

This article by Thomas and Roberts examines the bilingual language education of children inside and outside of the classroom in Welsh-English speaking primary schools. The authors state that there is a reluctance to use the L2 language (Welsh) in the social environment. The hindrances in using Welsh outside the classroom or in settings such as the playground depend on various influences such as home use, affective concerns of the students in peer-relations where English is preferred and if students attend schools with predominately Welsh speaking classes. Yet bilingual education has a definitive role to play in the development and maintenance of Welsh.

The participants were from 16 different schools in North West Wales with a mixed home language background. There were 145 students between the ages of 8 and 11 from English only speaking homes, Welsh only speaking homes and some from Welsh-English speaking homes. The researchers asked the students in a questionnaire about language in their community, with peers, with family and attitudes toward language use. They also conducted language observation both in and out of the classroom, with questioning in focus groups.

During school immersion, evidence from prior research suggests “that communicative competence can be achieved in an L2 in as little as two years of immersion schooling, whilst academic competence can take up to nine years to master (e.g. Cummins 1981a; Collier 1987, 1989)” (p.90). Bilingual teaching methods may be to blame in not engaging the student in a beneficial response by the type of questions asked. The type of questioning hinder higher-order thinking by permitting non verbal responses and short knowledge based responses. This particular study seems to give strong support to the findings of the study given to the schools, in

part, because of the findings in teacher-pupil interactions. Although the teacher taught in Welsh “some children would approach the teacher in English” (p.99). It seems that the students approaching with the use of English were at some point “allowed” to use English as they claim they do on the playground or with staff.

Usually, as in the case of the Welsh students, bilinguals have varying degrees of language abilities. These differences arise from “differences in patterns, age and frequency of exposure” (p.90). Vocabulary, the authors note, can be reduced in both the English and Welsh languages compared to their peers that speak one language. Children watch the soccer games (or football) in English and therefore learn the vocabulary for sports and play in English. Another deterrent to the use of Welsh during non school hours is “since most computer games are available only in English, and are often solitary activities, the child is engaged in English mostly during such activities” (p.105). Boys are more involved in these activities and therefore more likely to use English.

A major problem is that students will revert to English for multiple reasons. When there is a group conversation, English is used, and it usually only takes one child with strong language ability in the language. Children revert to what seems to be the “most natural means of communication for them” (p.92), outside of the classroom. If children are from English speaking homes they use English outside of school. In the actual classroom, as anticipated, those who use Welsh more often came from Welsh speaking homes. In fact, “the higher the proportion of children from Welsh speaking homes...the more Welsh was spoken with the teacher in class” (p.96).

Familiarity with the particular language seems to govern the use of the language whether inside or outside the class. I have taught English to Laotian adults and when they had some item

of interest they would readily converse in Laotian amongst each other. I also experienced this with a mixed group of adults learning English but a large contingent of the Spanish speakers wanted to discuss their findings in Spanish. I received questions in Spanish because they knew I could function in Spanish, but I had to make them ask again in English and answer in English.

We don't have the same situation like in other countries, such as Wales, where survival of Welsh is of cultural significance but to me what was essential is that higher order thinking processes are critical to the responses in English. The type of questioning by the teacher must elicit these responses to solicit more than "yes" or "no" responses or one word answers to be most effective. Vocabularies for groups of items would be helpful for the ESL teacher to teach, since reverting to the language which the students are most comfortable is often a result of a lack of vocabulary. Sometimes an immigrant is held back in their pursuit of the language of survival in their community because of conversing in their own language with the people that know it. In the school setting, I have had students converse in a group from a variety of countries like Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras because they were more familiar with Spanish than English. I think it was simply more expedient to converse in the language they knew better because their competency in English was varied.

Careful attention to the ESL classroom to ensure English is used and practiced is a necessity. Monitoring the use of the L2 and encouraging development of vocabularies and context will help in the student's mastery of the L2.

References

- Thomas E., & Roberts, D. (2011). Exploring bilinguals' social use of language inside and out of the minority language classroom. *Language & Education: An International Journal*, 25(2), 89-108. doi:10.1080/09500782.2010.544743s