Bilingual students at the crossroads

Livia and her classmates at a crossroads the year before entering (or not) Gymnasium (Switzerland, 2004)

Secondary education as a monolingual fork in the road
Let me bust a prevalent urban myth: You do not need to be bi- or multilingual to become a linguist. There, busted. In fact, being bilingual initially brought me to a crossroads where I was nearly denied access to the academic pathway I am embarking on today. In Australia, despite native-like English proficiency, my migrant background dictated that I visit ESL classes throughout primary school; during secondary school in Switzerland, my Australian passport resulted in obligatory participation in Deutsch als Fremdsprache classes [German as a foreign language]. This ironic situation of seemingly being deemed ‘not good enough’ at either nation’s language of instruction initially crushed my hopes of being recommended for Gymnasium — the main entry ticket to tertiary education in Switzerland. Fortunately, thanks to a loophole or two, and an additional entry exam, my teachers were able to grant me the much desired recommendation. Without it, I would not have had the opportunity to undertake an academic pathway. Undoubtedly, mine is not the only story influenced by language learning trajectories.

Multilingual values at a crossroads
Multilingual students with migrant backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to academic exclusion in countries such as Switzerland or Germany, where the transition from primary to secondary school is marked by rigorous selection processes. These processes are based on both academic achievement and language proficiency. In a recent article published in Multilingua, Gabriele Budach (2014) suggests that these selection processes predominantly favour monolingualism, Budach (2014) argues that “in primary years multilingualism is drawn on as a capital for social inclusion”; as opposed to secondary schools which “value languages as capital for social distinction and an indicator of individual achievement” (p. 526; italics in the original). Needless to say the shift in values and the transition from one level of education to the next has implications for students’ educational trajectories.

Bilingual communities of practice at a crossroads
Four years after her ethnographic fieldwork in a German-Italian Two-Way-Immersion program in a primary school in Frankfurt (2003-2007), Budach (2014) organised a reunion with her former students. The now fourteen-year-olds had once “enjoyed their bilingual experience” (p. 531); however, now, languages were an academic subject and a terrain for competition like any other school subject. In primary school, the students were encouraged to participate in the common endeavour of sustaining an inclusive pedagogical environment in which multilingualism was utilised across the curriculum. Multilingualism was valued as a means of promoting “social integration as well as intercultural experience” (p. 547).

This is in stark contrast to mainstream education where a ‘monolingual mindset’ prevails. Once the students left the immersion program and went on to attend mainstream secondary schools, most had no further opportunities to use Italian in school. If Italian was available in their secondary school it was purely in the form of foreign language teaching, or Fremdsprachenunterricht. Therefore, and despite their high-level bilingual
proficiencies, students from the immersion program struggled to get a foothold in the mainstream and felt that their multicultural knowledge was not recognised and was indeed devalued.

For one student in Budach’s (2014) study, a German-Australian girl, Italian was not offered again as a third foreign language until Year 8. During her primary years, German and Italian were used to teach all subjects; in secondary school the transfer of knowledge was restricted to German. As a result, multilingual students see their linguistic repertoires as being devalued.

**The monolingual fork in the road**

Budach (2014) writes that only five out of her twenty-three students were able to continue their secondary education in a comparable bilingual program. Other students either did not achieve the recommendation for Gymnasium or chose other pathways within the Gymnasium stream (e.g. they chose a school with musical or artistic profile). Therefore, the value ascribed to languages became dependent on the school curriculum – all subjects were henceforth taught in German, and Italian was either not offered, or only offered within the scope of foreign language teaching as a subject. Students’ bilingual careers had more or less ended in a monolingual cul-de-sac.

Indeed, even the five students who continued in the bilingual Gymnasium found themselves faced with a similar dilemma. Students in this stream can choose whether they want to complete the German school leaving certificate (Abitur), or a combined German/Italian certificate that is also recognised in Italy (matura). Completing the combined matura increases the value of multilingualism and creates “a form of capital for social mobility and distinction” (p. 546). However, for Budach’s students this proved a risky choice that threatened their overall marks.

It seems to me that – even within bilingual secondary education – there is a shift towards mainstream monolingualism. This creates a sense of detachment from the bilingual community of practice which was so important in the students’ primary years. Moreover, the dominance of German as the national language devalues their multilingual repertoires. In their primary school years, students in the bilingual immersion program are able to access curricular knowledge through multilingual learning. At secondary level, regardless of the educational trajectory they choose, students have only limited possibilities to apply their multilingual knowledge across different subjects. At this level, multilingualism is primarily valued within the foreign language leaning curriculum where linguistic competence is evaluated according to the subject’s grading criteria (e.g. whether students use correct grammatical structures, can string sentences together and can complete small translation tasks). Later in life, young job-seekers’ multilingual resources are a nice addition to their résumés, and therefore act as a tool for social distinction. Although multilingualism is believed to lead to greater success in the employment market and to maximise social mobility, the monolingual mindset influences the perception of academic achievement. Therefore – ironically – without monolingual academic distinction, multilinguals cannot succeed.

**Beyond the crossroads**

In a day and age where cultural and linguistic diversity are an inescapable reality, it seems instrumental to give all students the chance to undertake the educational pathway that best matches their abilities and aspirations, regardless of their linguistic background. To ensure that fewer children fall between the cracks – as I nearly did
– it is vital that policy makers, educational stakeholders and sociolinguists work together to turn the monolingual impasse into a gateway to multiple possibilities.

Reference