Do monolingual teachers produce a Golem effect in multilingual students?

Teacher expectations produce self-fulfilling prophecies in student performance: high teacher expectations result in students' higher academic performance and low teacher expectations result in students' lower academic performance. The positive effect of teacher expectations on student performance is called “Pygmalion Effect” and the negative effect is called “Golem effect.” Evidence for a Golem effect in teaching was first provided in a 1982 Israeli study. The researchers Elisha Babad, Jacinto Inbar and Robert Rosenthal provided evidence for the Golem effect “with low-expectancy students of high-bias teachers receiving a more negative treatment and performing less well than any of their peers” (p. 473).

The transformation of teacher expectations into student academic performance works through four factors, as Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jakobson explain in their classic book *Pygmalion in the Classroom*:

1. **Climate**: Teachers are nicer to students of who they have high expectations and create a warmer climate for them.
2. **Input**: Teachers teach more material to students of who they have high expectations.
3. **Response opportunity**: Teachers provide more response opportunities to students of who they have high expectations and help them shape the answer.
4. **Feedback**: Teachers praise students of who they have high expectations more and provide them with more detailed and constructive feedback when they get their answer wrong.

In the original study of the Pygmalion effect by Rosenthal and Jakobson a positive expectation was created in teachers by telling them at the beginning of the school year that five randomly selected children in their class had done extraordinarily well on a predictive test of academic aptitude and could therefore be expected to become “late bloomers” over the course of the year. It turned out that, within the school year, these five randomly selected kids achieved the greatest gains in academic performance in the class. Obvious evidence for a Pygmalion effect!

Ethical experimental research designs to investigate the Golem effect are much more difficult to come up with (Babad, Inbar and Rosenthal circumvented the ethical problem by studying teacher trainees who made a one-off assessment that had no consequence whatsoever for the way other teachers assessed the student or the way the students' overall performance was assessed).

Beyond artificially inducing high or low expectations of academic talent, the implications of the Pygmalion and Golem effects in diverse schools are clear for students from backgrounds about whom group stereotypes exist: if there is a widespread belief in a society that the children of rich parents have higher academic potential than the children of poor parents, many teachers will share those beliefs; and, by treating the children of rich and poor parents differently, they will contribute to the self-fulfilling prophecy that actually turns the belief into a reality. The same will be true of children from different ethnic backgrounds.
While the relationship between teacher expectations and student socio-economic background and student ethnicity has received considerable attention, this is not true of student bilingualism.

A Belgian study recently published in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (Pulinx et al. 2015) raises precisely this question: how are teacher attitudes towards linguistic diversity related to the expectations they hold of their students? While the study does not actually go on to examine a link between teacher expectations and student performance, the results of the study are not pretty: The researchers found that three-quarters of all the 674 teachers in their study held strong monolingual beliefs. This means that the teachers believed that there was no place for languages other than Dutch in schools in Flanders. For bilingual students this means that their teachers saw no role or value for their home languages.

Pulinx et al. 2015, p. 8

Not only did a majority of teachers hold strong monolingual beliefs; those who held monolingual beliefs were also more likely to have low expectations of the academic performance of their bilingual students:

*There was an association between the monolingual beliefs of teachers and the level of trust they have in their pupils: the stronger the monolingual beliefs are, the less trust teachers have in their pupils.* (Pulinx et al. 2015, pp. 11-2)

This quantitative study does not go on to link teacher’s monolingual beliefs and the low expectations they have of their bilingual students’ academic performance to the actual academic performance of their students nor to any of the other numerous factors known to constitute educational disadvantage. However, the researchers raise an important point for a future research agenda: how do teacher’s expectations of linguistically diverse students shape the learning experiences and academic trajectories of those students?

References