
What are the social and educational implications of bilingualism and/or diglossia?

Simply put, bilingualism is the ability to use two languages in either spoken or written form, with any degree of proficiency. A person can become bilingual through having learned two languages from birth, or through learning another language sometime after their first – this is known as sequential bilingualism. This essay focuses on how bilinguals have historically faced many social, political and educational stigmas that have mainly arisen from a lack of understanding about their additional language acquisition and utilisation, although modern-day views on bilingualism are generally evolving to become more positive.

As writer and journalist Tobias Jones states in his recent essay *The Joys and Benefits of Bilingualism*, 'until recent decades, bilingualism was deeply frowned upon and considered deleterious to development. The

received wisdom for much of the 20th century was that there was really only space for one language in a child's brain. It was thought that if, for example, immigrants maintained a mother tongue at home, it would impede integration at school and probably lead to academic regression and confusion.' (Jones, 2018). This is a social view also observed by Baetens Beardsmore (153), in that those encountering bilingualism for the first time, who may originate from monolingual middle-class communities could 'mask sentiments more akin to class-related or racist prejudices conveniently hidden behind a rationale of unilingual superiority.' For example, Thomas (94) gives the example of Shadi – a child with Iranian parents who fled Iran and lived in France and the UK before settling in Sweden when she was 12. Shadi says: 'I would say I was always quite admired for speaking different languages... so I gained popularity at

school... Four years later, when a lot of Iranians had come, it wasn't that popular anymore and Iranian children were bullied in school because they couldn't speak Swedish.'

These views and instances of bullying are hardly surprising given unscholarly historical views such as Adler's, as referred to in Baker (17), which present bilingual children as 'having split minds' and suggests that bilingualism could even lead to mental health issues such as schizophrenia. There is no evidence to suggest such forthright claims, but, sadly such opinions have been all too common in previous studies on the subject. With a contrastingly modern view, Baker (12) in more recent literature points out that bilingual children have many advantages growing up, including wider communication and chances of employment due to the use of two languages, raised self esteem

and sense of identity, increased curriculum achievement and an ease in learning a third or multiple languages, should they choose to do so in future.

In *A Parent's Guide to Bilingualism*, Fitzpatrick (39) delves into her own case studies on bilingualism based on her conversations with parents of bilingual children. She notes that the most common types of criticism or prejudice people exercised towards bilinguals included the views that 'children become confused by two languages and therefore never speak either properly, they are liable to stutter, can't express their ideas coherently, sometimes do not know which language to use, or can't distinguish between the two.' She also refers to one parent who spoke 'disparagingly of "cross-talk", which presumably referred to some kind of language mixing'.

Educational implications in bilingualism also extend to teaching staff, who, according to Fitzpatrick's research (41), 'had, on the odd occasion, made discouraging remarks. One university lecturer, for example, who taught linguistics, told one of his students, the son of a parent in this group [that Fitzpatrick studied], that if he continued to mix languages he would become "a language freak". Fitzpatrick's studies however clearly revealed that such generalisations should not be made when it comes to language learning, as each individual is different and learns in their own way at a pace that is comfortable for them. The human brain can clearly store two languages with far more

ease than originally thought by scholars and linguistic experts. For example, another study by Fitzpatrick (45), outlines how difficult it is to make general assumptions about linguistic competence in language learning. She interviewed two families, one of which had 'an elder daughter who had spoken very little English, even in England, until she was approximately two and a half years old. In fact, she spoke very little German at that time either. Then on a holiday with her grandparents in Yorkshire she had suddenly begun to speak English, using whole, fairly long sentences, containing relatively difficult words.' Fitzpatrick (46) suggests that this girl's parents were among many studied who believed that 'some bilingual children begin to speak slightly later than their counterparts growing up with only one language, but that many do not... and usually caught up with other children within a few years'.

So how do modern teachers teach bilingual children? How do they ensure that attitudes advance and that bilinguals are protected from discrimination that may arise from social and political factors? Ponterotto (168) suggests that educators take a proactive role in valuing differences in communication styles 'including bilingualism, and view them as assets to education', and that they should 'recognize the challenges that students may face within our education system when English is not the native language', encourage all students to develop bilingual skills, and work to improve their own bilingual competence.

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