Linguistic capital of trainee teachers: knowledge worth having?

Kimberly Safford, Open University: k.safford@open.ac.uk
Alison Kelly, Roehampton University: a.m.kelly@roehampton.ac.uk


Introduction

This research is an interpretive study of individual and institutional language practices which explores dimensions of teacher professionalism in relation to language and examines the ‘invisible’ linguistic and cultural capital (cf Ellis 2004) of multilingual, minority ethnic student teachers attending a British university. This capital is a potentially powerful contribution to student teacher pedagogy and professionalism, but in the two key domains of teacher education (university and school) where practitioner ‘funds of knowledge’ are manifested in events and activities (Moll & Greenberg 1990) the research reveals how multilingual student teachers struggle to create or access events and activities where they can demonstrate and develop their ‘knowledge in action’ (Schön 1987). The study frames multilingual student teachers and multilingual pupils as mirror participants in monolingual institutions and explores issues of subordination, investment and empowerment in relation to language use (Norton 1997; Lee and Norton, in press) as research informants describe their experiences of training to operate in a curriculum which offers little meaningful space for linguistic diversity (cf Heller 1995). The research presents multilingual student teachers as multi-competent language users (Pavlenko 2003) who could positively influence wider pedagogic knowledge and practices (and the attitudes and achievement of pupils) but who are prevented from activating and enacting their linguistic, cultural and community expertise through institutional and professional lack of recognition.

Research questions arising from institutional practices

Widening Participation programmes in post-compulsory education have greatly increased the numbers of minority ethnic student teachers, and this research arose from professional experience as university tutors in a large institute of higher education in England where we interviewed applicants to primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) postgraduate and undergraduate programmes, lectured in English education and observed trainees on teaching practices in primary schools.

Interviewing prospective student teachers, and reading their personal statements on university applications forms, we began – initially out of personal interest - to ask whether they use any languages other than English, as there is no language question on UCAS forms (although there is on the GTTR forms for PGCE courses). There was a pattern in their replies: ‘Yes, I speak Hindi (or Greek / Urdu / Portuguese / Arabic…) but I didn't think it was important to put in the application’ and ‘Should I have put that? Is it
important? ’ and ‘ I suppose it could be useful sometimes talking to parents ’. Applicants rarely mentioned their first (or home/community) languages unless prompted. This pattern seemed to continue once students embarked on their training. Very early on they are required to complete a ‘ Starting Profile ’ which records existing skills and competences. One of the trainees reported that she did not think that it was ‘ relevant ’ to include the fact that she was a Welsh speaker. Students appeared to view Initial Teacher Education as a context in which community multilingualism is irrelevant; the current research enquires whether the outcomes of such views may be reflected in the ongoing lack of diversity within ITE and the primary teacher population, in monolingual schools and in the low attainment of pupils who use English as an Additional Language (DfES 2006). At both ends of the educational spectrum – school and university – multilingual, minority ethnic learners generate institutional concerns about attainment (e.g. DfES 2003) and structures designed to ensure they ‘ fit in ’ (TDA 2008). At the ITE institution where this research arose, achievement and retention of minority ethnic student teachers was a cause for concern.

As teacher-educators, we observed informally how multilingual students often experienced difficulties in monitoring their own and pupils’ English in order to meet the expectations of the school and national curriculum; we likewise observed multilingual student teachers who never used or referred to their other languages on teaching practices, even where they were teaching pupils who use these same languages (one postgraduate student, a Hindi speaker, reported that when she used this language with a child in her class who also used Hindi it was ‘ embarrassing ’ for both of them). The current research reflects upon what opportunities linguistic minority student teachers have to call upon their ‘ funds of knowledge ’ (Moll et. al. 1992) in order to enhance their own and pupils’ learning. Whilst the role of novice teacher is one where all student-trainees are subject to a great deal of scrutiny and critical feedback, the curriculum appears to position minority ethnic student-trainees in ways which present particular challenges for their professional development. Our initial research questions were:

- How do multilingual student teachers characterise their language knowledge?
- How do they use their language resources in monolingual institutions and in a monolingual curriculum?
- What are the theoretical, educational and practical implications for diversity in teaching and learning when student teachers use or do not use their language resources?

These are significant questions for teacher educators. It is puzzling that the ever-growing multilingual pupil population in British schools has not created a parallel institutional interest in multilingualism within teacher education and training. Apart from the distinctive situation in Wales, being bilingual or
multilingual is not viewed as a competency for mainstream primary school teachers and holds no special status.\(^1\)

**Languages in primary school: the research landscape**

Research which touches on our questions is comprised of two broad areas: work carried out with respect to teachers of English as a foreign language (to which we will refer later) and work in Britain about children’s multilingual competences. Although the latter has been the site of a great deal of research over the last thirty years in British schools, the language competences of children’s teachers have not attracted the same attention.

It was in the early 1970s that interest in children’s language and talk began to flourish. 1971 saw the publication of James Britton’s seminal text, *Language and Learning*, a book that illuminated Vygotsky’s insights into the relationship between thought and language. Two years later the Rosens’ celebration of the linguistic diversity in London primary schools (*The Language of Primary School Children*) was published. At the same time Douglas Barnes’ work in secondary schools was signalling the power of collaborative talk and learning. This was followed by the first significant government report with a sole focus on language: the *Bullock Report*. Subtitled *A Language for Life*, this included the much-quoted recognition that:

> No child can be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold.

Educators welcomed the *Bullock Report’s* emphasis on the centrality of talk and children’s first or home languages and dialects as a learning medium, but there was little in the report to support teachers in developing appropriate pedagogies for pupils for whom English was not a first language. The widespread premise at that time was that learning a second language was very different from learning a first one; indeed that the presence of the first would impede the learning of English. To this end, after a period of no provision at all, Language Centres were gradually developed and children were withdrawn from their classrooms to attend separate English language classes until they were thought to be ready to learn the mainstream curriculum.

The ensuing thirty years saw increased understandings about the relationship between first and second language learning, with findings about the similarities between the two processes and the clear advantages of bilingualism, for instance, in terms of metalinguistic awareness. (see, for example, Mayor 1988). Terminology and provision mirrored these research shifts: the ‘immigrants’ of the *Bullock Report* became ‘bilingual / multilingual

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1 In other English-speaking countries, bilingualism (e.g. Spanish–English or Khmer–English in the United States) is a highly-regarded and applied teacher skill. We should note here that we are not discussing the career advantage of having a Modern Foreign Language at this time in primary schools.
learners’ and then users of ‘English as an additional language’; teaching moved away from Language Centres (which a 1986 judicial ruling criticised as separate and unequal provision) to mainstream classrooms with varying levels of language support.

These significant developments in theoretical understanding of children’s language learning, and resulting changes in provision, have had little parallel impact on considerations of the language learning of mainstream (as opposed to language/ELT/EFL) teachers, and how practitioner language knowledge is applied in mainstream practice. Current QTS standards use ‘diversity’ as an umbrella under which a whole range of teacher knowledge, including language, religion and ethnicity are conflated.

**Data collection and methodologies**

The research combined analysis of large-scale quantitative data and small-scale qualitative data. It began with a questionnaire of two cohorts of student teachers, one postgraduate and one second-year undergraduate. Data from this survey of 237 students provided self-reported evidence of a wide range of language expertise, affiliation and inheritance (Harris 1997; Rampton 1996).

The questionnaire revealed a depth and breadth of language knowledge amongst student teachers of which university tutors were largely unaware; more than half of the respondents reported using a language other than English, with some students reporting the use of two, three and four languages in addition to English. These included: Panjabi, Albanian, Flemish, Arabic, Greek, Portuguese, Gujarati, Tagalog, Urdu, Polish, Welsh and Hebrew.

The survey data raises questions about what university teacher-educators know about their student cohorts and the extent to which the Initial Teacher Education curriculum offers opportunities to identify and call upon their linguistic resources, and it is worth considering how this relationship continues to be replicated between teachers and pupils in schools (Brumfit and Mitchell 1995; Gregory & Williams 2000; Cajker and Hall 2009). As Erstad et al’s research into adult ‘learning lives’ reminds us, student teachers’ learning trajectories are located in many different sites in which the self is positioned and repositioned: how far then does the training institution - a key

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2 Adapted from the University of California *Language Survey of Incoming Students.*

3 ‘Expertise’ reflects language proficiency, ‘affiliation’ reflects languages adhered or aspired to for peer, academic, community, faith or family reasons, and ‘inheritance’ refers to languages attached to ethnicities; these often exist in combination, reflecting formal study and informal acquisition, and may be strong or weak. For example, a learner may have a language inheritance (Panjabi) but a weak affiliation to it whilst developing expertise in another language (French) and a strong affiliation for yet another (e.g. Arabic) through academic and peer networks.

4 Typically, a bilingual student is asked address a lecture in a language other than English in order to illustrate to monolingual trainees the difficulties pupils who are new to English may experience in the primary classroom.
learning site - offer the ‘mobilisation of resources and affordances’ (2009: 100) that these adult learners bring?

The questionnaire data was exemplified and illuminated by invitational interviews, in university and in primary school work experience placements, of six undergraduate and two postgraduate student teachers (see table, below). This qualitative data captured students’ thinking in semi-structured oral interviews (eg Patton 1990, Kvale 1996, Spindler & Spindler 1993) where informants had scope to reflect on how and when they use languages other than English in their teacher training contexts. Further optional primary classroom observations of informants on teaching practices (eg Berger & Luckman 1966) also examined how student teachers operate within monolingual institutional habituses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Language background</th>
<th>Languages used fluently (less fluent in languages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pavitar</td>
<td>Born in England, Panjabi GCSE and A-level, also confident in French and German</td>
<td>Panjabi, Hindi (Urdu, Arabic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhadra</td>
<td>Born in England, learned English from older (7+) sister and started school age 4 confidently bilingual</td>
<td>Gujarati (Panjabi, Hindi, Urdu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Qualified teacher from Uganda, re-qualifying in UK, emigrated to the UK as an adult</td>
<td>Rwandan, Luganda, Acholi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muskaan</td>
<td>Born in England, worked as a nursery nurse and later as a bilingual community worker for HIV awareness charity; started school age 4 with no English</td>
<td>Panjabi (Urdu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abidemi</td>
<td>Born in Nigeria, came to Britain age 4</td>
<td>Yoruba, 'back-slang'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherie</td>
<td>Born in England, Greek Saturday school from age 4, Greek GCSE</td>
<td>Greek, Greek-Cypriot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meagan</td>
<td>Born in Wales, Welsh medium school from age 6</td>
<td>Welsh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nona</td>
<td>Born in England, Gujarati Saturday school from age 8</td>
<td>Gujarati (Swahili, Igbo)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Multilingual worlds, monolingual schools**

Student teachers described rich backgrounds of language learning. Angela, one of the students born outside Britain, characterised a linguistic background and education which is considered unremarkable in many parts of the world:

*We’ve got 23 languages in Uganda. The village I was brought up was predominantly Rwandan … but the children speak together in Luganda. They will speak Rwandan or Acholi when they go back home… You have one language at home, another on the street, another one in school. I would recognise that in any classroom… it’s just normal for people to have many languages.*
Bhadra, who was born in Britain, had a similar experience and continues, as an adult, to use many languages:

Well, mum and dad were Gujarati and I've been brought up speaking that as my first language. Obviously I went to school in this country and picked up English. Punjabi, because my sister got married and they all speak Punjabi so I managed to pick up that language as well. And my daughter’s dad, he’s also Punjabi, so she’s picked up that language. And Hindi from the amount of Bollywood films we watch, and I use Urdu when I go to my best friend’s house – only to her parents. ...with my daughter… I try to make as much effort as I can to speak to her in Punjabi because I want her to be proud of the language but whether she uses it or not, that’s her choice.

The student teachers described their multilingual worlds as normal. In the context of the mainstream primary school however they recast this ‘normalcy’ as difference, articulating a keen awareness of this difference for themselves and for pupils.

I'm more able to relate to them [bilingual children], know what it's like to be from a different culture. I understand they'll have their own music, they'll have their own way of speaking, they'll have their own way of thinking ...the main thing is having a different culture, having a different language, you can understand where the child is coming from…it's just being able to put into words the fact that they have a life outside of school that's different to the norm and I have a life outside of school that's different to the mainstream

Comments such as Pavitar reflect the ways in which multilingual student teachers and pupils seem to have ‘mirror’ experiences of normalcy and difference as they travel between home, community and school. This was a theme which permeated the interview data and appeared to influence the student teacher’s sense of professional self and her relationships with multilingual pupils in monolingual institutions:

I like being different…and I think language is a key part of that completely.

It [being bilingual] just makes me so much more well-rounded and able to relate to the children, to relate to their home life.

They feel comfortable, not silly. They know I speak Gujarati. In fact, whenever I go into a school children always ask me three things: ‘Do you speak any other languages?’ I don’t think they could ask a white teacher that. They ask, ‘What religion are you?’ and ‘Where are you from?’
These comments reflect distinctive, ‘knowing’ relationships with the whole child that orchestrate cultural, community and language knowledge.

**Metalinguistic awareness: knowledge worth having**
Research evidence has pointed to the fact that bilingual pupils have heightened metalinguistic awareness in comparison with their monolingual peers (e.g. Ellis 2004) so it is unsurprising that a clear finding from our research suggests a very specific metalinguistic awareness about their pupils’ learning needs that may not be possible for monolingual student teachers:

_I can see things from their points of view, what they might be thinking in their other languages. It’s empathetic really. Sometimes when I’m reading their work I can tell how they’re thinking, because I’ve made the same mistakes, making literal translations. My mum used to say to me ‘Do your brush’ instead of ‘Brush your teeth’, and ‘Close the light’. So I used to say it like that…You can see it in their children’s work, and in what they say._ (Nona)

These student teachers bring with them a very special type of professional expertise, one that is largely unacknowledged. Here is Nona putting such invisible ‘capital’ into practice, as she modifies inappropriate resources for her pupils.

_I was teaching a lesson on the use of apostrophes. … There were phrases which you had to change into idioms. Children who may not have English as a first language – even though they were supposed to be focusing on apostrophes – they were going to have problems with the idioms…It looked like a fun thing to do – IF you knew those idioms…There was a clue, and a word, and you had to guess the word – like OKRA and LADIES’ FINGERS. Every idiom had an apostrophe. Publishers haven’t thought about things like that. As soon as I saw it I knew it was going to cause problems. .. I didn’t use it. I made my own sentences._

Student teachers also demonstrated an awareness of the level of language knowledge of monolingual class teachers, noticing their lack of understanding of bilingual pupils and as a result missing opportunities to promote learning.

_One of the boys here is Muslim and he’s learning, because his parents told us, he goes to Arabic lessons for the Koran and when I was listening to him read one week, I noticed that he was reading right to left, and I said to him ‘Oh have you got confused because that’s how you read the Koran, right to left’. So I knew that, and now the class teacher knows, and I’m not convinced somebody else who didn’t have that knowledge would know. … (Muskaan)_

_I was observing my teacher. She was asking the children what they did on the weekend. One girl said, ‘We went to my mum’s sister’s house’. And the teacher said, ‘What is the word for that?’ But in other_
languages you have a word for ‘mum’s sister’, not ‘aunt’, a specific word for your mother’s sister, that specific aunt. And I know that, because I have it in Gujarati... There is no word in English for that – which is why the girl said it. She knew the word ‘aunt’ – she wanted to explain how they were related, and that is the only way she could do it in English... The teacher ignored it. Maybe she thought the girl didn't know the word for 'aunt'. But I think this child wanted her to know it was her ‘mother’s sister’ and not her father's sister... Like me, if I say the word ‘aunt’ to people, I don’t feel that’s enough information. It feels wrong. ...I feel those words. I can see what that child meant – because I can feel it. I can translate it in my mind. That is quite a big thing. It’s deep. (Nona)

This is powerful insider knowledge: it demonstrates a subtle understanding of what might be perceived as the child’s misconception (or lack of vocabulary knowledge), when it actually reveals her precision and efforts to be accurate. Tellez and Waxman (2006) found that multilingual teachers are better able to understand such challenges and to distinguish language problems from more general learning difficulties, but the case for Muskaan and Nona, the student teachers above, is problematic because of the location of this particular ‘learning site’ (Erstad et al, 2009) in their ‘learning lives’. As a student teacher working under the guidance of her mentoring class teacher, how are they to operationalise their relevant understandings given the power relations that exist within such a context? The danger is that the constraints such a context could impose also become constraints on pupils’ learning. It is also worth remembering here the extent of some of these student teachers’ language competence: evidence from recent research (Ellis 2004) suggests that where children learn more than two languages, their metalinguistic competence is enhanced still further.

Research carried out by Ellis (2004), although it focuses on ESL teachers in an Australian context, has particular significance for this study. She found that although monolingual ESL teachers typically demonstrated some degree of metalinguistic awareness through a secure grasp of the syntax of English,

... this knowledge can only be articulated or examined in relation to one language... A monolingual teacher may know what is English, but not what is not-English. Neither is it clear to what extent a monolingual teacher can know which are features of language as a human system, and which are features specific to English. (2004: 102)

Ellis also found that monolingual ESL teachers perceived learning a new language as challenging and potentially distressing, and the resulting mind-sets for monolingual teachers over-privileged the difficulties of learning a new language and underplayed the potential. This attitude and the resulting possibility of a lowering of expectations appears to pertain to mainstream primary schools in this country: consider the earlier example where Nona’s
teacher perhaps thought that the pupil did not have the vocabulary for ‘aunt’ and here, Pavitar’s comment about her class teacher which also hints at this same monolingual mind-set:

_The class teacher doesn’t think she can do much but I found out that she is very good at maths_

This monolingual mind-set was illuminated for us in an interview with Bert, one of the student interviewees. His perspective appeared to be that English language teaching was largely lost on bilingual children once they left the school building. Their linguistic prowess in other languages was seen as a disadvantage:

_If they’re only hearing English 6 hours a day and then they go home, and anything they pick up at school will be immediately wiped out at home where they don’t hear any English or speak any English, don’t watch English TV. A lot of them don’t read in English, they read in Punjabi or Urdu…I don’t think it’s holding them back, but they may not be at the same level as everyone else._

Student teachers in Britain are not trained as ESL teachers, yet most of them, like Bert, will be teaching pupils who are at varying stages of English language learning. They will be, in effect, teachers of the English language, and the confidence with which they approach this teaching task will come, in no small part, from their own experience of language learning. To cite Ellis again:

_For the multilinguals [teachers], language learning is possible. They know that what they have done successful, their students can do, too… They can, and do, reflect on their own learning as a key source of knowledge and experience from which they construct their own practice._

(2004: 104)

This study is helping to articulate the multilingual lives of student teachers and the largely unacknowledged resources and expertise that they bring to primary classrooms. The student teachers in the study found few spaces to enact their expertise and many of their class teachers lacked interest in their potential contributions to teaching and learning. In the same way that bilingual children are often positioned as problematic learners, so too there is a real danger that the monolingual mind-set impacts on the professional development of multilingual training teachers.

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