Insights for Young Learners from Bilingual Education

Dr Gary M. Jones
Department of English Language & Applied Linguistics
Universiti Brunei Darussalam

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(abstract)
Some form of bilingual education is now the norm rather than the exception in most countries. Even in large mostly monolingual nations, such as those in Europe, the expectation is that a child must learn at least one other language in addition to the national language. In developing countries, including most of Asia, the need to learn English, due to its eminent role in commerce, politics and development, has meant that whether planned or otherwise most school systems now inculcate some form of bilingual education in the curriculum. The need for this type of education has coincided with a period of rapid economic expansion throughout Asia. To a great extent, events outside the classroom have overtaken planning within it, with the result that teachers and planners are often bemused by the changes and confused by the new expectations demanded from them. This paper examines some of those demands and expectations and identifies what is realistically possible, given often difficult conditions, and how this might be achieved. It looks at actual classroom practice and compares this with a model that should produce a better balanced bilingual child.

Introduction

This paper is based on research and insight into bilingual education that has been gleaned while studying the National Education System of Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), a country that has adopted mainstream bilingual education. Brunei lends itself very well to such research, being physically small (5,765 square kilometres) and having a small population (approximately 330,000). The country is situated on the north coast of the island of Borneo where it is sandwiched between the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. Brunei is fortunate in that it has large deposits of both oil and natural gas that helps to ensure a high standard of living for its citizens. Among other benefits, education is provided free to all the country’s citizens and adult literacy is almost universal.

Background to the Research

My own interest in young learners stems from studying their much older peers. It is a common experience in countries in which English is not the first or home language to hear expressions of concern from both administrative and academic staff about the English language ability of university undergraduates. Indeed, most universities devote a great deal of time and effort to this question, establishing language centres, providing dedicated teaching staff and spending money on both pre and in-service language courses. While such support is necessary, the question of what can be done to help the students really needs to be addressed at an earlier age and level. The problem is similar to that of making a cake: at a university we are only really dealing with the icing. It is the schools, particularly the primary schools, that are dealing with the raw product, providing the mix and thus determining the outcome of the cake. Therefore, the problem of
language ability among undergraduates really involves an analysis of their school experience and whether this experience might be improved.

Development of Bilingual Education in Brunei

Bilingual education in Brunei came about as much by accident as by design. The country’s 1959 Constitution states clearly that the National Language is Malay. The National Educational Policy, published in 1962, states clearly that Malay should be adopted in all schools. (At this time schools were either Malay, English or Chinese medium. Some were also, and still are, Arabic medium, but these are run by the Ministry of Religious Affairs rather than the Ministry of Education.) However, following an internal revolt in the country in 1962, the normal operation of government was temporarily suspended and when it was resumed some business was left unfinished, this included implementing the recommendations of the 1962 Policy. The matter was left unattended till 1972 when an Education Commission recommended, among other things, that the 1962 Policy should be implemented as soon as possible. Again, however, politics intervened.

In 1974 political and diplomatic relations between Brunei and Malaysia deteriorated to the extent that Bruneians studying in Malaysian universities were recalled, their degrees left unfinished. Brunei now had a problem accommodating Malay medium students. Brunei did not have a university, following the problems of 1962 Bruneians could not be sent to Indonesia and now Malaysian universities were also closed to them. The solution was to provide intensive English language courses to prospective Bruneian undergraduates and then to send them to take degrees in English medium universities, principally in the United Kingdom. This was a tried and tested route for the country’s English medium students, but they obviously had a huge language advantage when it came to actually studying abroad. Besides, the cost of providing intensive English language courses for Malay medium students, both in Brunei and abroad, was very expensive.

In part as a response to this dilemma, Brunei eventually decided to adopt a National System of Education that would be common to all. Arabic schools would still continue under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but the former Malay/English medium split would be replaced by a single system of education. In time the country’s private Chinese medium schools would also follow the common system, although they would still include Mandarin in their curriculum. The new system would mean an end to any perceived bias and would ensure equal education opportunities for all. Introduced in 1985, the new National System is a mainstream bilingual education system that uses Malay and English to teach various subjects in different languages at different times. Heavily weighted in favour of the use of Malay at the lower primary level, by secondary the majority of subjects are taught in English. (For a full description of the system see Jones, 1993)

Brunei’s Bilingual Education System
As described above, one reason for the introduction of the bilingual education system was to solve the problem of placing Brunei’s potential university students. However, little planning was involved and at the time little was understood about the implications of adopting such a system. The questions that were asked after implementation should really have been asked earlier. However, political events overtook educational planning and the constraints of the time have to be borne in mind. Due to the unusual circumstances the education authorities did not have time to consider the implications of the new system, rather, an immediate problem had to be solved.

Expectations v. Reality

Not having had time to consider the ramifications, the expectations of the new system were initially over optimistic and never matched by reality. One assumption was that providing education in two languages would result in a bilingual population of equi or balanced bilinguals. Another was that it must be desirable to teach subjects that would eventually be examined in English through the medium of English as soon in the school curriculum as possible. It soon became apparent, however, that a balanced bilingual is a very elusive creature and that simply providing classes in a particular language medium does not guarantee that a pupil would learn either the subject, the language or both. Expectations had to be adjusted – in fact, this adjustment is still taking place: as factors differ over time so the results, strengths and weaknesses of pupils vary. While expectations were being adjusted, other assumptions were also being questioned. As described, Brunei’s education system uses both English and Malay, but Malay is a language with many dialects and the Standard Malay of the classroom is not the same Malay as that used by Bruneians.

Malay is the national language of Brunei, but in teaching and all formal circumstances the Malay used is Standard Malay, based on the Malay of the Malaysian Peninsula. The first language of Bruneians, however, is Brunei Malay, a dialect that is very different from its standard brother. Thus Bruneian school children are not studying through the home language, Brunei Malay, when they enter school, but through a medium that is new to them, Standard Malay. In addition, a second new language, English, is quickly added to the mixture. To further complicate matters, for many children in the country Brunei Malay may already be a second, third or even fourth language, depending on which part of the country they come from and with whom they grew up. (Brunei has seven indigenous languages: two Malay dialects, Brunei and Kedayan, plus five languages that are distinct from Malay: Tutong, Dusun, Bisaya, Belait and Murut. For further discussion of these languages see Martin & Poedjosoedarmo, 1996. In addition to these languages, for other children the first language of the home might be a Chinese language or Iban, a language indigenous to neighbouring Sarawak.)

The introduction of the bilingual education system was closely followed by the establishment of the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Brunei’s only university. Academics from the university, particularly linguists, were encouraged to study the implementation of the bilingual education system. One of the first assumptions to be
questioned was whether children entering Bruneian schools would know the school language, Standard Malay, even if the children were themselves Malay.

**What has been learned**

Introducing the bilingual system of education, especially since this was followed very soon afterwards by the establishment of a university, raised the question of what is a language. This question was asked in relation to the languages of Brunei. Until the establishment of the university there was a widely held assumption that the country’s various languages were all dialects of Malay. Work by Nothofer, 1991 quickly dispelled this notion and today the difference between dialect and language is much better understood and appreciated. While this research was done independently of that investigating bilingual education the results, naturally, were of relevance.

A greater understanding of the country’s language mosaic made it possible to appreciate constraints affecting the education system. For instance, assuming that people speak various dialects of the same language also assumes much commonality between languages and, especially for education purposes, that the school language, Standard Malay, is similar to or even the same as the pupils’ home languages. The research dispelled this notion: Bruneians are not just multidialectal, they are also multilingual. This has enormous implications for the schools. Whether working in a mono, bi or multilingual system there is usually the assumption that one of the school’s languages, usually the first and most important language of the school, is also the language of the pupil’s home. This is not the case in Brunei: for the majority of children Standard Malay is a new language first encountered when they enter school. Nevertheless, given the multilingual nature of the society, and given the impracticalities of trying to use Brunei Malay as a school language, Standard Malay must remain as a medium within the schools.

Allowing for the language constraint, the question still remained about whether the new education system would prove successful. Merrill Swain (Swain, 1983) has identified three common denominators of successful bilingual education:

- That in addition to acquisition of the second language the child’s first language is psychologically, linguistically and cognitively maintained.
- That teachers use separate languages in the classroom.
- That the community recognizes bilingualism as a valuable bonus having political, economic, cultural, psychological, linguistic and cognitive advantages.

As already described, defining what the Bruneian pupil’s first language is is in itself a problem. Setting aside the arguments and assuming it to be Standard Malay then it can be accepted that the conditions for denominator one are met. Malay is the national language in Brunei, it is widely used and it has prestige. In the foreseeable future at least its dominant position in the country should remain unchallenged.
The second denominator has rather been overtaken by events. Why Swain should stress separate languages in the classroom is immediately apparent, however, especially in the very early years, pupils generally need the emotional and psychological support of their first language. A certain amount of sympathy and commonsense is required. Nevertheless, a point is quickly reached where resorting to the pupils’ first language is actually detrimental to second language acquisition and teaching needs to be done exclusively through the target language. Whether this is being achieved in Brunei depends greatly upon the individual teacher. In many cases the teacher herself may not have sufficient command of the English language, or sufficient confidence, to use the language throughout a lesson. In other cases the teacher does not know the pupils’ first language, so the question does not arise. In theory, however, denominator two is achieved.

The third of the denominators is perhaps the most important. When the education system was introduced and when research into bilingualism and bilingual education commenced, nobody knew whether these attributes were being met. This then became a major focus for research – the results are described below.

**Attitude**

A survey was conducted across the country to determine attitudes towards bilingual education and bilingualism in general. The survey was prepared at UBD and conducted with the assistance of the Ministry of Education. It was comprehensive and was designed to reach a large representative cross section of the Brunei population. A major consideration was confidentiality and to develop the trust of the respondents. This was achieved and the result was a truly comprehensive national analysis of attitudes towards languages used in the education system.

Prior to conducting the survey there was an assumption that the Brunei population might actually be opposed to bilingual education and to the use of English in the school system. This concern reflected the many statements that were being made at the time about nationalism and the use of the Malay language. As it turned out, however, it was revealed that while many individuals were saying one thing their actions were very different. Overwhelmingly the population showed itself to be in favour of neither Malay nor English education systems, but rather a bilingual education system using both Malay and English. In other words, the population showed itself to be hugely supportive of exactly the sort of education system that the country had introduced. As far as Merrill Swain’s third denominator is concerned, therefore, it is clear that the community does recognise bilingualism as a bonus and that they recognise its political, economic, cultural, psychological, linguistic and cognitive advantages.

Thus far the prognosis for bilingual education in Brunei looks good. The denominators for a successful system are all present and most importantly the country has very positive attitudes to the education system. Despite these positive indicators, however, results were not as good as might have been hoped. Many children continued to struggle with both the school languages as well as with their subjects. Of course, no education system can ever
hope to be perfect, there will always be failures and problems with such issues as particular school catchment areas and, in Brunei at least, with teacher supply. These factors aside, however, there are other problems that were not foreseen and which still need to be addressed.

Weaknesses

In a report to the Bruneian Ministry of Education in 1993, Professor Baetens Beardsmore highlighted the relation of Jim Cummins’s BICS/CALP division of language and its relation to Brunei. Cummins (1984) has distinguished between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The basic assumption of the division is that BICS-type skills must be acquired before a learner is ready for CALP-type skills. Moreover, CALP involves some universal underlying proficiency that is shared across languages. Thus CALP is transferable – skills learned in one language could be transferred to another and vice versa. When planning a school curriculum, therefore, the obvious thing to do would be to first encourage the development of BICS before proceeding with subjects that require CALP skills. In a monolingual school system this progress would occur quite naturally. In a bilingual system, however, this progression cannot be assumed.

When planning the school curriculum and the order and medium in which subjects would be introduced the first consideration in Brunei was the final school examinations and the language mediums in which they would be taken. Thus it was decided that those subjects that are examined in English when the pupils are sixteen years of age (the final year of compulsory schooling) should be taught as early as possible in English while those that would eventually be examined in Malay would be taught in Malay. In practice, however, this means that many subjects requiring CALP are introduced in English before the pupils have fully mastered BICS in that language. Teachers therefore find themselves in the impossible situation of having to teach academically demanding subjects to pupils in a language that the pupils do not properly understand.

As suggested earlier, children in a monolingual environment make the progression from BICS to CALP quite naturally. With bilingual education this progression has to be contrived. Young children learn their language(s) from their surroundings, from interaction in the family and from playing with friends. Obviously, this is also the pattern for Bruneian children, acquiring one, two or three or more languages before they even start school. English, however, apart from the few families that use the language in the home, is not a language that will be acquired in this way. For the majority of Bruneians the first exposure to English is at school. The language is taught as a subject, but given the avowed aim of the bilingual policy – to achieve native-like competency in the language – provision has to go beyond treating the language as just another subject.

The BICS/CALP division is not without its critics, Romaine (1989) for one has argued that language skills cannot be neatly compartmentalised. Nevertheless, the assumption that some subjects are more language friendly than others, that they lend themselves to the acquisition of BICS, is inescapable. Physical education classes, for instance, are not
theoretically demanding (certainly not at the primary level), but they are activity and language rich; they provide an excellent platform for teaching language in an unthreatening environment. Similarly, primary level art classes provide further opportunities to exploit language while developing BICS. Unfortunately for the language planners and school children in Brunei, neither of these subjects is taught in English thus the opportunity to present the new school language in an unthreatening environment is lost. Instead, after only three years at school and only ever having studied English as a subject, Bruneian pupils are then expected to study mathematics, science and geography in English. No matter how well intentioned or innovative the teacher, it is clear that these subjects do not provide the sort of opportunities to exploit language acquisition that are offered by physical education and art. These subjects require CALP and many pupils are not ready for the transition from BICS to CALP after only three years at school.

Teachers

As has been suggested, the introduction of the bilingual system was done with little planning. There was no time to retrain teachers or explain objectives. As a result many teachers found themselves teaching in a medium in which they were not particularly comfortable. An important criteria for any bilingual education programme is that teachers should be proficient in the target language. This was not the case for all teachers in Brunei in 1985. Since then the local teacher training institute within the University of Brunei Darussalam has been graduating as many teachers as it can. All must be proficient in English, although the accepted level of proficiency means that some graduates still fall short of being good role models for their pupils.

Assuming that the majority of teachers will be locally recruited, and assuming also that not all will have an ideal level of target language proficiency, then consideration needs to be given as to how these teachers can best be assisted in the classroom. Clearly further training and in-service courses would help, but of more immediate benefit is a supply of well constructed teaching aids. These might be in the form of classroom posters, overhead projector slides, videos or written handouts. If properly prepared and in sufficient quantity, the teacher is able to focus attention away from herself and towards something that provides a good language model. This does assume, however, that a central body able to produce such teaching materials exists and is able to deliver.

Another problem that has been realised with teachers in Brunei is that they very often lack an appreciation of the problems faced by pupils in a bi as opposed to a monolingual education system. This is particularly true of teachers who are themselves monolingual and who come from monolingual countries and whose previous teaching experience has only been with monolingual children. They are recruited to teach English medium subjects and many of these teachers unfortunately have the attitude that the pupils should adjust to them rather than that they make changes to their own teaching methods.

Gender inequality
An observation that may be related to the type of education system introduced in Brunei is that females are obviously outperforming males at school and later in tertiary studies (Jones, 1998). This not only a Bruneian phenomenon, the same is being reported in many countries around the world, in both mono as well as bilingual communities. Nevertheless, in Brunei the differences in performance are very marked and initial research suggests that the gender gap starts as soon as children enter school and becomes most apparent at Primary Four level—the year when greater emphasis is given to English. This would suggest that while neither boys nor girls might have reached an appropriate language threshold for their English medium studies, the girls are at least coping better than their male counterparts.

Suggestions

What insights for young learners can be gathered from these experiences? It might be assumed that with proper and adequate planning, with an analysis of education and second language acquisition theory and with a sufficient budget that all eventualities can be foreseen and that no problems should arise. However, despite the best intentions of everyone involved, education planning is rarely planned and implemented to schedule. External factors, particularly political and economic change, cannot always be predicted, with the result that action has to be taken without sufficient analysis being given to the implications. This was certainly the case in Brunei. Educational planners are still learning as they go, with the result that things are evolving in situ rather than as a result of having been planned.

Following are insights for young learners in a bilingual education system based largely (but not solely) on the Bruneian experience:

- Ensure a supply of properly trained primary school teachers who are proficient in the language medium through which they will teach (and preferably bilingual themselves). Moreover, given the huge responsibility on these teachers to ensure that their pupils attain an academic threshold in all the school’s languages, such teachers should be considered and treated as the equal of their counterparts in secondary schools. (Although this is rarely the case: primary teachers are often poorly qualified and paid compared to secondary school teachers.) Such teachers will need training or retraining in the special needs of bilingual education and second language acquisition.

- Provide interesting and relevant teacher support. This needs to be done by a teaching materials centre and will take the form of class handouts, posters, videos and worksheets.

- Relate the primary school curriculum to the language ability and needs of the pupils. In other words, introduce the second or any new languages through subjects, such as physical education and art, that allow for real, rich and unthreatening classroom interaction. At the primary level play provides the best opportunity to acquire new language. With skillful use of classroom time the teacher can create a supportive and conducive learning environment. Plunging pupils who are not yet ready into
academically demanding subjects is demotivating for all concerned. This very often results in a damaging and lasting negative attitude towards schooling for the pupils concerned.

- All teachers will teach to the examination. Examination results reflect a measure of the teacher's success; head teachers want to see good results and both parents and pupils demand good results. This being the case, examinations, especially for young learners, need to be designed with the learners’ best interests in mind. Too often examinations are poorly and arbitrarily planned, based very often on a poor understanding of the final public examinations, which are ten years off anyway in the case of young learners. In a bilingual education system it is crucial that examinations reflect the needs of language and language acquisition, especially at the primary level. Thought needs to be given to the type of questions asked, how they are asked and how this will contribute to classroom teaching rather than hinder it.

- Given properly trained teachers and given a language and examination-friendly curriculum, classroom practice should take care of itself. Such practice should create language rich activities, not just in the language classroom but through other subjects as well. Language across the curriculum is never more important that at the primary level, but unfortunately it is still the practice in many places for teaching to be compartmentalised, with subject teachers giving little consideration to the problems of language. Although this is poor teaching, many teachers would argue, and quite correctly, that they have not received any training in language acquisition theory and are therefore not in a position to help. Quite clearly, such training should be provided, whether pre or in-service.

**Implementation limitations**

It is one thing to suggest plans for the implementation of an education system, it is often a very different matter when it comes to actually seeing them through. For instance, suggesting that teachers should all be adequately trained assumes a great deal more than might actually be possible.

In order to train the teachers we first need teacher trainers, and not just any teacher trainers but those familiar with the peculiarities of a bilingual education system. In Brunei, initially at least, neither teachers nor teacher trainers existed and all had to be employed from overseas. (Indeed, many are still recruited from overseas.) However, while Brunei could afford to do this most countries do not have the luxury of being able to afford to recruit expensive foreign staff. The reality, therefore, is that a nation might have to accept employing teachers who are not wholly suitable for the job. Nevertheless, this need not be a permanent predicament and eventually the ideal type of teacher will replace the only ones who were initially available. (This transition though, will not happen immediately. This is a process that should be considered in generations, a transition period of forty years is not unreasonable.)
Even if the process takes time, and even though pupils may initially be disadvantaged, such teachers and teacher trainers are a necessity. If a country is sufficiently large to have an adequate pool of teachers to ensure that only those who are fully able actually make it to the classroom then so much the better. This has not been the case in Brunei. Very often those people who would have made the most able teachers have been lured away from teaching by apparently more glamorous and high paying careers. Ironically, given the recession that is now affecting Brunei, some of those very same individuals, as well as school leavers who might otherwise have gone elsewhere, are now applying to become teachers. Not, unfortunately, because they have any great motivation to be teachers, but because teaching provides secure employment in an increasingly competitive job market, especially teaching English medium subjects and most especially English language.

Just as actually securing teachers is far from easy, so changing the medium through which subjects will be taught creates problems. This change assumes that the teachers will themselves be able to switch from one language medium to another. This is not always the case. In the past, in Brunei at least, many of the art and physical education teachers were unable to teach in English, so a change with those teachers would not have been possible. Today, however, with more trainee teachers emerging from the bilingual education system, this should be less of a problem, but note that it has already taken fifteen years to reach this point.

Changing the medium may also mean changing the syllabus, inevitable if it is going to include consideration for language acquisition. Changing a syllabus involves rewriting the textbooks and examinations. Somebody has to do this and the education authorities have to pay for it all. In a large country it should be possible to call on a sufficient pool of textbook writers, or commission a publishing company, to provide the new materials. In a small country like Brunei, however, there is not necessarily a pool of textbook writers and economies of scale often make it prohibitively expensive to commission commercial publication of textbooks. Change may not therefore always be possible, especially not during a recession.

Public examinations often hinder rather than help classroom practice. However, in a small country like Brunei internationally recognised qualifications are important because locally-based examinations may count for very little outside of the country. Thus Brunei still uses the British General Certificate of Education examinations to test its pupils in their final school years. These are examinations designed for native speakers of English and which do not reflect the needs of a small Islamic sultanate on the north coast of Borneo. Nevertheless, they are internationally recognised, and armed with their GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ level examination certificates Bruneians are able to secure university places and work around the world. This is something of a trade off: international recognition at the expense of a more appropriate examination and school curriculum. The situation can be improved and locally produced examinations under the auspices of a GCE examining body would seem to suggest the most likely way forward.

Conclusion
Many factors that determine the success or failure of an education system are beyond the control of education planners. These include the socioeconomic background of pupils, local politics and resources. Nevertheless, while there may be little that can be done about these there are many school-based factors that can be considered. This paper has attempted to describe these. Although based on the experience of a small nation in Southeast Asia, these factors are really universal and applicable wherever a school system is using more than one language for teaching.

Perhaps the most important factor contributing to the continuing development of bilingual education in Brunei is the positive attitude to having an education system that includes both the national language and English. A role for both languages is widely accepted in Brunei: both are necessary for career advancement, particularly in the country’s civil service. An education system that does not fulfill the wishes of the people, or one that does not fulfill the needs of a country’s employers, is doomed to failure.

I hope that this paper has helped to explain some of the factors that should be considered when introducing education to young learners in a bilingual education system. There are additional factors, and there will be local considerations, but what is presented here should be universally applicable and, I trust, useful.

References


