

Learning the host country's language is important for migrants but we should not forget that maintaining the home language is just as essential for the next generation's success in life. Unfortunately, in Australia there are no policies in place that support the home language maintenance of languages other than English. In the absence of top-down approaches, changing teacher beliefs can be a grassroots way to support bilingual education and combat migrant disadvantage.

I teach "Planning and programming in TESOL" for English language teachers as part of the [Graduate Certificate of TESOL program](#) at Macquarie University in Sydney. A great proportion of our students are in-service teachers who have decided to specialize in English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teaching. EAL/D teaching is delivered in a variety of ways, which include providing support to students who need help with English alongside a class teacher or collecting EAL/D students into a separate group and providing full-time intensive support. [In 2015, 251,336 students \(32.3% of all students\) enrolled in New South Wales government schools had a language background other than English.](#) And over 145, 000 students [\(ca. 20%\) were learning English as an additional language.](#)

Home language maintenance

As one of the assessment tasks, our in-service teacher students analyse their teaching context and pinpoint salient features in the given context. Many of them identify the fact that EAL/D students in Australian schools do not speak English at home as problematic. This view constitutes a 'deficit' model of bilingualism, meaning it concentrates on what negative effects speaking a minority language might have for migrant children and speaking another language is simply seen as an obstacle on the way towards integration.

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How can we turn this belief around so that bilingualism comes to be seen as an advantage? Highlighting the long-term educational and cognitive effects of bilingualism constitutes one strategy. These benefits have been covered widely in the media (e.g., [here](#)) and also here on *Language on the Move* (e.g., [here](#)). Economic benefits may be another long-term effect of home language maintenance. US research has found that bilingual children of migrants have higher earnings in adulthood than their English-dominant counterparts ([Agirdag, 2016, see here for details](#)) and that biliteracy is associated with better educational and occupational attainment ([Lee & Hatteberg, 2016, see here for details](#)).

In sum, research consistently points to the fact that bilingualism should have priority in education over fast assimilation into the dominant language group for the future benefit of the children.

Contesting monolingualism in language policy

To enable a positive bilingual strategy, it needs to be backed up by language policy. Australian language and language-in-education policies unfortunately consistently result in monolingualism, as Schalley, Guillemin & Eisenclas (2015) found in an examination of literacy policies from the past 30 years. These researchers found that “the more multilingual Australian society has become, the more assimilationist the policies and the more monolingual the orientation of the society politicians envisage and pursue” (p. 170). Much of this assimilation to English monolingualism is achieved indirectly. This means that even if language policies appear to promote and value diversity and bilingual learning, they may result in monolingual outcomes: “standardized assessment, year-group performance targets and league tables undermine diversity and bilingual learning and can be highly damaging to the academic achievement of minority students” (Piller, 2016, p. 139).

What can be done to overcome the monolingual bias of our language policies that fly in the face of the research evidence to support the benefits of bilingualism? Schalley, Guillemin & Eisenclas (2015) emphasise the importance of grassroots

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activism to enhance home language literacy. It is precisely here where our TESOL program aims to make a difference.

Teachers as grassroots language activists

All too frequently we hear stories of migrant families changing the home language to English in response to advice from their child's ESL teachers. To parents, recommendations like these may appear to be based on professional authority but they are not backed up by research. The English language learning benefits of switching the home language may be minimal, particularly if the parents lack confidence in their own English. Against this small or non-existent short-term English gains, we must consider the long-term harm to the home language: changing the home language to English deprives EAL/D children of the long-term educational and economic benefits of bilingualism.

Research related to the benefits of bilingualism and to strategies to support bilingualism at home and in school need to be available to teachers. An ideal platform for this is through teacher education, as in our TESOL program. Changing teacher beliefs must be considered an important form of grassroots activism for a bilingual Australia while we work towards a national language policy for our times.

References

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The Graduate Certificate of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) is a course designed for current teachers and people wishing to teach English to speakers of other languages. The course prepares students for a variety of language teaching contexts in Australia and overseas. It integrates current theory and practice of TESOL, including teaching methodologies, programming and planning, and linguistics for language teaching. [For further details visit the website.](#)

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- You are making a very important point here, Agnes. Unfortunately, research results are currently largely disregarded in any policy discussions. While educational and economic benefits – as well as socio-psychological ones – are important to the bilingual individuals and their families, they are unlikely to feature in any political decisions soon. In line with Cross (2009), it appears that the current approach is aimed at maintaining “the existing distribution of power, knowledge and skills within society more broadly”

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(Cross, 2009, p. 514). This is why grassroots activities are so important.

[Cross, R. (2009). Literacy for all: Quality language education for few. *Language and Education*, 23, 509–522. doi:10.1080/09500780902954224]
