

Supporting children's mother t

A child's identity, culture and language need to be fostered so that the child is motivated to

According to the most recent nationwide survey completed by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2009), newcomer students represent 10 per cent of the primary school-going population. The opportunities and challenges this presents for our teachers and students are ones that need continued attention. Supporting the culture of these students is one which most schools have adopted with open arms and enthusiasm. Hand in hand with supporting culture is a necessity to support children's own mother tongue languages.

The identity of a child, the culture of which language is a huge part needs to be fostered so that the child is both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn.

The work of Jim Cummins, an Irish

born academic, living and lecturing in the United States has pioneered much research in this area.

What research is telling us

Research into second language acquisition and bilingualism has provided evidence that point to a link between proficiency in the first language and academic achievement in the second. Cummins (1979) suggested that children need to attain a critical level of mother tongue proficiency in order to avoid negative cognitive consequences and as a result have increased success in second language acquisition.

He developed the *Threshold Theory* to explain that there may be threshold levels of linguistic competence which bilingual children must attain both in order to

avoid cognitive deficits and to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence

Alongside that he developed the *Interdependence Theory* which explains that concepts and skills acquired in the first language is transferable to the second language (Cummins, 1984, 1991) and affect the rate and level of development in the second language. The idea is that the greater the first language abilities and the more underlying linguistic knowledge available to support the development of the second language, the more rapid and complete the acquisition.

These functions develop alongside thinking skills. Related to this is the notion of Cummins that there is a *Common Underlying Proficiency* where concepts and skills acquired in the first language are transferable to or are accessible through the second language (Cummins, 2000). This widely accepted theory explains that if the *Common Underlying Proficiency* is weak, this will affect the development of the second language.

In order for children to have successful language acquisition attention needs to be given in schools to the value of both the *Threshold and Interdependence Theory*.

Bernhardt, 2000, reinforces this thought that instruction needs to accommodate the array of first languages that come into play

« We need to teach in a way that fosters transfer of concepts and skills from the students' mother tongue and identity to their current context and language »



...r tongue in our schools

ed to learn

among learners of second languages. The theory behind Cummins' thinking is written into our *Intercultural Educational Strategy 2010–2015*. We are reminded of the importance to “give due cognisance to the importance of mother tongue, by encouraging migrant students to maintain a connection with their mother tongue and culture, to assist in the development of their sense of identity, belonging and self-esteem, as well as their proficiency in the language of instruction.” The strategy also recognises “that Mother tongue proficiency assists additional language acquisition.”

What can we as teachers do?

As educators we need to teach in a way that fosters transfer of concepts and skills from the students' mother tongue and identity to their current context and language. Research has shown this type of cross curricular transfer in schools has the potential for supporting bilingualism.

It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door.

Cummins et al, 2005

It is important to remember we are limited to the extent that we cannot teach children their own language or allow too much class time to be spent on children speaking their own languages. We can however, acknowledge its importance and take certain steps to promote and support mother tongue proficiency. Ultimately it is necessary that a school keeps an overall vision in mind in its approach to literacy. That is, literacy is not solely about the development of proficiency in English but the development of proficiency in any language.

How to strengthen use of the mother tongue

- Use of online language translation tools, efforts to source texts in other languages are some opportunities teachers can explore further. The classroom should be a place where multiple languages are celebrated and supported.
- Children could be encouraged to do projects on similar themes in their own languages.
- Read books and engage in some oral work within same language circles or read dual language books on their own.
- Utilise parents to help setting up foreign language shared reading groups during Reading for Fun or CAPER (Children and Parents enjoy reading) time.
- Paired reading between senior classes and junior classes within same language groups.
- When new vocabulary and elements of grammar is introduced in English, links between it and other languages should be explored.
- Encourage a tolerance for allowing children to speak their own language during informal class time or in the yard.
- Allow children an opportunity to teach other classmates simple greetings and frequently used expressions.

At a school level it is necessary that there exists an official school policy on intercultural education. This should explicitly state the academic value in supporting both the culture and mother tongue language of newcomer children. It should be a target of every school that this is worked towards. A school policy should have procedures in place to educate and inform parents of the need to continue speaking, reading and writing with their children in their mother tongues. Efforts should be made to include parents in occasional classes where they could be of some support to teachers. At a class level, teachers can make

efforts to support the mother tongues of all their students. Every effort should be made to tailor resources to allow this to allow some mother tongue instructions to happen. Some ways of achieving this are suggested below (see box): Overall a continued vision that is evident in the whole school should be reflected in the classroom and school that language, every language is important.

Julie O'Connell is a Learning Support Teacher in North Presentation Primary School, Gerald Griffin St, Cork. Her school is currently piloting a Polish Paired Reading Group funded by a Literacy Development Award from the Reading Association of Ireland.

Bibliography

Bernhardt, EB (2000). *Second language reading as a case study of reading scholarship in the twentieth century*. In M Kamil, P Mosenthal, PD Pearson., & R Barr, (Eds), *Handbook of reading research, Volume III* (pp 793–811). Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbau

Cummins, J (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 24, 273–282.

Cummins, J (1984). *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J, Bismilla, V, Chow, P, Cohen, S, Giampapa, F, Leoni, L, et al (2005). Affirming identity in multilingual classrooms, *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 38–43.

Cummins, J (2007). *Promoting Literacy in Multilingual Contexts*, Research monograph No. 5, *What Works?* Research into Practice, A research into practice series produced by a partnership between the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education, June.

DES/OMI (2010). *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010–2015*, Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration, Government of Ireland.

Smyth, E et al, (2009). *Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students*, ESRI Research Series, No. 8, the Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin.