

## **Skills, knowledge and academic performance of bilingual students**

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Dealing with the educational needs of bilingual (immigrant) students is not a new issue in countries that have a tradition in hosting immigrants. In Greece we are in the process of building this kind of tradition under time pressure, then at the same time we have to deal with the urgent demand for a language planning and educational programs for bilingual students with immigrant background.

Immigrant students in Greece perform poorly (IMEPO 2004). At the same time the average level of school performance towards the end of compulsory education is manifested as low (PISA 2000, PISA 2003).

The challenge is to formulate some basic principles, upon which we could work in order to improve academic performance of immigrant students and at the same time to affect positively the level of the academic performance in general.

We suggest we start with a few general principles:

- Linguistically and culturally diverse learning / teaching contexts represent the rule rather than an exception
- Education of bilingual students is not bilingual education.
- Schools as social institutions can orient themselves either to language homogeneity (monolingualism) or to language diversity (bilingualism /multilingualism).
- Bilingual students often find themselves (i.e. as immigrants) in monolingually orientated schools where they are taught academic contents through a second language while trying to cope with language itself.

### Where do we place the Greek case in this context?

According to the available data, 6,7% of the whole student population in primary schools are immigrants (IPODE 2003-2004, IMEPO 2004). According to the UNICEF study for “Discriminations, Racism & Xenophobia in the Greek School System” that was conducted in the major cities of Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki), 87% of the interviewed teachers reported that they had immigrant students in their classes (UNICEF 2001). These sources show clearly that we have to do with a central phenomenon. In Greece we have bilingual students but no bilingual education programs. Practically, this means that students with a first language other than Greek are taught in mainstream content classes through their second language as if it were their first language. Furthermore, this applies for contexts where learning the content takes place simultaneously with learning the language through which the content is taught. It is a complicated task, which takes place under the pressure of time. Time

plays a significant role because it takes longer to develop academic language skills than it takes to develop conversational skills in the same language (Cummins 2000).

### Assessment of academic performance and immigrant students internationally

PISA assesses

“how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and the skills that are essential for full participation in society. In all cycles, the domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life” (PISA 2003).

In PISA 2003 “problem solving” that refers to students capacity to deal with cross-disciplinary issues was additionally assessed, while in forthcoming PISA 2006 assessment of students’ ICT skills will be added too. Each PISA study has a focus: reading literacy for PISA 2000, mathematical literacy for PISA 2003, scientific literacy for PISA 2006, and reading literacy for PISA 2009.

According to the PISA studies (2000, 2003) as well as to the IGLU-Study (2003) immigrant students in the counties of inquiry seem to perform poorly in academic testing in a way that negatively affects negatively the average academic performance of all students in the country involved.

The PISA (2000) study, referring to the case of Germany, which had fallen below the average rate, concludes that if it were possible for Germany to improve the academic performance of its immigrant students, this would result in positioning Germany above the average rate rather than below it. There are a series of reasons given for the poor performance of immigrant students and a few general suggestions are made in order to improve results (IGLU 2003).

As regards Greece, the available data show a similar picture. Immigrant students with diverse linguistic and cultural background seem to be concentrated in the primary schools and less in the secondary levels. In fact, the lowest percentage of immigrant students in Greece is located at either extreme of the preschool, primary and secondary levels of the educational system: in Kindergarten and in Lyceum (senior secondary level). Taking for granted that Lyceum represents the level with the most intensive academic challenges, we went through the average grades the immigrant students achieve in this level and we correlated it to their duration of stay in Greece. The surprising conclusion was that the duration of stay did not mean better performance levels. Both newcomers and students who had gone through the whole system (kindergarten, primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels) did not differ significantly. On the other hand, we know that there are brilliant exceptions to the rule and that immigrant student achieve high level of academic performance (something that often becomes rather negatively made public through the media). The same sources inform us that at the concluding grade of Lyceum the immigrant students who perform better are those that were born in the country of origin rather than those who were born in Greece. It is worth mentioning that according to the PISA (2003) study, a similar phenomenon seems to emerge in Germany: immigrant students who grew up in Germany and went through the German school system appear to perform as poor as or even worse than students who immigrated into Germany at a later point in their life.

The points above raise some issues:

1. Does a developed first language play a role in leveling the academic performance of immigrant students?
2. How long does it take to develop academic language skills?
3. How could we accelerate the development of academic language skills?
4. How could we activate prior knowledge in order to promote content learning?

#### Issue 1:

Theory and research and practice being in a dialogic relationship seem to result in the common conclusion that the continuous or temporary development of the entire linguistic repertoire of language users does not cause them any harm. Referring to practice we have the examples of elite bilingual / international schools in Europe and elsewhere, as well as the immersion programs in Canada. At the same time, it remains a fact that the majority of mainstream schools in the inner city areas are hosting large numbers of bilingual students with poor academic performance. How is it that privileged schools are building upon bilingualism while schools with bilingual students are unprivileged largely because of the linguistic diversity of their students? For answers to these questions we need to shift to a sociopolitical rather to a linguistic or educational orientation.

#### Issue 2:

Exposure to a dominant language in school and in the wider environment leads immigrant students to a considerable fluency in this language in a short time. It is not always easy to discriminate immigrant students from native speakers on the ground of their conversational fluency or accent. However, when it comes to academic aspects of language, fluent immigrant students might fall far behind their school companions who are native speakers (Gándara 1999). As it has been documented through a series of studies this discrepancy between developmental patterns for conversational and academic language skills has consequences for a variety of curricular and assessment issues (Hakuta et al. 2000, Shohamy 2000, Ramirez 1992). The time difference is considerable: a rapid growth of conversational skills to a native proficiency level, opposite to at least five-years-time for catching up to native proficiency in academic skills (Cummins 2000, 2001) Summarizing the relevant research findings, Cummins retains a few major reasons to explain this time discrepancy in development of language skills: the considerably “less knowledge of language itself” that it is required, along with the implementation of contextual and interpersonal cues that facilitate communication of meaning in interpersonal communication. Considering the fact that native speakers themselves reach a plateau in conversational skills relatively early, it explains furthermore why immigrant students catch up with peer appropriate levels in conversational fluency. On the other hand, the same native speakers continue schooling constantly expanding their proficiency in academic language. Sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, improving literacy skills in reading and writing academically, are tasks that they need a long time to complete.

To conclude: language proficiency in school differs considerably with a general notion of language proficiency that could be proven to be conversational fluency only. Developed language skills in academic contexts are identical with academic skills. These academic skills include the skills that according to the PISA study are required from students towards the end of the compulsory education: reading literacy, mathematical literacy, science, problem solving.

We have to find ways to combine academic involvement with an accelerated growth of academic language.

### Issue 3:

The instructional framework we present here represents an attempt to combine academic language development with age / grade appropriate content. It highlights three interrelated strategies of language teaching but in the heart of it, is no language as such but a much more central pedagogical imperative: in order to allow learning to take place there must be such teacher-students interactions that allow for and promote “maximum cognitive engagement” as well as “maximum identity investment” of students (Cummins 2001). The foundation for learning is in this way built equally on cognition (knowledge construction) and affirmation (identity issues). Now that the PISA findings stress the need for improvement of the tested skills, it might seem that focusing on identity issues is not urgent. We stress on the other hand that we cannot separate knowledge construction and skills from identity because both are integrated features of learning / teaching interaction: nobody could learn without feeling that he/she belongs to the learning community, i.e. that he / she is accepted as a personality, but feeling well alone is not enough if there is no cognitively challenging input to bring the student further in his / her knowing process (Wells 1999).

### **Figure 1: The Development of Academic Expertise**

The three interrelated strategies of language teaching build upon “meaning”, “language form” “and language use”. In this sense, focus on meaning aims to cover a range from making input comprehensible (Krashen 1985) to developing critical literacy (Cummins 2000, 2001, Skourtou, Kourti-Kazoullis, Cummins in press). Understanding what content is about is, according to Wells (1999), the foundation of meaning making or making input comprehensible. The more the content makes sense to the learner, the more language he /she learns. Focus on language itself includes all grammatical corpuses that are relevant to each language. In linguistically diverse contexts teachers may organize their teaching of the grammar of the language totally independently from their students’ first language(s). For the bilingual student though learning the grammar of a new language develops in relation to the grammar of his / her first language. That means that a first language may be absent from a teaching process while it is always present in a learning process (Skourtou 2002). The present framework suggests that there must be a shift from focusing to the target language exclusively to focusing on teaching target language in relation to first language(s). In this way, we put the focus on language form under the umbrella of language awareness. We claim that a shift of focus from target language exclusively to a relation between target language and the first language(s) of our students helps bilingual students to accelerate their learning of Greek academic language (IMEPO 2004) because this makes them realize what they already know, what is similar or different between their languages, what is appropriate to say in each language in similar circumstances. Focus on use stresses the importance of using language to generate new knowledge and to create meaningful texts. It is here where the combination of maximum cognitive involvement and of maximum identity investment takes shape. Students who understand the meaning of what they are taught and learn the language forms and their uses in relation to their first language(s) are encouraged to create texts or other artifacts that represent themselves in the most genuine way. We call these new texts / artifacts “identity texts” (Skourtou, Kourti-Kazoullis, Cummins in press).

#### Issue 4:

The connecting thread between knowledge construction and identity investment is the activation of the prior cognitive and linguistic knowledge of students. We consider prior knowledge as a familiarity with a particular content. Activation of prior knowledge is always useful in order to integrate new input in existing cognitive schemata, making thus the learning process more efficient. Especially in multilingual settings activation of prior knowledge helps to make input comprehensible and more context-embedded, allows the teacher to comprehend the experiences immigrant students come into school with and helps immigrant students realize what they already know from the content they are taught through second language. This has consequences both for learning (especially for building background knowledge) and for identity empowerment. We stress the need to support activation of prior knowledge because prior knowledge does not make itself automatically explicit if new content is taught through a second language. In this way, a second language learner cannot realize how much of the content is already familiar to him /her.

Cummins (2001) summarizes the research evidence about positive effects that activation of prior knowledge in learning communities with diverse language background has for learning (Chamot 1998; Meyer 2000; Freeman & Freeman 1998, 2000 in Cummins 2001). Prior knowledge (cognitive or linguistic) is always cultural knowledge. Activation of prior knowledge makes the cultural background visible, something that first of all enables teachers to realize the potential students bring with them to school, build upon it and also organize the necessary contextual support in order to secure maximum cognitive engagement of the students. If prior knowledge is kept out of the classroom, somehow in the darkness, students may be kept repeating known content that makes no cognitive demands on them. It might look like supporting immigrant students when offering them already familiar material to work upon, but keeping cognitive demands under a peer appropriate level may result into knowledge deconstruction.

As we have mentioned earlier, the available data in Greece show a gradual decline of the representation of immigrant students in secondary level. At the same time, they show that there are immigrant students who graduate from primary school older than the average age. It is worthwhile to examine whether putting and keeping immigrant students in lower grade for longer periods of time than normal forces them to retreat from learning and to orientate themselves to labor instead.

In summary: the challenge we face is to secure a continuum in language and knowledge construction for all in a positive climate for all that allows and encourages every single student to build new knowledge and language on prior linguistic and cognitive knowledge.

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