

Are we creating biliterate bilinguals?

by Maurice Carder
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The author, a practised hand at teaching English as a second language (ESL), points out the ethical, theoretical and practical imperatives in accepting non-speakers of English in 'schools named international'. In our enthusiasm to teach usable English, are we creating students with no firm foundation in any language, be it English, or a mother tongue? The answer appears to be more and better bilingual education, with the experienced ESL teacher playing a pivotal role. The author sees the IB's new language A2 programme as going a long way towards meeting this goal.

Britain's economic decline masked the huge strides being made by English as a world and hybrid language in the closing decades of this century. Some linguists believe that up to 1.4 billion people now speak versions of it, compared with an estimated 700 million in the early 1980s. It is probably safe to assume that non-native speakers outnumber born speakers 2-1. English is pushing and shoving its way round the world. It's been going on while we weren't looking. English is now the strong, competent second language of all Scandinavians, Germans and Dutch, the dominant working language of the EC, the key language of computing and of international film and television. At a rough estimate you can say that 10 per cent of any country you can think of in the world is working hard on their English – and is doing fairly well.

About 10 per cent of modern Japanese is borrowings from English. Older Japanese are having great trouble understanding it. Both in Malaysia and Indonesia, they've almost got machines for converting English technical terms into Malay. The interplay of Spanish and English along the American-Mexican border is fantastic. These are strands for the 21st century – massive hybridization. New composite languages are likely to arise out of it, (MacArthur, 1992).

One major point which has profound implications for the developing world is the global reach of doublespeak. The US-dominated Western media have a virtual international monopoly in print, television, and broadcasting news. With the growing power of satellite television and other information technologies, Third World dependence on Western news sources is further increased (*Guardian Weekly*, 1992).

I have used these quotations to bring together the two strands of today's world which are shaping people and events on a massive scale previously unknown in history. One is the English language, the other is Western media and information technology.

I do not need to speak at length about the unease many people in the world feel about our current situation; anyone who has listened to the news or read a newspaper in the last year is well aware that all is not well: wars, famines, ethnic

cleansing, social disruption, unemployment and a lack of peace of mind about our collective present, past or future characterize much of what we hear about. Even if we are sitting in a wealthy 'Western' country there are now enough problems to niggle us or even concern us: race riots, violence, rape, abductions, inflation, devaluation, political corruption.

So, what has this got to do with ESL teaching in international schools?

Like so many people I know, I 'fell' into teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). I was in a 'foreign' country and I needed a job. I had no qualifications for teaching other than a university degree in Spanish and the fact that English was my mother tongue. I soon discovered that I could combine my accident of birth, that is, being born with English in my mouth, with my desire to travel and see the world. I did more courses and got better jobs. I have always enjoyed learning foreign languages; this always means, of course, that you have more scope for making contact with the culture of the people in whose country you live; you can read 'their' newspapers, listen to 'their' radio, watch 'their' television. After living in ten different countries, ranging in political style from democracy through right-wing dictatorship to communist, and having an opportunity to get some sort of insight into how people live there and what their expectations are, the solid truths of childhood and upbringing are whittled away. I remember clearly the genuine surprise on my American travelling companion's face when, in 1965 in a small Romanian village where we had been invited to a christening party, he exclaimed: 'These are really good, friendly people and in the USA we were taught that all people living behind the Iron Curtain were evil'. The naivety of youth, perhaps, or an expression of the culture of the master race?

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the obvious lack of any forethought about how to deal with the event (shown clearly by the total failure of any genuine preparation for the 'New World Order' other than empty words) there have been sporadic attempts to do 'something' in former communist countries. I have no statistics, but I would be prepared to bet that most of it has been done in the English language, and has included many English language teaching programmes. Of course, this is what much of the populace desires; they see a good knowledge of English as the passport to 'a better job and more money'. The fact that an understanding of English is also necessary for much computer technology, and that most of what comes over the air waves is in English, also provides motivation without much, if any, critical appraisal of what would happen in the long term.

In international schools the situation is similar; here we have a fine educational network, offering mostly excellent services leading very often to the possibility of study in some of the best universities in Britain or the USA.

Figures from the Vienna International School (VIS) show that of 102 leavers in 1993, 32 intend to study in North America, 30 in Britain, 28 in Austria, and 12 in other countries. Since the student body at VIS is composed of a minority of British, American, Australian, Canadian, Irish, New Zealand or other mother-tongue English nationals, then clearly not many students are returning to their own countries to study. And who can blame them? Some of the best education in the world is available at British or North American universities and English is the international language.

There are, however, new trends around. 'Environmental awareness' is the catchphrase of the day, and many international schools build an element of this into their curricula. Just about all students know what ecology is, and how important balancing the environment is for the future of the planet. The ecology of language, though, is not something we hear much about; if we do, it is often linked to political issues, or even to violence. Northern Ireland, the Basque country, Belgium spring to mind. There are estimated to be maybe 3,000-5,000 languages in the world, whereas there are fewer than 200 countries. Clearly this implies that the majority of people living in one country do not speak the official language of the country as their mother tongue. In fact there are more bilinguals in the world than monolinguals. This often comes as a shock to those who have never spoken, read, watched TV, thought, or dreamt in any language other than English. Even at quite high educational levels English is not put in the same bracket as other modern languages. English has been described more as a 'way of life', such is its overwhelming power and infiltration throughout the world. It has even been suggested that 'speaking other languages does not make you, or is not a prerequisite for being, more international than a person who speaks only English'. At this juncture we might be excused for asking for a definition of 'international'; should we perhaps be saying 'multinational'?

International or multicultural?

The dictionary describes 'international' as 'concerning, taking place between, or recognised by more than one nation'. So an international school would be 'a school concerning more than one nation', a fairly bland description. There is another term which, because of its application in certain societies, has become rather more loaded: this is 'multicultural'. The definition of this word is 'the co-occurrence of many cultures in one area; or alternatively, 'a socio-political policy of encouraging the coexistence and growth of several cultures in one place'. In the Canadian framework it was stated thus: 'a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of

Canadians' (MacArthur, 1992). Multiculturalism got a bad press, as seen in press cuttings like this: 'It is in its most intense and extreme form...that multiculturalism is on its way to being a major educational, social and eventually political problem. This version is propagated on our college campuses by a coalition of nationalist-racist blacks, radical feminists, 'gays' and lesbians, and a handful of aspiring demagogues who claim to represent various ethnic minorities.' That is from the *Wall Street Journal* of 31 July 1991, and is not a wonderful recipe for international schools.

So far I have given some idea of the things that bother me about international education in the English language. Sniping from the sidelines is easy; there is nothing more facile or undermining than to niggle, criticize and condemn a system that has proved to be popular, successful and rewarding for huge numbers of students, parents, teachers and administrators. My aim is to provoke thought on the huge responsibility that we, as teachers of the world language of communication, education, technology, political persuasion and mass culture, carry on our shoulders, both morally for its consequences on the future of our planet, and also pedagogically and ethically for the possible consequences for the children we teach. Briefly, I believe international schools should work towards establishing a linguistic policy, which could include such issues as setting up a worldwide information network to inform parents of what they are getting themselves and their children into by educating them in a second language, informing them of the importance of ensuring that their children are literate in their mother tongue before commencing a second language, of maintaining education in their mother tongue, and also including in every English language curriculum an element of both language awareness and critical language study.

In the United States, the language factor has already become an issue; there is the 'US English' movement which promotes English as a common bond (a 'blessing' that integrates America's diverse population) and often refers to official French-English bilingualism in Canada as a source of disharmony that Americans should seek to avoid. In addition to its concern that English be made official, US English holds that every effort should be made, particularly through education, to assist newcomers to acquire English. At the same time, it rejects linguistic chauvinism and xenophobia, encourages foreign language study, supports individual and private rights to use and maintain languages other than English, and does not propose to prohibit forms of bilingual education intended to ease children into English. Surprisingly, English has no official status in the USA, though 17 states have made English their official language.

The movement has from its outset encountered strong opposition. Many academics and ethnic leaders have seen it as a nativist organization that panders

to the prejudices and entrenched attitudes of monolingual whites. Many organizations, including TESOL, have attacked US English, and reaction has led to the formation of the English Plus pressure group which encourages Americans to be bilingual (English plus one or more languages). In 1987 it established the English Plus Information Clearing house (EPIC) to canvass support and disseminate its views. Adherents to the idea of English Plus have proposed a constitutional amendment, the Cultural Rights Amendment, which would give legal backing to the preservation and promotion of ethnic and linguistic diversity.

There is evidence that Hispanic immigrants tend, like others before them, to shed their original language so as to join the mainstream of American life. Such evidence of language shift does not, however, impress English-speakers in Miami or Southern California who feel threatened by the powerful presence of an alternative language and culture. Similarly, despite disclaimers by the fans of US English, and its support for transitional bilingual programmes for adults, an impression of chauvinism among native speakers of English is being projected that arouses and reinforces old anxieties among non-English speakers. Although the primacy of English in the USA is hardly in doubt, people who argue for both sides are likely to feel threatened for some time to come.

In England the situation is different, since English has no major competition. Although the language has never been officially standardized, a typically English nostalgia for the past is reflected in attempts to fix one period as definitive. There continues to be a feeling that a certain type of English is the best, and phrases like ‘the Queen’s English’, ‘BBC English’, ‘Oxford English’, suggest that the ruling and cultural establishment has by right the correct usage. The term RP (Received Pronunciation) has a considerable prestige value, but it is disliked and caricatured by many speakers with other accents. It is accepted without comment from a BBC newsreader, but is liable to arouse mirth or hostility when used by anyone suspected of shedding the local speech and ‘talking posh’.

England has traditionally had many dialects. I recently saw an item on TV showing some event in the British countryside on a US network, where subtitles had to be added because American viewers could not otherwise understand. However, English in England appears to be losing many of its particularities, due probably to the influence of TV, and it may be true to say that specifically *English* English is currently less distinctive within the British Isles than at any time in the past.

I hope that this brief review will help cast some light on the status of English as the language of instruction in international schools. The international school

body has been characterized as being ‘the equivalent in size of a country of four million people, if we allow for the students’ parents, families, schools and infrastructure’ (Matthews, 1989). This ‘country’ consists mainly of highly motivated people who are also very mobile. In addition, they come from probably 100-150 language backgrounds. Clearly this is a unique body, and there will have to be special language services.

What is provided at present? I have no statistics, but from experience in the school where I work, contact with other international schools, and what I have read, I think it would be fair to say that at the most there is some sort of ESL programme, that is, a programme that gives non-English speakers some assistance with their English. Many schools have no ESL provision but a submersion programme. A few have a bilingual programme.

It is a pity that a great many parents are more than happy to have their children in a school where they will be educated in English, the international language and the language of a successful future. Teachers, unlike doctors, take no equivalent of the Hippocratic oath when qualifying; they do not have to swear allegiance to a code of ethics, promising always to behave according to approved guidelines of quality of instruction. But they do on the whole have strong beliefs about helping children to do what is right, and educating and guiding them so that they will contribute to a better society and, it is to be hoped, a better world. If we are really educating tomorrow’s elite, the leaders of tomorrow’s world, those who will take decisions and help shape the views of people around the globe, then I believe much more must be done on a cultural and linguistic level than at present. If we are teaching students English, then we should not be taking away their mother tongue; the two processes of teaching English and maintaining the mother tongue must be linked in a common programme.

English and the mother tongue must be linked

Teachers in many international schools still seem not to understand the issues clearly. Teachers and administrators of the ‘English only’ stereotype seem to be rather unsure, sceptical, or even scathing about attempts to introduce more sophisticated language programmes. Certainly, there are administrative problems in scheduling and finding mother-tongue teachers; there are financial difficulties about whether to add them to the payroll or get parents to pay extra; and there is the challenge of persuading and cajoling parents into understanding that it is one thing to speak your own language well, and quite another to write it well enough to get good grades in school subjects.

Luckily there is one important factor to help us in what might otherwise be an uphill struggle: it is now generally accepted that the better a child’s roots are in

his or her home language, the better the performance in the second language being learnt. By using this information aggressively we can convince parents and administrators of the huge mistake they will be making by not having a good mother-tongue programme.

This process must begin at a very young age. Concern shown by teachers about the poor linguistic and academic performance of students in English after some years of international schooling has led to the realization that they had no previous education in their mother tongue; they were being forced to speak, read and write in English when they could not read or write in their own language. The first step, then, will be to inform parents that by ensuring that their children have these skills in their mother tongue, they will avoid failure in the future. They should be clearly advised of the dangers inherent in an English-only programme when the mother tongue has not been firmly established.

Research also shows that bilingualism, for that is what we are talking about, if structured well, will benefit students academically. There is now much literature on this area, and the only hypothesis that 'more than one language will reduce the student's academic ability' has long been discarded and, in fact, reversed.

The IB's bilingual diploma project

There is also good news from the International Baccalaureate Organization. It is developing a more sophisticated language programme that takes into account the fact that students at international schools are likely to have more than a mother tongue and a foreign language (Language A and Language B, respectively). The new programme will offer a Language A1 and Language A2, as well as a Language B. This permits the typical student who comes, say, from Indonesia, studies in English for ten years and takes English as Language A1, to take Indonesian as Language A2. The combination of A1 plus A2 will entitle the student to a bilingual diploma. The project is still in an initial stage, but should be in place by 1996. *

When the news about this project is circulated around the student and parent body, it should add momentum to a movement for mother-tongue instruction, and increase general awareness amongst all parties in international schools. Some have already adopted the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (ages 11-15) which makes reference to Language A1, A2 and B, and work has begun on a primary related curriculum (the International Schools Curriculum Project), in which I hope we can also have some input.

ESL teachers play a key role in this area; they are the ones who are most involved and most concerned; and in my experience they care more about the language needs of the students.

* *The bilingual diploma project is now in place. (Ed.)*

TESOL Matters, the paper for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, recently published a ‘Statement on the Role of Bilingual Education in the Education of Children in the United States’. It includes a description of TESOL, a brief definition of bilingual education and English-as-a-second-language programmes, another on the most effective bilingual programmes, a section on parents’ roles in bilingual education and ESL programmes, and one on the preparation that teachers need to function effectively in a culturally diverse school. It closes with TESOL recommendations for K-12 educational programmes in the USA, and describes the resources available to teachers and schools there.

The need for a linguistic policy statement

I propose that we prepare a similar statement on the role of ESL and mother-tongue teaching in the education of children in international schools. There will be some divergence from the TESOL statement in order to take into account the diversity of the many types of international school, and the fact that they are largely private schools and often must make financial considerations a top priority. But at present there is still a somewhat lackadaisical and even uninformed air about language as a whole in many schools. Some do not have an official linguistic policy, but have developed an *ad hoc* one over the years. Vigour in this area is essential if we are to fulfil our role as international educators in a world that is too rapidly becoming bland and Westernized.

It should become a priority to inform all bodies such as embassies, international organizations, international businesses and governments on the issues relevant to bringing up children internationally. Parents should know before they start moving around the world about the importance of a solid grounding in the mother tongue.

In school we should press for recruiting more senior administrators who are linguists or bilingual, and not always go for the ‘concrete sequentialists’ in maths and science who, with the best will in the world, often do not have a feel for what it means to be educated bilingually.

Every new student and parent in an international school should be given an information leaflet and have the chance to discuss what is at stake in the coming years. They should also be warned of the time element, since students who come late to an international school with little knowledge of English will take much longer to catch up to grade level.

There should be regular in-service training programmes in schools for teachers, so that they are constantly reminded of the language issue. Events can be arranged along different cultural and linguistic lines in order to allow

students to break out from their peer group, the Western ‘cool’ image that dominates most campuses. This will require an effort of will and positive discrimination on the part of the administrators, but should be seriously considered in the light of today’s all-pervasive McDonald’s culture.

Bilingualism has been a normal part of life for at least 3,000 years for most of the world’s population. The Romans had their *Pax Romana* and Latin was the *lingua franca*, but other languages and cultures survived successfully in this environment. Because of recent history, the power of the media, market forces and business interests, the world is in danger of losing not only much of its natural beauty and diversity in an environmental sense, but also much at the linguistic and cultural level.

If English is to remain the international language, then let us at least do our bit to ensure that those we teach retain strong links with their cultural and linguistic heritage and value and respect that of others.

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