pupils has also found interesting differences between EAL and non-EAL peers. Babayiğit (2015) examined the writing abilities of EAL pupils in Year 5 (aged 10–11) in England through the administration of a standardised task which required children to write two paragraphs in response to a given prompt (e.g., ’my favourite game is. . . ’). There
were no differences between the two groups on spelling accuracy (a finding consistent with previous research), but non-EAL pupils had higher scores on measures of holistic quality, organization, vocabulary and compositional fluency. These findings are also consistent with other work which compared EAL and non-EAL pupils’ writing skills. In Murphy et al. (2015), children in Year 5 in England (aged 10–11) were compared on their narrative writing skills. The two groups of children were matched on their English vocabulary and syntactic knowledge. Nevertheless, the EAL pupils still had lower scores than the non-EAL pupils on higher-level writing processes such as organization of ideas – despite the fact that they actually had higher nonverbal IQ scores. These studies together suggest that just as in reading, LD students tend to lag behind native-speaking peers on key aspects of writing – particularly the higher-level features. Unfortunately, it is precisely on these higher-level features of writing that students are required to do well on academic assessments.

One method that seems to have had some success in improving EAL students’ writing has been the genre approach. Pioneered in Australia but taken up in other countries, notably in South East Asia (Derewianka 2015), the genre approach, which is derived from systemic functional linguistics (see Martin 2009) explicitly teaches students about text structures and how these are achieved. While some commentators have dismissed the approach as reductionist (Martin 2009), others have noted that the approach provides EAL students with the tools they need to ‘successfully write in the second language in the context of school’ (Brisk 2011, p. 53).

In summary, children from diverse language backgrounds tend to be as good or better than their native-speaking (monolingual) peers on lower-level aspects of reading (decoding) and writing (transcription), yet they tend to have difficulties on higher-level aspects of reading (comprehension) and writing (organisational structure and content). For both reading and writing, vocabulary has been shown to be an important component underpinning LD students’ performance.

Cognitive benefits of bilingualism

The sections above have demonstrated that while LD students constitute a heterogeneous population, international studies of academic achievement, together with specific studies examining reading and writing skills, have demonstrated that many LD pupils lag behind their non-LD peers on academic achievement, reading comprehension and higher-level features of writing. One of the reasons why this pattern is particularly frustrating is that many researchers have argued that bilingual children should benefit cognitively from being bilingual – though this is being hotly debated in the literature at present. The idea that becoming bilingual might be cognitively advantageous is not new. Peal and Lambert (1962) argued that bilingual children (English/French bilinguals in Montréal, Canada) perform better on verbal and nonverbal IQ measures, suggesting that using two languages results in mental ‘flexibility’ and more diversified mental skills. Peal and Lambert (1962) also showed that the bilingual children in their study had higher scores in academic achievement as well. It should be noted here that the type of bilinguals in this early study examining cognitive advantages of bilingualism were quite different from the LD pupils in focus in this chapter because they were children learning and using both English and French in an English/French bilingual city – in other words, they were not minority language learners, but spoke the two official majority languages of Canada. There are a range of studies arguing that bilingual children do have cognitive advantages on a range of different skills such as concept formation, classification, creativity and analogical reasoning skills (Ben-Zeev
1977; Diaz 1983; Hakuta et al. 1987). Other researchers have argued that bilinguals might be better vocabulary learners as a result of approaching vocabulary learning more flexibly than monolingual children. For example, Marinova-Todd (2012) compared bilingual and monolingual children in Grade 3 (between eight and nine years old) on a word learning task and showed that bilinguals were more successful at deducing novel word meanings than monolinguals – even when the bilinguals had smaller vocabulary sizes. Other researchers have argued bilinguals have advantages over monolinguals in Theory of Mind – the ability to interpret other people’s behaviours in terms of their mental states (Geotz 2003; Kovács 2009). Arguably, however, one of the areas that many researchers have more recently been investigating is whether bilingual children have advantages on executive function skills.

Executive function is a general term describing cognitive skills that are at the core of all human cognition, including attention, selection and inhibition processes. Bialystok (1991) claimed that young bilingual children have superior selective attention skills relative to monolinguals and since then, a number of researchers have been attempting to identify the extent to which bilinguals have superior executive control (see, e.g., Bialystok and Barac 2013; Bialystok et al. 2010). However, the findings from these studies is at best mixed, with a number of researchers finding different patterns of results (e.g., Gathercole et al. [2010]) where not all bilingual children show the same cognitive advantages across similar tasks. It is not within the scope of this chapter to delve deeply into this important area of research, but clearly there is more work to be done to resolve the issue of the extent to which there are cognitive advantages for bilingual children on executive function skills.

One area where there does seem to be relatively consistent evidence that bilinguals have advantages over monolinguals relates to metalinguistic awareness – an important predictor of literacy skills. Metalinguistic knowledge refers to the ability to go beyond the meaning of a language and focus on its underlying structure (Bialystok and Barac 2013). Bialystok (1991, 2001) notes, however, that these advantages are not uniformly manifest across all tasks. There is a fair degree of variability in terms of the kinds of bilinguals that different researchers have recruited into their studies (i.e., whether they are bilinguals in a bilingual environment like Montréal, or minority language learners like EAL children in England), the extent to which they are proficient in both their languages and the nature of the tasks used. This variability no doubt has led to some of the variability in the research findings, but the general pattern does seem to suggest bilingual children (in general) have some advantages (see Murphy 2014 for a review). This could be one of the reasons why LD pupils tend to do well on single word reading tasks as described above, because of more well-developed phonological awareness, allowing them to efficiently decode words. A possible advantage in metalinguistic awareness, however, does not seem to help them much with reading comprehension skills, and this is where the importance of vocabulary and supporting vocabulary learning in classrooms comes to the fore.

**Recommendations for practise**

As demonstrated elsewhere in this chapter, vocabulary knowledge underpins reading comprehension and writing skill, and children from diverse language learning backgrounds often have smaller vocabularies than majority language speaking children. This finding indicates that more focus could be spent on supporting vocabulary development in the classroom. This is particularly relevant given other research which has identified that for some forms of complex (multiword) vocabulary learners may be unaware of the fact that they do not
understand the meaning of these items (see Martinez and Murphy 2011; Smith and Murphy 2015). For learners who have sparse vocabulary knowledge and who need to learn lots of words quickly to catch up, explicit teaching of some carefully chosen words can be very productive and efficient (see Murphy and Unthiah 2015 for a review of interventions on vocabulary development for LD pupils). Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that words can be easily learned from context. Word learning takes time, and multiple exposures are needed to really enable learners to solidify the meaning, to acquire precisely the form, meaning and use of a word and to ensure it is remembered (i.e., learned). Word meanings are often very complex. For example the word ‘dog’ is a relatively simple word, and easy to learn. However, there are extended meanings of the word ‘dog’, for example, *His problems continued to dog him* and extended meanings are less likely to be known and understood by some English language learners. Students do not always know when they do not know a word, as has been demonstrated in research studies (Martinez and Murphy 2011; Smith and Murphy 2015), and hence for all of these reasons, some focus on explicit vocabulary teaching and learning in classrooms is warranted. Meaningful exposures, meaningful use, polysemy and structural analysis are all proven approaches to word learning and would benefit children from multilingual backgrounds (as indeed it would benefit all children).

**Future directions**

In many geopolitical contexts, the issue of how best to educate all of their student population has not yet been properly addressed and resolved. There are some educational programmes which have been shown to be particularly helpful for minority language learners, such as the two-way immersion (or dual language) programmes which were spearheaded in the USA (see Murphy 2014 for a review). In these programmes, LD learners are educated alongside their majority language speaking peers in both the minority and the majority language. These additive bilingual programmes aim to support proficiency in both languages, for both groups of children, and have been shown to be more successful than other traditional methods of education where minority language learners either receive no language arts instruction or only remedial support (August and Shanahan 2008). However, in many contexts with high degrees of linguistic diversity, such programmes are not feasible as there are far too many L1 backgrounds. In England, for example, there are over 360 different home languages represented by the EAL population. Which of these would a policy maker choose to implement in a two-way immersion model? For many educators, therefore, focusing efforts on finding the most effective ways to support vocabulary learning in classrooms will prove more fruitful. For researchers, in collaboration with educators, delving more deeply into the relationship between oral language (vocabulary) knowledge and literacy will help inform educational practice.

Roger Bacon is attributed with the quote that ‘Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom’. Given the discussion in this chapter we can ask to what extent this is accurate for children from linguistically diverse backgrounds. The selective review of research presented in this chapter demonstrates that many (but not all) learners from multilingual backgrounds are not walking through this door. Educational contexts have a powerful role in shaping children’s lives. Hence we need to more carefully consider the best ways to educate our multilingual children to ensure that they can take advantage of all the opportunities that being bilingual presents to them, and shift our thinking so that we no longer adopt a monolingual mindset in a multilingual world.
Further reading

   
   This is a now classic text in which Cummins outlines some of the main political and educational issues relevant for LD pupils. He references some of his main theories (e.g., Common Underlying Proficiency) in arguing that LD students should be afforded the opportunity (where possible) to be educated through the medium of their L1.


   A thorough examination of the construct of ‘translanguaging’ – using more than one language in the classroom – and why it might be useful.


   A very detailed and comprehensive summary of key research evidence carried out in the USA evaluating LD children’s language and academic achievement.


   A systematic review of intervention studies aimed at improving EAL students’ language and literacy outcomes. Many of these focus on vocabulary and offer ways of enhancing vocabulary knowledge in classrooms.

Related topics

*Classroom languages, contexts of learning, policies, research on learning outside the classroom*

Note

1 In England in 2016, for the first time pupils with EAL had an identical Attainment 8 (GCSE) score to the national average, they were more likely to achieve the English Baccalaureate than native-speaking peers and were more likely to make greater than average progress. However, this national picture obscures the reality that many sub-groups of pupils with EAL struggle in key ways. For further information see: https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/educational-outcomes-children-english-additional-language/

References


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