Understanding Bilingual Learning in Post-Primary Education

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Abstract

This study is concerned with the supports available to language teachers in post-primary schools in supporting bilingual learning.

Using a qualitative methodology, this study comprises of data and findings from semi-structured interviews with four language teachers regarding their experience of teaching a language.

It investigates challenges faced by language teachers and explores supports available to them.

The study is representative of actual information and data collected and identifies an imbalance in curriculum within written and oral content that does not support oral competency development of the student.

The research identifies a lack of policy and documented directives on how the languages should be taught and the difficulty of mixed ability class teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with bilingual learning (BL) in post-primary classrooms.
The rationale for this study was motivated by the researcher's personal interest in the topic stemming from their position as a student language teacher. Through observation while on school placement, conversations with teachers and fellow student teachers, the lack of awareness of language policy was apparent. Literature also influenced the basis for this study. The researcher is interested in how BL benefits students in various aspects of their lives including socially and cognitively.
The main aim of this research study is to explore the overarching question of "can the provision of appropriate supports be useful to lessen the challenges faced in BL to gain maximum benefit". To assist in answering this central question and research topic, the following questions have been identified:

- What methodologies and policies exist to support teachers and students in bilingual learning and what level of awareness do teachers have on such methodologies and policies?
- Are there advantages associated with bilingual learning? If so, what are they?
- Are there challenges associated with bilingual learning? If so, how can students be supported?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research design for this dissertation is interpreted as qualitative research. The rationale for choosing qualitative methodology of research is the difficulty in quantifying the experiences and opinions of participants (Cohen et al. 2011).

Qualitative research allows for the expansion of understanding and allows for in-depth exploration and analysis. Where quantitative research is concerned with a numerical approach including statistics and figures, qualitative research focuses on the experience of people and allows the researcher to understand the content within individual responses.

The sampling method chosen to complete this research was convenience purposive sampling as the investigation aimed at gathering information on BL would require participation by those best placed to partake in the research and in answering the research questions. A sample size of n=4 was selected.

FINDINGS/ RESULTS

The findings that emerged, following qualitative research, were categorised and subsequently generated themes were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013). The themes capture something recurring and important that emerged in the interviewing process that assist in answering the research questions.
The findings are summarised as follows:

Curriculum Imbalance

- A key finding from the semi-structured interviews was the curriculum imbalance of languages within post-primary schools. In particular, the emphasis being placed on the written literature rather than on the spoken language, a common feature of both the Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert curriculum. By placing the emphasis on form, communication and its importance is viewed as secondary, further exacerbating the challenges of bilingual learning.
- Participants did acknowledge the decision taken by the DES on introducing an oral component of the Junior Cycle in reducing the desk-orientated tasks benefits the students' oral ability. However, apart from this one-off assessment, students do not revisit a structured oral format until LC and so the focus remained on the written.
- Participants also outlined concern of the vast quantity of literature expected to be taught- literature of which is "*not relatable to students*"

Resources Available

- Participants of the study highlighted the lack of resources available to them as language teachers. Outdated or inexistent language labs, damaged CD players and limited posters were mentioned by participants.
- The availability of languages teachers at post-primary level was identified in the interviews as well as a shortage in language books.

Gap Between Policy and Practice

- One of the issues that emerged was the lack of policy awareness and documented guidance including methodologies that are available for teachers on how they could support students learning a language within a post-primary school
- Although a prominent feature in the interviews that were conducted showed how the skill set of a particular language can be adapted in learning an additional language, little connection was identified between the language departments on topics to be covered.

Modern Foreign Language and An Ghaeilge

- When investigating the challenges identified in the interviews that the participants faced in supporting bilingual learning, an interesting point to note was that the challenges appear to impact more on the Gaeilge department rather than the MFL department.
- Common level papers, Gaelscoileanna and mixed ability classes were among the differences.

DISCUSSION

The researcher concluded that curricula and in turn the language assessments that exist do not support BL overall as the focus is placed predominantly on the written aspect and less emphasis on oral competence.

It is evident that the vast quantity of literature and the content within the literature has been identified as outdated and in need of a reform in order to engage and make the material relatable to the students.

Another finding recognises the need for additional resources and supports being made available to language teachers in post-primary school which can be achieved through increased policy awareness and increased personnel.

The chapter identified the difficulty in having mixed ability students within one Gaeilge classroom which can result in some students not progressing as appropriate to the aptitude, again, a feature that may benefit from increased language personnel.

From the research it emerged that there is a need for more collaboration between teachers of all languages to develop the integrated approach to teaching languages.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the research, conducted through semi-structured interviews, the provision of appropriate supports mainly in policy, personnel and resources would lessen the challenges of BL. The research has concluded the curriculum imbalance and lack of policy awareness between the language departments has contributed to the challenges.

The researcher concludes the creation and implementation of internal school language policy, in addition to external curriculum reform, will reduce the challenges faced in BL and in turn enhance their support of students as a language teacher.

KEY REFERENCES

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