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Beyond a language

A study about implications for support for students (14-16 years old) with bilingual backgrounds

AS PART OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OF LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY LONDON

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Executive Summary

The Samosa Media Charity is a non-government organisation that works with South Asian and Muslim communities nationwide to assist bilingual education of 11-18 years old. Facilitating the work of Samosa Media, this report introduces a more in-depth concept and brings a better understanding of bilingual education. Nowadays, learning and using English as an additional language (EAL) is an important area of bilingual education in many countries. By interesting in learning more from the perspective of the organisation that supports students with bilingual backgrounds about the phenomenon, the interview with the representative of a consultancy firm, the EAL Academy, is conducted. From that, the connection between the supporter and students is demonstrated with more meaning. Moreover, the current situation of bilingual education in London has also been tackled to find out about the difficulties that students (14-16 years old) with bilingual backgrounds have encountered and what sort of support do they received. After discovering more about the phenomenon, the recommendations for both Samosa Media and future research are suggested. The aim is to draw the line between bilingual education and media, especially to emphasise how digitalised activities can contribute to the growth of bilingual students.

Introduction & Background

Bilingual education is the use of two languages while teaching and learning the subject matter in those two languages, rather than learning about the languages themselves (Cummins and Corson, 1997). It involves teaching in a native and a secondary language, usually the second language being English. It is essentially established to assist children who have limited English speaking ability and develop skills, not only in English but in their native language as well.

In many cities, especially London, many people do not speak English at home or in their school or workplace. In a place where English is typically the dominant spoken language, people find it difficult to communicate or live a life. One cannot blame the person for not learning English growing up since there are many institutions which do not usually follow the model of bilingual teaching. If nothing, the person feels left behind while society continues to progress. Students especially face difficulties since they feel left out as many grow up learning a different language from what is being taught in schools, and it is not just about not being able to communicate with other people in school. It raises questions about their future as well. Before we can understand how bilingual education is related to students, it is important to understand the concept of bilingual education and how it functions.

About Samosa Media



The Samosa Media Charity is a non-government organisation that works with South Asian and Muslim communities across the country to facilitate positive cooperation and discussion through arts. Intending to expand their research, they are working towards introducing bilingual education in the curriculum of 11-18 years old. Anwar Akhtar, the co-founder of the Samosa Media Charity, believes that there is not much research on the bilingual population as a whole. There is not much reliable data to support how effective bilingual learning has been on students. Anwar wants to understand and develop research on bilingual education and learning by looking at the issues surrounding the questions on bilingual learning, the scope of employment; how bilinguality helps with employment. He is keen on understanding what the workforce wants in terms of employability. The end goal is to help the workshop, support the children who do not have English as their first language, and understand the demographics and communities. This assertion is where our work comes in. It is up to conduct this research on our basis and formulate a solution while keeping in mind the points brought up by Anwar.

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT



Anwar Akhtar
Company Secretary
and Director



Graham Hitchen
Chair of Samosa
Media



John Pandit
Co-founder



Sonia Raja
Management
Consultant

Summary of the brief

To narrow down the focus of the brief, the team decided to focus on conducting research among secondary school students, between the ages of 14-16. The best possible way to understand the environment of the students, without having to talk to the students directly, was to approach the teachers. We divided the team, each person looking at one specific area of London to find bilingual schools in that area that we could approach to conduct our research. The main aim is to figure out how beneficial bilingual learning is for students, and what difficulties students encounter while engaging in bilingual learning. We decided to talk to the parents, only if we get through with them with the help of the teachers, and also talk to graduated students and understand their experience studying in a bilingual school.

After much deliberation and research, we decided to shift our focus from looking at bilingual schools, to local schools, with the job of understanding how a local school environment in London supports bilingual students in their education. We divided the team again to contact schools from different parts of London, and also, look at various intuitions and private organisations which engage in bilingual teaching for students of the same age group.

We finalised the significance of our research and generated our main research question to guide the study:

1

How does the organisation in London support bilingual students in their education?

To achieve the goal, two sub-questions were plotted out for more in-depth exploration:

2

What difficulties do bilingual students encounter in their learning journey?

3

How does bilingual education impact bilingual students' future?

Literature Review

Students with bilingual backgrounds

Nowadays, learning and using English as an additional language (EAL) is an important area of bilingual education in many countries. In the UK, official statistics released in June 2021 showed that 1 in 5 students - about 1.6 million - do not speak English as their first language (Department for Education, 2021). In recent years, linguistic diversity and provision for EAL are regarded as ordinary features of education in schools, while EAL students have come from the periphery to the centre and become the major participants in the class (Constant Leung, 2016).

The Department for Education (2021) has defined EAL students as being exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English. Furthermore, EAL students are divided into different groups according to race, economic and social status. They may belong to well established ethnic minorities and communities, be children of refugees and asylum seekers, or be children of migrants whose parents have come to the UK to work, and they may live in large cities or more isolated rural areas (Arnot et al., 2014). These migrant students face many educational barriers to accessing schools, placement in classes, year groups and types of secondary school programmes, which is likely to negatively impact their future opportunities in further education and the labour market (Darmody Byrne and McGinnity, 2014)

At first, EAL students encounter difficulty with language, and their proficiency in English is the major factor influencing their educational achievement. There is evidence that English proficiency among EAL students explains as much as 22 per cent of the variation in their achievement, rather than the typical three to four per cent that can be statistically explained by gender, free school meal status and ethnicity (Strand and Hessel, 2018). Likewise, there has been much research showing that when measured by standardised tests, language proficiency correlates highly with academic success since migrant students in European countries often score lower than their native-born peers on these tests (Moskal, 2016). Also, migrant students are found to suffer the loss of discipline-specific language including STEM subjects, geography and history (Scott, 2021); have lower achievements in maths, reading and science (Flisi et al., 2016).

Then, the lower educational achievement will impact EAL students' psychological well-being and put them at greater risk of social exclusion throughout their adult lives (Moskal, 2016). About 20% of teachers reported that their students who use EAL had lost confidence to speak to their peers or in class (Scott, 2021). Secondary school students are more likely to lose confidence because of higher susceptibility to self-consciousness in teenagers, and the higher demands of language in the secondary school curriculum (Scott, 2021).

Moreover, for youth of ethnic minority backgrounds, they face cultural dissonance, racism, and discrimination. Firstly, adaptations to the new school environment were accompanied by cultural dissonance between migrant students' heritage and the host society's cultures as well as by their experience of being a minority within mainstream society (Makarova and Birman, 2016). Migrant students are exposed to challenges of identity and belonging, which are further mediated by race, social class, as well as gender, leading to differences in how they deal with school (Devine, 2009). Likewise, a number of studies have shown that migrant students tend to feel uncomfortable at school due to being perceived as different by their classmates because of their values, attitudes, and behaviours (Martinez-Taboada et al., 2017). Secondly, racism is considered to be one of the biggest problems hampering bilingual students' growth as they are discriminated against by stereotypes (Good, Masewicz and Vogel, 2010; Pratt-Johnson, 2015). Tereshchenko, Bradbury and Archer (2019) have researched Eastern European migrants and they argued that migrant students are on the periphery of society and outside of the acceptable norm of whiteness based on their migration status, class and gender. Teachers may also be influenced by stereotypes in their low expectations of migrant students' academic performance and career pathways (Tereshchenko, Bradbury and Archer, 2019). There was evidence that perceptions of racism and discrimination on the part of native students, teachers, and administrators contributed to refugees' psychosocial stress and diminishing self-esteem (Makarova and Birman, 2016).

Schools and Family

In the development of EAL students, schools and families are the two central entities. Communication and cooperation between home and school are vital to improving students' social and emotional well-being, which also eases the transition into a new environment and helps improve academic achievement (Moskal, 2016). Good, Masewicz and Vogel (2010) have pointed out the achievement and cultural gaps between schools and families, including communication gaps; culture clashes; poorly articulated teaching plans, lack of

teacher training in multiculturalism, language acquisition and instructional strategies for English learning; and a lack of support systems for families adapting to a new environment and new culture.

At last, Good, Masewicz and Vogel (2010) have provided several recommendations: The school needs to implement a systemic teaching plan, recruit and retain qualified bilingual teachers, provide ongoing professional development for all teachers regarding multiculturalism, and also recognize and respect all cultures. Additionally, academic and emotional support needs to be provided for students and their parents. And parents should be given the opportunity to participate in authentic conversations about their children to increase their sense of empowerment and equality.

Similarly, Schneider and Arnot (2018) have underlined the mismatches in school and home communication, advocating to establish an effective transactional school-home-school communication (TSHS) system. Schools must review their communication practices as much as other organisations must so that they can address the demands and opportunities of an increasingly multicultural, transnational, and globally mobile society (Schneider, 2016).

Methodology

Methodological approach

This project adopted a qualitative methodology based on the approach advocated by Bauer, Gaskell and Allum (2000) to have an in-depth understanding of bilingual education through exploring personal experiences. The research subject was organisations that support English as an Additional Language especially secondary school students between the ages of 14-16 years old.

The purpose for attention held towards the 14-16 age group is because this age group appears to be in the progress of making the vital decision on their higher education journey (McCrone, Wade and Golden, 2007). The students within this age range also show the cognitive effects, especially bilingual teenagers (Bochner, 1996). Importantly, scholars emphasised that cognitive aspects (e.g., linguistics) had contributed to the educational attainment of bilingual students (Sue and Okazaki, 1990; Bochner, 1996). Moreover, EAL students appeared to play a positive role in the classroom in terms of language learning and peer-tutoring when it came to their expertise (Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015; Carruthers and Ayres-Bennett, 2019). However, scholars pointed out that the differences in many culture-driven aspects might affect the students' academic performance and their interpersonal experiences (Leki, 1991; Zhu and Flaitz, 2005). From that, previously mentioned indications appear to be aligned with the purpose of the research.

Method

Key terms such as "bilingual support organisations", "non-English student support", etc. were searched on Google. The list of organisations that matched the criteria was created into a shared document among researchers using the purposive sampling technique. Participation invitation emails were sent to qualified organisations on the list. Due to the short period of the project, researchers limited the time scale of waiting for responses to two weeks only. After sending out emails, researchers got an acceptance of the invitation from EAL Academy.

The EAL Academy offers a range of approaches to assist schools in addressing the diverse needs of their students, bringing together specialists in English as an additional language, ethnic minority achievement, and the teaching of academic language (the EAL Academy, n.d.).

Procedure

The description of the research and the main purpose of the interview were explained again to the interviewee. The interview only started once the participant complied with the consent form. A semi-structured interview with a representative from the EAL Academy was conducted online due to the unavailability of the interviewee. The interview lasted for 45 minutes. Crucial information was noted as part of data collection and subsequent data analysis. There were eleven open-ended questions designed to gain insight into participants' perceptions and experiences of EAL students and their educational support (See Appendix). All information was confidential and is securely stored on the University IT systems (OneDrive), only accessible to the researchers.

Data analysis method

The framework of the thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed for this qualitative research. The interview notes were the fundamental source of data. Initial codes were generated from the redundancy of categories throughout the data set. The extract's meaning was drawn from interpreting patterns of the qualitative data.

The analysis was supported by secondary data through the gathering of information from previous research on the same phenomenon. The supportive statement was followed by updated statistics from official government firms related to the main focus of the study.

Findings

Before having an interview with a representative of EAL Academy, the aim was to find answers on how training organisations support bilingual students in their education. In order to understand in-depth the phenomenon, there were two additional purposes what difficulties the students face in their learning journey, how would bilingual education impact their future and understanding the demographics of bilingual populations. With these in mind, researchers hoped to get a clearer perspective through someone who has been working in support of bilingual education in London. To understand bilingual education, it is also imperative to understand the role of the EAL Academy after the interview.

"We don't perform miracles; instead, we try to inspire." The EAL Academy works with independent and international schools supporting bilingual education for the students of primary and secondary schools. A representative of EAL Academy believes that there is "nothing" that would be called bilingual education, especially in London. Many schools advertise themselves as bilingual schools with related education. However, there are more multilingual schools than there are bilingual. Therefore, the number of multilingual teachers has also increased. In a city with a culturally diverse population, there are many whose first language is not English. According to a report by Clark (2022), 44.2% of the population living in London do not have English as their first language.

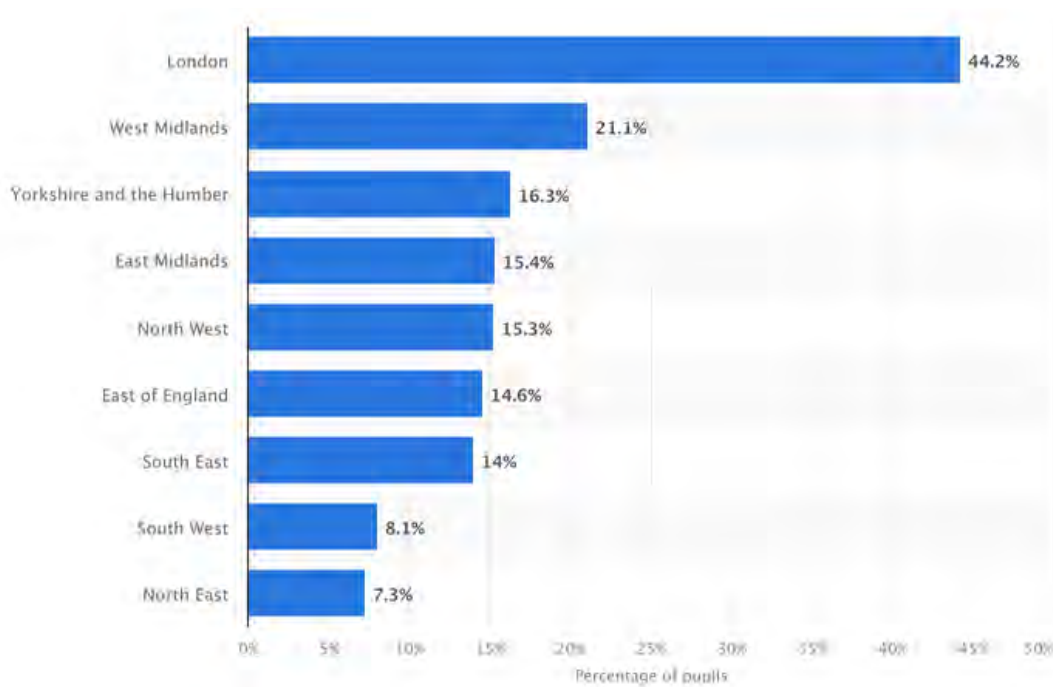


Figure 1. Percentages of students who do not have their first language as English in London (Clark, 2022)

Understanding interviewee’s perspective on the number of bilingual schools in London, it is difficult for people to cope with the world which is constantly on the move and communicates in the one language that many may not be familiar with.

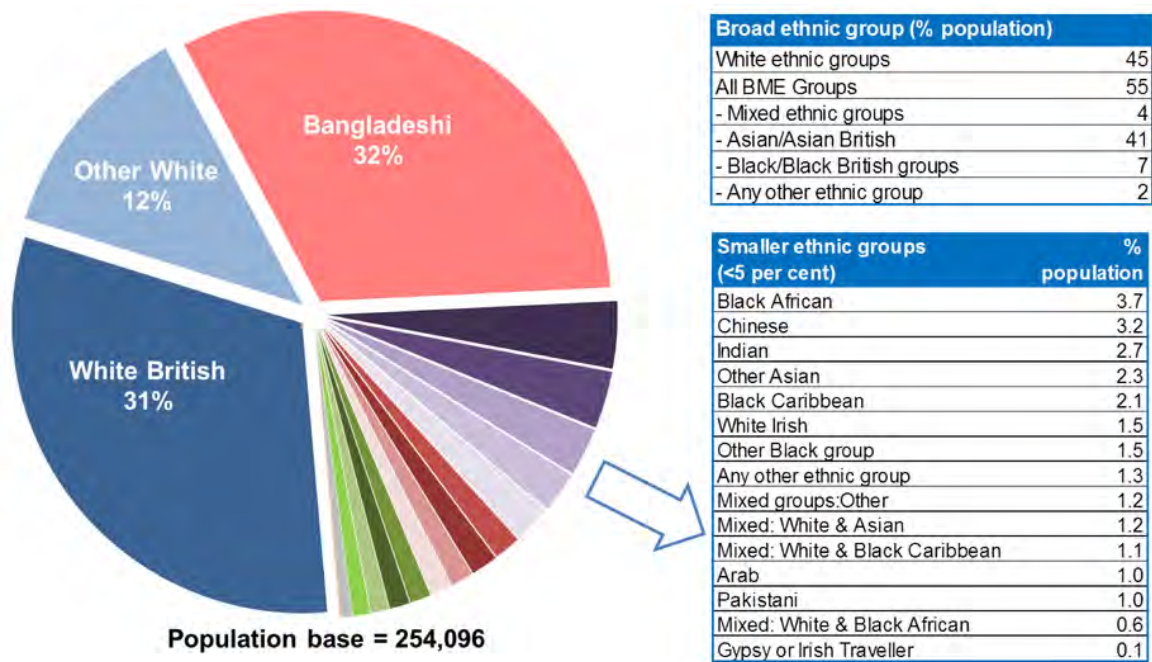


Figure 2. Proportions of the population classified by ethnic groups at London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2011 (Tower Hamlets council, 2013)

A representative of EAL Academy specified that the London Borough of Tower Hamlets has a significantly diverse population with a multicultural residing population. According to the 2011 census, Tower Hamlets was one of the most culturally diverse areas in the UK, having the largest Bangladeshi community (Tower Hamlets council, 2013). Bangladeshi, White British and Other White populations make up the top three ethnic communities in the Borough. The Bangladeshi population makes up for 32%, White British makes up for 31%, and the Other White population comprises a mix of diverse backgrounds like Americans, Europeans, and Australians. Moreover, the Somali population seems to increase in the area. The 2011 census states that around 1.2% of the population in Tower Hamlets consists of a Somali-born population (Tower Hamlets council, 2013). About the demographics of the students in the academy, it was stated that the White British population consisting of primarily Eastern-European students attend the classes, but this number is slowly falling. The white British population has fallen from 75% to 65% in 10 years, with a mix of east and west European Australians and Americans making up the second-largest group, including Canadians.

From the interview, researchers understood the demographics of the bilingual population and learned how many schools were set up to support this education in greater detail. Informant also believes that there have been more Saturday schools set up than bilingual schools. Saturday schools for the Chinese population. For example, one of the schools in London, Hatching Dragons weekend school, is set up to develop bilingual proficiency in children to prepare them to capitalise on a future in which China plays a more active part. This claim answers questions based on how schools are supporting students in their education and what impact it has on their future.

The only difficulties faced, both by the students and teachers, were the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to the online medium of teaching. During the pandemic, the toughest phase was reaching out to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds due to a lack of internet access, even when the school assisted them. Some of the responses were quite inventive. Translation software was introduced to encourage responses. Breakout rooms were mostly used, and there would always be French and English speakers in a group. Teachers found it difficult because they had to learn new teaching techniques for the online format. Most importantly, the essence of engagement is broken through teaching online, and it is especially difficult to cope with difficulties in learning a second language, due to distance learning.

Concept and Value Proposition

By continuing the notion of bilingualism from previous studies, this research is interested in different perspectives about students with bilingual backgrounds and their learning journey. From the outlook of the organisations that support bilingual secondary students, the study has been able to:



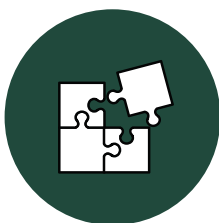
01 — Current situation of bilingual education

The study tackles the norm of bilingual education and the current situation of bilingual education in London. The support that students receive from schools and organisations is also found in the report.



02 — Diversification of multicultural communities

The insights into the distribution of various ethnic groups to the multicultural communities in London have also been indicated in the study. Linking from this point, different ethnic groups have had their projects to support children within the communities in their education and daily lives.



03 — The role of bilingual support organisations

The notion of bilingual education has been used as the base to progress further and brought out the view from the other side of the phenomenon. Therefore, the story of how teachers or consultants who support and students who need support reach out to each other has been told with the most objective viewpoint.

Recommendations

FOR SAMOSA MEDIA

It is inevitable to clear the essential role of school or organisation in contributing to a better environment to grow for bilingual students. Besides the suggestions of reviewing and restructuring the teaching-related elements, events and activities also hold the ability to nourish a multicultural community in a better way. After distilling all the main ideas from the interview, the researchers used those points to initiate the conceptions suggested below, supplemented with practicality with evidence from prior studies and experimentations.

Cultural celebration events

Cultural celebration events can give chances to students to be more open to the diversification of cultures (Sclafani, 2017). The better knowledge gained from the events can help clear the misunderstandings that result from a lack of simple wisdom about one's culture (Sclafani, 2017). Moreover, Ariza (2006) explained that this celebrating type of event could become a confidence-boost action for students with multicultural backgrounds (Ariza, 2006, p. 153), especially from their school or teachers and together with their peers.



Figure 3. Photo of students celebrated cultural events in The Rosary Catholic Primary School (The Rosary Catholic Primary School, 2021)

Digital storytelling

The evolution of technology has utilised more options for the design of school activities. For instance, the introduction of digital storytelling gives even more space for bilingual students to reinforce more than just study skills (Prada, 2022). The students need to deliver a story in their way and make it better with the infusion of different digital effects. From that, both the linguistics and digital skills of the students will develop throughout the task. Moreover, a special point of this activity is the option to choose what language students want to use. Thus, bilingual students will feel encouraged and receive the feeling of expressing themselves freely which showed in the project of Castañeda (2013, cited in Prada, 2022). Additionally, the activity prompts students to discuss the insight into the cultural and intercultural identities of bilingual students (Galante, 2014).



Figure 4. Illustration of the configuration of digital storytelling illustrated by Silvia Rosenthal Tolisano (Langwitches, 2015)

Family-history projects

On the other hand, a project that requires high involvement of bilingual students can also contribute to their development in an unfamiliar community. One of the projects mentioned in the family-history project (Ariza, 2006). This project can be run in classroom size and create more connections between peers and between students and their families. By learning about the family history from the adults in the family, bilingual students will have a chance to gain deeper knowledge about their backgrounds. The acknowledgement of the existence of different traditions applies to both bilingual students and their classmates (Sclafani, 2017). Thus, the alteration in perception is indicated to be the long-term effect of these activities (Oliva and Sarmiento, 2006, p.81).



Figure 5 & 6. Examples of 8th-grade students' works for the family history project in school
(Family Locket, 2017)

Open days

Attending an open day is one of the essential practices to have more options to consider about higher education pathways. Especially for students at the age of 16, this is even more significant because of this transition to the college threshold. Moreover, not all students know their plans and choices clearly from the very beginning. Pursuing a higher level of education means they are more advanced in academic language and also the content and conceptual structures of various curricula (Lin and Scherz, 2014). The amount of college-related information and the expectation to change to a new environment might trigger the anxiety level and raise their concern once they step out of their comfort zone (Doane, Gress-Smith and Breitenstein, 2014).

However, having the seniors or guest speakers who share experiences in college as bilingual students will make students more anticipated and welcomed in the open days and the transition to college, on a larger scale. This idea is inspired by the case study of creating relevance between the students and the mathematical modelling by Hernandez-Martinez and Vos (2017).



Figure 7, 8 & 9. Photos of Open Days in different colleges and universities (King's College London, n.d.; Imperial College London, n.d.; West Thames College London, n.d.)

Recommendations

FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study has several limitations. The first and most crucial to pinpoint is a restricted number in terms of sample size. Although the researchers grab the chance to utilise utmost of the collected data from the interview, the small number of interviews still affects the quality and objectivity of the research. Due to the time frame of the study, Easter Break has a consequential impact on the reach out to local schools that limits the data collection resources, including the inability to approach parents and graduate students.

Further research can continue by improving the limitations and employing different data collection methods. The suggestion is to consider using focus groups to test out hidden hypotheses and understand the actual instant-effective decision of sample subjects. There also can be mixed-method research that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches for more reliable and diverse findings. The main focus of the study can also be more flexible and more considerable in sample size.

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