

Bailey and Marsden (2017). Teachers' views on recognising and using home languages in predominantly monolingual primary schools. *Language and Education* 31(4), 283-306.

## Primary teachers' attitudes towards using children's home languages

### What this study was about

How feasible is the use of multilingual activities which draw on pupils' home languages (e.g. Polish, Urdu, Bengali) in classrooms where most children speak only English?

### What the researchers did

Focussing on one area of the UK where numbers of children who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) are low, 55 teachers were asked to rate their willingness and confidence (/5) to undertake 16 suggested classroom activities on a questionnaire. 7 teachers were then observed (over a total of 15 hours) to gauge how much they used languages other than English in their teaching of literacy. Instances of them using languages or drawing on children's linguistic knowledge were tallied. The same 7 teachers were then interviewed in order to further explore their perceptions of home language use and teaching children with EAL more generally.

### What they found

*Actual use in class.* During the 15 hours of observations, none of the teachers promoted the use of children's home languages in their lessons.

*Confidence and willingness about possible class activities.* When rating hypothetical teaching activities in the questionnaire, they were more willing and more confident to use activities which supported the children's (with EAL) own learning (e.g. of English and other curriculum subjects), rather than those drawing on the children's knowledge of their home language and culture (e.g. *Using an original and a translated version of a poem by an author who shares a first language with a pupil who uses EAL in your classroom*). The teachers were also happier to implement vocabulary-based and aural activities rather than those which involved reading or writing.

*What might have affected their confidence and willingness?* The teachers supported the concept that '... pupils who use EAL can contribute to the teaching of other pupils', yet many factors which may prevent them from being *able* to do this were shown, such as their own language learning experience. It was found that the higher language qualification a teacher had, the more likely they were to say they were *more* willing and confident to implement the suggested activity. Yet, many of the teachers (20%) had no language qualifications and reported feeling apprehensive about teaching languages.

Other more ideological issues also became apparent within the analysis of the interview data specifically, for example, the *dominance* of English (in schools and society) and perceptions of the monolingualism of the area. Such attitudinal factors, it is argued, have a more significant effect on the feasibility of adopting a more multilingual outlook in schools than those which can be addressed through education and/or training, for example.

*In sum*, while drawing on pupils' knowledge of languages may be considered advantageous, as argued by previous research and also supported by many teachers in this study, in reality, many factors may represent (at least temporary) barriers to wide implementation of such practice.

### Things to think about when considering this study

These teachers' views do not necessarily reflect those of all teachers, particularly those in different areas and with different backgrounds and experiences. The teachers were only observed for a short amount of time, thus the researchers may have missed relevant classroom practice. A longer and larger study would allow conclusions to be drawn with more confidence.