

A report on biliteracy in primary school education

For primary school education, developing pupils' reading and writing skills can be as important as developing oral comprehension and speaking. However, the best way to introduce reading and writing in English, as well as the ideal age to do so, and the timing of formal literacy compared to formal 'oracy' skills are matters of no small controversy.¹ Decision makers for schools with a bilingual curriculum will of course be faced with challenging decisions that monolingual schools have to take, as well as additional ones, including on the best way and age to introduce speaking, comprehension, writing and reading in the additional language.

Introducing bilingualism and bi-literacy

As regards speaking and comprehension, there is robust evidence from decades of educational practice and research in parts of Canada, Switzerland and other countries with bilingual education in support of three key points: (1) the earlier the additional language is introduced, the stronger the learning outcomes in that language; (2) development of the first language is not hindered by bilingualism in any way, in fact bilingualism bestows significant and robust benefits to thinking and reasoning skills as well as health in later life; (3) an early start alone is not a guarantee of success: the amount and quality of teaching are of paramount importance. Learning is most effective, and sustained engagement with the additional language is more guaranteed, in fun environments where there are natural opportunities to use the additional language and the teaching methods are age-appropriate.

As regards reading and writing skills, it is well established, e.g. in the French immersion system in Canada, that strong speaking and comprehension skills in the additional language lead to strong literacy in that language. Moreover, strong literacy in one language correlates with strong literacy in the other. These and other findings consistently dismiss any misconception of bi-literacy being 'too hard' or 'too complicated' for the young learner.

Bilingualism: an asset for reading and writing

A child exposed to two languages develops awareness that the mapping between a word form and its meaning is arbitrary, for example, there is no natural reason why a dog is called 'dog' in one language and 'chien' in another. They also develop acute sensitivity to the sounds of language, aided by the similarities and contrasts of the two languages they are exposed to. *Phonological awareness* is the term used by researchers to refer to bring these and other skills together. It is the meta-linguistic ability to understand that spoken words are comprised of small sound units; to detect, discriminate between, and manipulate these structural components; and to perform these skills independently of the meaning of words. For alphabetical languages, the process of reading and writing involves segmenting words into smaller units and mapping them to letters. Because good

¹ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence>

phonological awareness skills are essential for reading and writing in these languages, bilingual children are in an excellent position to embark on literacy.

An important aspect of phonological awareness is that it is a general skill that children develop with language, and as a result it is transferable from one language to another. A well-established body of research has found that (a) there is positive transfer between languages, that is strong phonological awareness in the dominant language leads to strong phonological awareness in the additional language, and (b) that there is positive back-transfer, that is, exposure and training in literacy in an additional language has a positive influence on literacy in the dominant language (on these points, specifically for English-French, see Comeau, Cormier, Grandmaison, & Lacroix, 1999)². As such, the bi-lingual child is well-equipped to develop literacy skills in both languages.

Bi-literacy: timing matters?

The ideal timing for the introduction of reading and writing skills in the bilingual curriculum however, is less well understood. In our review of the literature on the topic, the nature of the writing systems of the two languages is highlighted as decisive factor. In contexts where one language is alphabetic and one is not, e.g. in Korean-English primary schools in Korea, the overwhelming practice is to introduce first reading and writing in the language that is likely to be dominant. This strategy offers pupils the opportunity to establish their skills in the writing system of the dominant language before they are exposed to another system which differs significantly in its principles.

When it comes to bi-literacy in two languages with similar writing systems, e.g. two alphabetic languages such as English and French, there is a tendency for early introduction of literacy in both languages. Our review of the literature did not find clear evidence on the optimal timing, e.g. we did not find studies that compared the outcomes of pupils introduced to literacy in both languages at the same time to the outcomes of otherwise comparable pupils introduced to literacy in the additional language four years later. A review of international practices in primary school language education³ has recorded both strategies. E.g. schools in Iceland introduce writing in English at a later stage than speaking and comprehension in Icelandic, while schools in Croatia introduce literacy in English as early as in the dominant language.

A search of practice in the UK context has revealed mixed practice and further interesting combinations. For example, Wix Bilingual Primary Schools in Battersea, London, introduces literacy in both English and French at the same time, but with one-year's delay compared to the national standard for English, that is in year-1 rather than reception.⁴

In its review of bilingual education in an international setting, the CfBT Education Trust⁵ concludes "A key concern in the literature is whether reading and writing in the foreign language should be introduced from Year 1 of primary school or delayed until after literacy is established in the first language. There is no consensus on this and indeed, no one answer is likely to fit all circumstances.

² Comeau, Liane; Cormier, Pierre; Grandmaison, Éric; Lacroix, Diane (1999) A longitudinal study of phonological processing skills in children learning to read in a second language. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 91(1), 29-43. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.91.1.29>

³ CfBT Education Trust (2012) Lessons from abroad: International review of primary languages <https://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2012/r-lessons-from-abroad-2012>

⁴ <http://www.wix.wandsworth.sch.uk/inside-the-classroom/wix-bilingual/making-an-informed-choice>

⁵ See footnote 3

Although it is common practice to focus on oracy in the early years, some research makes a strong case for introducing reading and writing earlier.” (p79).

Concluding remarks

While there is no strong evidence-base for recommending one or the other approach as regards to timing the introduction of bi-literacy, our review reveals that a common and prevalent motivation for introducing early literacy in the additional language is that it can provide an important focus as well as support for learning in that language. Moreover, it helps to highlight differences and similarities between the two languages in the pupils’ environment and raise awareness of similarities and differences. To these considerations we may add the positive transfer and back-transfer in literacy skills in the dominant and additional language.

‘Early’ bi-literacy in this context is understood as the introduction of literacy in both languages either at the same time or with one or two years’ difference. In all cases, reports and research emphasize that the timing of bilingualism and bi-literacy is only one of the aspects to be paid attention to. Quality and amount of teaching as well as a playful, stimulating, and appropriately challenging learning environment are essential contributors to successful outcomes.

Dr Napoleon Katsos* and Ms Carla Pastorino-Santos

Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge

[Cambridge Bilingualism Network](#)

*email correspondence: nk248@cam.ac.uk