



# Multilingualism in the Early Years

Extending the limits of our world

Sandra Smidt

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# Multilingualism in the Early Years

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*Multilingualism in the Early Years* is a highly accessible text that examines the political, theoretical, ideological and practical issues involved in the education of children speaking two or more languages. Drawing on current research and thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of being multilingual, Smidt uses powerful case studies to reveal how language or languages are acquired. She explores language in terms of who shares it, its relationship to class, culture, power, identity and thinking, and its fascinating role as it moves from the personal to the public and political. More specifically the book studies:

- what it means to be bilingual through an analysis of the language histories submitted by a range of people;
- how language/s define people;
- a brief history of minority education in the UK;
- how practitioners and teachers can best support all young children as learners whilst they continue to use their first languages and remain part of and partners in their communities and cultures;
- being bilingual: an advantage or a disadvantage?
- the impact of multilingualism on children's educational and life chances.

*Multilingualism in the Early Years* is a really useful text for practitioners working with multilingual children, as well as any student undertaking courses in early childhood education.

**Sandra Smidt** is a writer and consultant in early years education.

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This book is dedicated to Adrine, Alfredo, Anne, Carmen, Carol, Cleo, Dario, Fatih, Hong-Bich, Janos, Jill, Marion, Marisa, Mellie, Mike, Raymonde, Rosa, Snoeks, Toula and Beate, whose story appears below:

Beate Planskoy has an extraordinary family history – sadly not because it was rare, but extraordinary for her ability to deal with all that happened to her and her family and to build on it. You will guess within the first three sentences that she was one of those fleeing fascism in the last century. She and her siblings arrived in London from Berlin on a Kinder Transport in April 1939.

My family lived in Germany for many generations. They and their parents and grandparents spoke German at home. When we came to England in April 1939, my brother, sister and I went to school and picked up English as fast as possible. My parents who, by a miracle, managed to join us in London on 31 August – two days before the war started – had reasonably good English based on their secondary education. We then spoke English in public and German at home. (This was during World War II.) Gradually my generation spoke English more and more often and eventually always to each other. To my parents we continued to write in and speak German a lot of the time.

My nephews and nieces, all born in England, speak only English and so does the next generation.

My husband's linguistic history may be of interest. He spoke five European languages, all learned as a child, completely fluently. Russian: was his native language. He was born and grew up in Russia; Polish: he spent many school holidays staying with Polish relatives in Poland; German: nanny who knew little Russian and only spoke to him in German; French: good school tuition plus a French tutor at home; English: a Scottish grandmother who never mastered the Russian language. She always spoke English with him.

After he emigrated from Russia, he studied and worked for some years in Germany, France and the United States before settling in England. Whichever language he spoke, he retained his unmistakable Russian accent.

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# Preface

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This book has its roots in an earlier book – *Supporting Multilingual Learners in the Early Years* (Smidt, 2008) – which arose out of my awareness that many of those working in multilingual early years settings and classrooms knew little about how to communicate with and/or teach those having languages other than or additional to English. The book, written in 2008, was a slim one, aimed particularly at the growing body of those training to be teaching assistants, early years practitioners, teachers, childcare workers and others. The tone of writing was designed to be non-academic and the intention to make some difficult concepts accessible to all. That book is clearly now very out of date and the world a different place. This book does not seek to replace the earlier one, but rather to add to it.

As I started to think about the book I remembered some of the many bilingual or multilingual people I have met and who have talked to me about the languages they speak and I decided to send a short email to them, asking four very simple questions:

- What languages did your grandparents speak?
- What languages did your parents speak?
- What languages do you speak?
- What languages do your children (if you have any) speak?

One of those to whom I sent these questions was Marisa, the partner of my brother. I have never met her but my brother has talked about her and her languages and cultures and so I sent her the email. She not only replied but passed it on to many of her multilingual friends. The language histories that emerged are at the very heart of this book. They provide the opening section and then occur as examples or illustrations or reminders, and because they have been written by many people there are many voices in this book.

This book is made up of four sections that take the reader from the very personal tone of the first section to the more formal tone of the final section.

## **Section I: The bilingual child in the home and family**

This section looks at the bilingual child in the home and family. It consists of four chapters, as follows:

- *Chapter 1: My language/languages: Language histories* – made of a series of the personal language histories described above followed by a summary of what you might have learned from your reading of these.
- *Chapter 2: Being bilingual* – which draws on what being bilingual means to those who are and to those who are not.
- *Chapter 3: How language can define you* – which looks at what bilingual people say about how they are defined by their languages and cultures. This is followed up later in the book.
- *Chapter 4: How we acquire our first and subsequent languages.*

## **Section II: From the home and local community to the classroom or setting**

This section moves the focus from the home and local community to the classroom or setting. It is made up of three chapters, which are:

- *Chapter 5: Language/languages in the school curriculum*
- *Chapter 6: Why young children should use their first language throughout their early years*
- *Chapter 7: A brief history of minority education in the UK.*

## **Section III: Supporting children in classes and settings to learn and remain attached to their languages and cultures**

Here we begin to consider many of the issues about how practitioners and teachers can best support all children in classes and settings to learn and remain attached to their languages and cultures. It is made up of three chapters, as follows:

- *Chapter 8: Making sense of a new world*
- *Chapter 9: Understanding multimodality and translanguaging in early education*
- *Chapter 10: The threat of a good example: Celebrating and supporting young bilingual learners* – at the end of this chapter there is a section called ‘The implications for practitioners’ since it is here that ‘advice’ is offered.

## **Section IV: Moving from the personal to the public**

In this last section we are looking at things remote from the everyday lives of young children and their families but things that affect their education and life chances. So we go from the personal to the public. There are five chapters in this section, which are:

- *Chapter 11: Which children? Whose rights?*
- *Chapter 12: Performing culture*
- *Chapter 13: Language and identity*
- *Chapter 14: Preserving language and culture*
- *Chapter 15: Pedagogy, politics and poverty.*

At the end of the book you will find the following:

- a bibliography of the sources and resources cited in it;
- an index of the terms and names in the book.

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## Section I

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# The bilingual child in the home and family

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‘I’m missing the practice and the lightness and spirit of the language’

Cleo Ganz

Does it surprise you that, in many countries around the world, multilingualism is the norm? There are more than 20 states or countries that have more than one *official language*. India, for example, has 19 official languages. In my birth country of South Africa there are 11 official languages. And apart from official languages there are the other languages of the people. The term *heritage language* has been coined to describe any language a child learns/uses within the home that is not the official or *majority language* of the country. This may be synonymous with *mother tongue* or the first language the child learns. In some of the literature this first language is written as L1. And where reference is made to a second language acquired this is L2. For generations, people all over the world, confronted by poverty, war, lack of resources, paucity of jobs, poor living conditions and discrimination, have been and continue to be forced into emigrating in their search for a decent sustainable life. Those of us privileged to be in the developed world encounter more and more people coming to live here in our developed countries. In our schools and settings we will continue to welcome children speaking languages other than our official language of English. Since this is, and will continue to be, the reality, the question is raised as to whether we should focus entirely on ensuring these children learn to speak, read and write English (which they will surely do as they learn and play and live in a society where English dominates), or should we ensure that they are encouraged to learn English whilst maintaining the language or languages they already know and that are a link to their past and their culture? That is the pressing question we ask.

We start with the personal and the local as we set out to consider the implications of speaking, reading, writing, learning, teaching, loving, living and communicating in more than one language. So this section will focus primarily on individual learners as the starting point for examining the limits of our worlds.

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# My language/languages

## Language histories

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As I have already written earlier in this book, my starting point was inviting people whom I know speak more than one language to tell more about their linguistic heritage. I was surprised and highly delighted by how seriously these questions were taken and how much interest they stirred in the people responding. Many sent my email on to others. All responses are to be found in this book – some in their entirety and some in the form of shorter extracts. Some have been slightly reworded to make sure they are clear. All raise issues that will be discussed in the book. Others illustrate points being made or offer touching or illuminating insights into the lives of others. As you read through them you might like to keep these questions in mind.

- Did all of these people move country?
- Did they leave for similar reasons?
- Did they hear more than one language as part of everyday life from birth?
- Did they lose their first language by choice?
- Did you feel that they rejoice in their linguistically rich lives?
- Did any of them suggest that they had lost something in terms of culture, history, opportunities, abilities?
- Is there any indication of the effect of formal education on their use of languages or of their language on their education?
- And what happened to the original first language by the time you get to the children or grandchildren?

We will return to these at the end of the chapter.

The first case history comes from Janos, the husband of my friend Hazel Abel. I have known Hazel for many years and she shares with me a passion for chamber music (which is, for both of us, another language) and an interest in early childhood education. Janos was born in Hungary and then, like so many people, had to leave his home country – in his case, as a refugee.

His parents were peasants and he had to leave school at the age of 14. Here is what he wrote:

They only spoke Hungarian. One of my grandfathers must have known Spanish because he went to South America. He made money there and when he returned to Hungary he bought land to farm in the North East of Hungary.

My parents spoke Hungarian and didn't learn any other language.

I grew up speaking Hungarian in Budapest. When I was evacuated to my grandparents in the country I was self-conscious about my city accent.

When I became a refugee I went to a coal miners' hostel in Scotland where we were given English lessons every day. These were paid for by the coal board because we were going to become coal miners.

I came to England after a year, where I worked for British Rail; I continued to learn English from reading and studying. My plan was to learn ten words a day!

I lived with a few Hungarians during this time but I wanted to speak only English. I was very pleased when my friends agreed to speak only English. Then I left England for Paris. I could not speak a word of French but I wanted to live in France so that I could learn French. I spent 2 years in Paris studying on my own and tried to speak whenever I could. It was hard because so many of the young people had learnt English and wanted to practise on me. During the second year I went to the Alliance Française for French language lessons. I liked the assimilé direct method (which is similar to programmes like Linguaphone) so I got records out of the library. I had the ambition to learn German and Italian as well but I didn't manage to get there. I met Hazel!

Ever since getting married I have spoken only English except with my parents when they visited and when visiting Hungary on holiday. My children speak English. I took two of my daughters to Hungary when they were 6 and 8 years old. The elder daughter learnt quite a lot of Hungarian from her grandparents and has always enjoyed learning languages at school, evening classes and when she went to live abroad. The younger daughter was totally overwhelmed by the experience and remembers only one sentence of Hungarian 'hol van a másik zokni?' 'Where is the other sock?', or to be more precise, 'where is the other half of my pair of socks?!' She learnt French at school and lived in Paris for a while but she found it hard to learn a language. Now it is difficult for me to speak Hungarian. I was 19 when I left and my language then was probably not advanced enough for discussions in subjects that I enjoy talking about now – for example economics, philosophy.

The second language history comes from Raymonde Sneddon, a dear colleague, friend and often a role model for me. We retired on the same day from