Does learning another language improve English literacy skills?

Many teachers are finding that participation in bilingual learning programs not only results in positive learning attitudes and perspectives of students but also benefits their literacy skills. Speaking at the Department’s recent Research Partnerships Forum, Janet Beck, assistant principal at Richmond West Primary School says: “Our students are quickly enthralled and use the language both playfully and for their learning.”

Richmond West has been running a bilingual program from Prep to Year 2 for 20 years. When both the Mandarin-English and Vietnamese-English strands were extended to higher year levels, the school identified the need to be accountable for the language and literacy learning outcomes across the three languages of instruction (English, Mandarin and Vietnamese).

With funding from the 2008–09 Research Grants to Schools program, staff at the school, with Dr Paul Molyneux and Renata Aliani from The University of Melbourne, examined the strengths of the program, and what students thought of it. The school presented the findings from the project at the 2009 Research Partnerships Forum.

The project investigated students’ learning attitudes and perspectives, and drew on achievement data in the form of school assessment data and national testing results. Teaching staff systematically collected and analysed writing samples from students in order to better understand the writing skills and strategies of the students in each of the languages of instruction.

The project aimed for a better understanding of the place of the three languages of instruction in the lives of the bilingually-educated students, their perceptions of their own ability across the dimensions of each language, and their attitudes towards learning bilingually.

Researchers at Richmond West Primary School were not surprised to see that English-speaking children who studied Mandarin or Vietnamese from Prep displayed higher literacy overall.

Evidence that it works

- Key findings from the research conducted at Richmond West Primary School demonstrate the benefits of bilingual education.
- 53.3% of students said learning a second language helped them understand similarities between languages.
- 86.7% stated that it helped them identify differences between languages.
- 86.7% stated that bilingual learning has made them more interested in learning additional languages.
- Student writing sample analysis revealed very strong language awareness and literacy ability in each of the languages taught.
In 2008, 100% of Year 2 students achieved the expected text level (Level and the expected percentile range. However, by the end of Year 2 the student outcomes often exceed the state mean – reflecting the non-English-speaking backgrounds and low socioeconomic circumstances of the students starting school at Richmond West.

The Prep-2 Assessment of Reading results at Richmond West are also worth considering. According to last year’s NAPLAN results, outcomes for Year 3 in reading are just below the state mean but within the expected percentile range; outcomes for Year 3 in writing and numeracy were at the state means and well above the expected percentile range; and outcomes at Year 5 in all three areas were at or above the state mean and well above the expected percentile range.

The 2008 NAPLAN data for Years 3 and 5 students in reading, writing and numeracy are also interesting. Approximately 75% of students tested via NAPLAN are students whose first years of primary education were in the bilingual programs (Chinese Prep–2 and Vietnamese Prep–2 at that time). The data confirm that students who began their schooling in a bilingual program, where half their language learning was in English and the other half was in either Chinese or Vietnamese, have achieved better than expected outcomes.

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The Prep-2 Assessment of Reading results at Richmond West are also worth considering. The outcomes at Prep and 1 have been consistently below the state mean – reflecting the non-English-speaking backgrounds and low socioeconomic circumstances of the students starting school at Richmond West. However, by the end of Year 2 the student outcomes often exceed the state mean and the expected percentile range.

In 2008, 100% of Year 2 students achieved the expected text level (Level 20). Approximately 75% of these students had been in one of the two bilingual programs for those three years. Students in the bilingual program, where their exposure to English is for only half the week, have achieved the same high outcomes as those students who were exposed to English for the whole week.

The findings at Richmond West mirror the conclusions of sustained international research on second language acquisition, bilingualism and bilingual education which demonstrate that learning a second language enhances and enriches children’s language experience, and offers them unique insights and opportunities for the development of cognitive skills which are unavailable to the monolingual learner (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008).

### Teaching in a bilingual school

The research highlighted the need for teachers involved in the bilingual education programs to:

- understand the students’ beliefs about the learning they are engaged in
- understand how students assess their own ongoing levels of proficiency
- devote team planning time to assess students’ language and literacy development across languages
- identify individual and group needs
- develop joint teaching goals in order to consolidate students’ strengths and build greater levels of student bilingualism and biliteracy

### How government is helping

The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development identifies the need to expand resources and opportunities for improving outcomes in languages. In the next 12 months the Government will develop a languages strategy that aims to increase student and community engagement with languages education.

One of the Department’s Research Priority Areas of Interest 2008–11 is the review and evaluation of the role of multilingual learning in the development of literacy skills and the identification of models of good practice that demonstrate an increase in knowledge of, and fluency in, particular Asian languages.
Studies show that learning a second language can enhance a child’s ability to think and reflect upon language which improves their reading readiness (DEECD 2008). Furthermore, studies show that a child who learns that meaning can be represented in more than just one way, through exposure to another language, gains valuable insights into the nature of language which can subsequently benefit their English literacy skills (DEECD 2008).

Case studies on successful bilingual programs are rare, particularly in Australia, and Richmond West is fast becoming the example of addressing this area of professional need.

To find out more about the bilingual learning program at Richmond West Primary School, visit the school’s website at: http://www.richmondwestps.vic.edu.au/language.htm

Further information on the 2009 Research Partnerships Forum can be found at: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/events/researchforum_partnerships.htm

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