



EECERA 2007
EXPLORING VYGOTSKY'S IDEAS:
CROSSING BORDERS
PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

**BILINGUAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS &
LEARNING IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS**

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation we will be:

- Questioning the role of the BTA as a cultural and linguistic mediator of bilingual children's learning;
- Exploring Moll's (1992) *funds of knowledge* in relation to the work of BTAs;
- Uncovering understandings about mediation, funds of knowledge and early bilingualism;
- Identifying future work and research to reveal deeper understandings of the BTA's role in supporting young bilingual children's learning.



The UK Context

Responses to bilingualism and linguistic diversity

A deficit model of linguistic diversity during the latter part of 20th Century and early 21st Century

1960s:

- An emphasis on overcoming the ‘language barrier’ and ‘culture shock’ for newly arrived ‘immigrant’ children.
- Emphasis on teaching ‘non-English speaking children.’



1970s:

The Bullock Report (1975)

Recognition of the importance of a child's cultural identity, cultural knowledge and mother tongue:

'no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally and separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.' (1975 p.286)



1980s:

The Swann Report (1986)

- Mother tongue provision was believed by Swann to ‘delay rather than overcome the trauma for these pupils entering an English speaking environment.’ (DES, 1986 p.407)
- A ‘bilingual resource’, was recommended to ‘help with the transitional needs of a non-English speaking child starting school.’ ... such a resource would offer ‘psychological and social support for the child, as well as being able to explain simple educational concepts in a child’s mother tongue, if the need arises’ (1986 p.407).
- The Swann report recommended that mother tongue teaching was best achieved within the ethnic minority communities rather than in mainstream schools.



1990s/2000s

- Absence of guidance for educators working with bilingual children.
- Notion of 'inclusion' did not take account of needs of bilingual children.

Assimilationist view

Official reports:

either

- problematised bilingual children's experience in terms of 'disadvantage' or deficit

or

- avoided acknowledging it claiming that existing practice was adequate.



Theoretical Framework

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D. & Gonzalez, N. (1992) 'Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms', *Theory into Practice*, 31: 132 – 41

Moll argues that the dominant model of education:

- is framed within values of white English-speaking educators
- emphasises the disadvantages of children from minority language backgrounds
- has the effect of undermining bilingual children's first language development in favour of English.



Moll's research:

- in collaboration with teachers, involved studying household practices and knowledge in Hispanic communities.
- used the term *funds of knowledge* to refer to the potential resource for educational change held within communities and which is largely ignored by schools.

Funds of knowledge are:

‘the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being.’

Moll et al, 1992: 133



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Children's Rights (James and Prout, 1997; Clark and Moss, 2001; Rinaldi, 2005, DfES, 2007).
- Children and their parents, families and communities as 'funds of knowledge' for teachers, settings and schools (Moll *et al*, 1992)
- Use of first language in supporting and speeding up the process of learning the school language (Cummins, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2002)
- Strong sense of self, and resilient, capable, confident and self-assured learner identity (DfES, 2007)



Mediation (rather than ‘just’ interpretation or translation)

‘Mediation, a direct and necessary activity between different kinds of activity and consciousness’ (Williams, 1976, p. 206)

- BTAs act as cultural brokers between different people
- They translate, not only the language, but also the cultural traditions
- Act as general advisors and ‘insider informants’ for children, teachers and parents
- Become invaluable mediators of new cultural practices



BTAs as a 'bilingual resource'

Bourne (2001) has questioned the ways in which current, dominant ideologies constrain much of BTAs work

Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003)

- Classteachers tended to control the BTAs' talk; when the whole class was present, the BTAs provided the occasional 'word', translation, but would not engage in discussion.
- *Funds of knowledge* have far greater relevance to work in multiethnic classrooms than token displays of 'culture' and folklore.



Cable (2004)

- Further dimensions of BTAs' work
- An important aspect of the role of a BTA is also to act as an intermediary and advocate for both children and parents.
- Both BTAs and schools recognise that this is important work, yet it takes place largely in the margins of school life, and is not an integral part of planned learning.



BTAs as cultural and linguistic mediators

- Data from an ethnographic study in England:
- Four year-old bilingual child, Nazma, during her early days of schooling working with a Bilingual Teaching Assistant, Mussarat.
- Nazma 's mother tongue is Pahari and all talk in Pahari is translated into English and presented in italics.



'Lemon, yuk!' transcript during the first term

- 1 Mussarat: *What's this?*
Nazma: *Apples*
Mussarat: *what's this?*
Nazma: *Pears*
- 5 Mussarat: *What's this?*
Nazma: *Lemon, yuk I don't like that [making a face]*
Mussarat: *Don't you like it because it's sour?*
Nazma: *Yes*
Mussarat *1,2,3 green apples [counting together]*
and Nazma:
- 10 Mussarat *1,2,3,4 pears [counting together]*
and Nazma:



Nazma:

We eat them, we like them,

*We get them, we go to a shop and we buy apples
and pears...*

15

We went to the shops with mum and Hasnan

And we bought lollies

We had Hasnan's birthday

*We went in a big mosque and there were lots of
people*

[the 'mosque' was in fact a hall]

20

Friends and everybody was there.

There was cake

I went with Hasnan to the shops.

(Drury, 2007: 77)



Mussarat (BTA) – a *'lifeline'*

The unique position of the BTA to mediate the new language and culture of nursery for Nazma:

- to bridge the gap between experiences in the home and those within the nursery
- to use her mother tongue for learning purposes in the nursery
- to talk about her home experiences

Drury, R. (2007) *Young Bilingual Learners at Home and School*.
Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham



Lost Opportunities

Data from an ethnographic study in England: 5yr old children in school, British-Pakistani background, mother-tongue Pahari.

Robertson, L.H. (2002) Parallel literacy classes and hidden strengths: learning to read in English, Urdu and classical Arabic. *Reading, literacy and language (UKRA)*, November, 36/3

Robertson, L.H. (2004) Multilingual flexibility and literacy learning in an Urdu community school. In Gregory, E., Long, S. and Volk, D. (eds.) *Many Pathways to Literacy*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, Taylor & Francis



1. Effective support for bilingual pupils (adapted from www.naldic.org.uk)

- Emotional support during the settling in period
- Problem-shooting
- Friday Story – a commendable rationale and intention, flawed practice
- ‘An Extra Pair of Hands’ - problem

2. Contributions to school awareness of the needs of bilingual pupils

- Resources, dual language books, background information on Pakistan, artefacts
- Information about families and community – but questions about shared understandings, about status of different groups and class related expectations



3. Appropriate use of bilingual skills

- Group work always in English
- When story read bilingually, Pahari not used: *'Urdu is our language of education'*
- Informal interpretation between parents and teachers
- Translating formal letters and notices

4. Contributing ideas to the planning of teaching and the assessment of learning for bilingual learners

- Occasional opportunities, but relied on the BTA's spontaneity, ability to think fast
- Very few organised opportunities to contribute to planning meetings (hourly-paid staff)



5. Keeping relevant and informative records

- 2 out of 5 children assessed to have SEN and assessed to have problems in mother tongue, eg. Amil - *'his speech is not clear and his mother says that he uses 'baby talk' at home, just like his sister did, before she went to school'*
- On the mistakes that were made: Yasmin - *'I always thought that Ikram was a bright boy', but given the overall constraints of the situation (i.e. taking the lead from a more experienced headteacher, and thereby welcoming some financial support for Ikram), 'I had to go along with it'.*

6. Facilitating supportive contact with parents

- Frequent informal meetings after school hours
- BTA present at some formal parent-teacher meetings

Questions arising for future research



If positive policy recommendations and government rhetoric are to be realised, how is this going to take place? How do children achieve the benefits of bilingualism?

- The role of the BTA becomes critical; need to marry the rhetoric with everyday practice and research this in greater depth.

In rejecting the deficit model the aim is to build on *funds of knowledge* and connect children's and families *funds of knowledge* with school's curriculum and teachers' knowledge.

- But what does this 'connecting' really look like in everyday classrooms? Who connects what and how?



Focusing on and beginning to theorise what is meant by 'connecting' ... This is based on shared values and understandings, and the emphasis is on *shared*. ...We need a new term or a concept...

First lady Eleanor Roosevelt in a 1950 radio broadcast to the children of America, speaking about civil liberties and the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights: '*Things have to happen within the hearts of people, not just within their laws*'.