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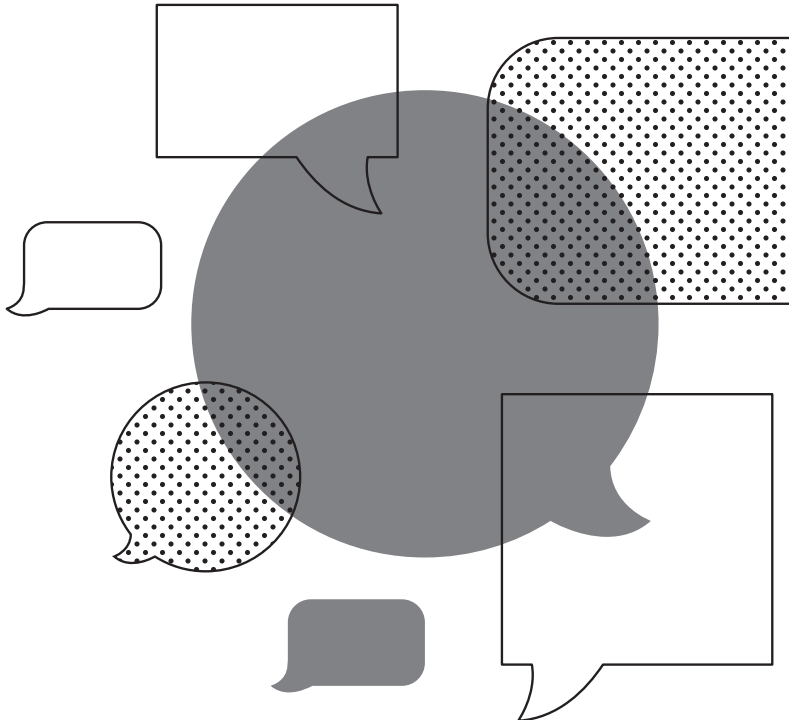
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KEY THEMES AND
CURRENT ISSUES

in Languages and Linguistics

Why teachers shouldn't be afraid of other languages being spoken in the classroom

Dr Clare Cunningham



ISSUE 2

Why teachers shouldn't be afraid of other languages being spoken in the classroom

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More than 20% of all primary school and 16% of secondary school children in the UK speak languages other than English. And there are now more than 360 languages spoken in British classrooms.

But more often than not, in mainstream schools in the UK, the “home languages” of children can be sidelined at best, and prohibited at worst. English is the language of the classroom – this is despite the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear that children from linguistic minorities should not be “denied the right” to use their own languages.

In my recent research, I found there was often a lot of fear associated with the use of “home” languages among the typically white, monolingual demographic of the teaching profession.

In my study, which looks at educator’s attitudes towards multilingualism, one teacher I spoke with explained how she likes children to respond to the register in whatever language they choose, but anything more than this is frowned upon.

She also spoke about what she called “the inappropriateness of language” – claiming that children only use other languages when they want to be rude or exclude others.

Not encouraged

This teacher is not alone in thinking classrooms should be exclusively English speaking – and it isn’t just the case in the UK. Researchers have observed prohibition of the home languages of children in France, where the thought of using any language other than French in the classroom was likened to “anarchy”. In Greece, Albanian speaking children are told that “here, we speak this language [Greek] that we all understand”.

Part of the problem, is most likely down to the fact that losing control of aspects of the learning process can be challenging for teachers. And it can take a significant investment of resources (both funding and time) to gain enough confidence to allow for other languages in your classroom.

Myths also prevail about how the use of a home language might delay transition to English and about the supposed negative effects of combining or mixing languages – known as “code switching”. Government rhetoric, as well as current policies that focus on “British values” rather than truly inclusive practices, also impact attitudes.

This leads most schools to follow the line of argument that the responsibility for maintaining home languages lies with the minority language communities themselves. But studies have shown how hard it is for families to be solely responsible for “language maintenance”.

Celebrating languages

But while a monolingual ideology may be rife in UK classrooms, there is a good understanding of the social and emotional benefits for children using and maintaining their home language. And there are increasingly positive stories demonstrating the innovative use of multiple languages in schools – including literacy and cultural projects that make the most of a classroom’s linguistic diversity.

Representing the views of a number of participants in my study, Lucy (a higher level teaching assistant and English as an additional language coordinator) said:

Keeping their language is an extremely important characteristic. It’s part of their culture, it’s who they are, it’s what they are, it’s what makes them unique.

A number of people I spoke to were also keen to tell me about the benefits of celebrating other languages and cultures – which helps to foster multiculturalism and a better understanding of languages and other cultural behaviours in all children.

The role of schools

Initial findings in my current study suggest that some schools are taking great steps forward to help offer opportunities for children to use languages beyond English. This is despite changes and cuts to funding that now limit the support schools are provided with in this area.

Teachers are striving to overcome their worries about multilingual spaces and making excellent use of online resources for curriculum based work in a range of languages – as well as providing tailored teaching materials for children that need them.

As an English as another language specialist teacher from the north-west of England explained:

If you’ve got rafts of young people who feel they haven’t been able to access the curriculum in the way others can ... how are they going to view their society and their country?

It’s the long term impact on those people and on the community and that’s for everybody, not just a particular group of people because we are all part of the country, aren’t we?.

As the numbers of children speaking other languages in the classroom continues to rise, schools must do more to avoid the potential negative effects of language loss. By sharing resources, and getting involved with the national association for English as an additional language teachers and schools can better cope with the particularly diverse linguistic setup of some classrooms.



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