

Perspectives on bilingualism

Maurice Carder reviews a new study

Power, Prestige and Bilingualism

International Perspectives on Elite Bilingual Education

By Anne-Marie de Mejia, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. 2002

In this informative book on bilingualism amongst 'elites', de Mejia takes on the massive task of 'attempting to describe and demystify a particular type of educational provision which has been referred to in the literature as "elite" or "prestigious" bilingual education' throughout the world. The book is welcome as 'among prestige bilinguals, there has historically not been a debate about the disadvantages and problems of bilinguals'.

She also accepts that the field of Second Language Studies has now become recognised as a discipline in its own right; and that this recognition must be built on by language programme developers in International schools. Her principal areas of investigation are International schools, European schools, and Immersion Education in various contexts. This review will focus primarily on International schools as referred to in her research.

She states in her introduction that 'the development of bilingualism has not always been considered of prime importance for students' as it was taken for granted that the curriculum would be based on models used in British or North American monolingual schools. She then briefly traces the development of International schools, showing how they evolved from catering primarily to English-speaking ex-patriots to 'commercial and business personnel around the world'.

The use of the term 'elite bilingualism' causes some difficulty; at one point de Mejia acknowledges that it may have negative connotations, not being seen as a 'worthy' object of study. She quotes a teacher who does not like to use the expression as "more and more families work abroad for a period of time and... the children have to follow. I know that the children do not always feel 'elite-like' ". From my own experience in International schools, I can only agree; most International school teachers are simply teaching children and young people from around the world whose parents have been temporarily posted to a particular location, though there will, of course, be those who consider themselves as 'elite'.

De Mejia makes much of the fact that little research has been carried out in the field of international education compared, for example, to the European schools. However, she makes it clear that 'unlike International schools, education is free for the children of European civil servants'. She also describes the increased focus of European schools on first language maintenance and the development of bilingual competence compared with International schools, which tend to be seen as 'English only', then later admits, following the South East Asian currency collapse of 1997, to the clear link between elite

bilingual provision and economic considerations in International schools.

There is a strong link between finances in International schools and the type and quality of the programme they offer; International schools are largely completely independent and unfunded by any central organization, and ESL/bilingual issues were in the past seen as peripheral. There are clear signs that this situation is now changing, and the work of the International Baccalaureate Organization and ECIS have much input in this respect. The 'washback' effect referred to by de Mejia, by which examinations influence the curriculum, has already taken place in the IB.

In the section on the IB de Mejia quotes the report on languages in the IB of Arturo Tosi in 1986, and goes on to describe the components of the IB examination. Amazingly, the schema shown reflects IB practice some ten years ago, with no mention of the language reform (based on Tosi's recommendations) which introduced Language A1 and A2, and a new route to a Bilingual Diploma (Language A1 plus Language A2). De Mejia makes no mention of the Bilingual Diploma at all (it already existed in another form, giving a separate, questionable route to the Bilingual Diploma). Her presentation of the IB curriculum is poorly laid out with no indication of the six areas (it appears to be ten) from which students may choose their subjects.

There is also no mention of either the IB Primary Years Programme or the Middle Years Programme, both of which are now actively working on policies and guides for good practice in second language and mother tongue programmes.

ECIS is mentioned only with reference to its handbook giving information about schools; the accreditation process is not touched on, yet this also potentially creates ever better conditions for bilingual support with its ratings in various subject areas, including for example the recommendation that 'the instructional staff should incorporate the students' home languages and cultural experiences into the curricular instruction' (*ECIS guide to school evaluation and accreditation*, 6th Edition, p.137).

De Mejia expresses frustration with lack of research in International education, but seems to have made no real effort to keep up to date with developments. There was an extensive description of the IB A1/A2 language reform in *Multilingualism for All*, (edited by T Skutnabb-Kangas, published by Swets and Zeitlinger, 1995: pages 113-158) and in any case direct contact with the IBO would have yielded results.

There is no mention of the *International Schools Journal* (published by ECIS) which for the last 21 years has given countless articles on the area, and many articles on ESL/bilingualism. Indeed, in the issue of April 2002 there is an article by this reviewer on the current situation of ESL and Mother Tongue programmes. Although de Mejia mentions the ECIS ESL Conference in Dubrovnik in

1991, she appears not to realise that the ECIS sponsors committees for subject areas to hold regular conferences. These regular meetings provide an answer de Mejia's request for 'an international forum where teachers working in different types of elite bilingual programmes could air their views and learn from the experience of other colleagues'.

In the final chapter de Mejia describes her brief as being 'to write comprehensively about the "state of elite bilingual education" in a global sense', and then adds: 'one of the dangers in trying to write comprehensively is the possibility of providing only superficial coverage of the issues involved'.

It is encouraging to see that issues of bilingualism in International schools are being addressed in the wider field, though unfortunate that there are so many omissions, and lack of accurate information, about current practice in the field. A quick look at the IBO and ECIS

websites would yield much information not given in this book. Nevertheless it does serve as an invaluable guide to a very broad field and may well become a base from which investigation in separate areas may be conducted.

Although the word 'Power' is used in the title there is little mention of it in the text. Power is present in all organizations, including International schools, and it is regrettable that de Mejia does not address this issue with regard to the implementation of bilingualism, because as Edward Said asks "who, if not the writer, is to elucidate the contests, challenge and hope, to defeat the imposed silence and normalized quiet of power?"

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