

Bilingual Education and Learning about Culture (Part One)

Bilingual education and language learning

Bilingual education is about learning two languages and learning through two languages. It is about more than just learning a language; it is also about learning subject matter in either one of the two main languages taught in the school or in both of these languages.

That may seem a lot of information to take in at once.

Let's break it down into smaller parts.

1. *Bilingual education is about learning two languages.*

At a bilingual school, you learn your mother tongue and a second language. Both languages are taught in classes specifically for that purpose.

2. *Bilingual education is also about learning through two languages.*

Both languages are used as the medium of instruction for subjects other than "language". Hence, in an immersion program, Maths and Physics may be taught in English; Social Studies and Biology may be taught in Thai, and so on. In a two-way (parallel immersion) bilingual program,

some subjects, e.g. Maths, Sciences, Social Studies, are taught in both Thai and English.

I hope this clarifies bilingual education, immersion and the difference between learning about and learning through a language. Many people, including teachers and educational administrators, are still confused over the terminology. I can understand that. Bilingual education is still reasonably new to Thailand (mid-90s); different models have been tried and different terms applied to them.

At a presentation I gave in Singapore in May, participants were surprised to hear that at my school students learn some subjects twice: in Thai first and then in English. "How do you find the time?" they asked. "Don't the students get bored?" Well, we do have a long day at school, and the students are bored only as much as the teacher or subject matter bores them. After all, the subject matter taught in Thai is not repeated word for word in English. The teacher is different. His or her way of teaching is different and the atmosphere and social dynamics are different. The linguistic and cultural context

of learning in the English-medium classroom is different from that of the Thai classroom, so it's not a case of doing the same thing twice, but of each class linguistically and culturally adding to and enriching the other. This brings me, then, to the question of teaching and learning about culture.

Cultural knowledge and cultural competence

In any language teaching program there will be some attempt to teach students about the culture of the country (or countries) where the language originates or is widely spoken. Hence, a student of Spanish will learn something about the way of life of the people of Spain and, maybe, Latin America. A student of French will definitely learn about French culture because of its high profile and status in the world. At the most basic level, students may learn a bit about foods, clothing and music. More advanced language students would learn about the art, literature, religious beliefs and core values of the culture. There are two questions we need to ask, however, if we want our students to learn about the "culture" of English speakers:

1. What do we really want to know about and do with "English-speaking culture"? and

2. Do we have an English-speaking culture in mind and, if so, which is it?

The first question addresses the learning outcomes intended for teaching students about English-speaking culture. The second points to the fact that there are many English-speaking cultures, each of which has features in common with the others, but has different features as well.

To answer the first question we must decide what it is we mean by the "culture" we want our students to learn about. In a short course or a "drip-feed" program (where students have maybe an hour or two a week of English) very little can be learned and it must be very superficial (courtesies, gestures, some customs, etc.). In an extended program, such as we have in bilingual and EP schools, much more can be done, but we need to know what we want.

Some of the things we'd want our students to know about after a few years of learning a reasonable amount of English would include core values, courtesies and politeness conventions, gender relationships and

expectations, dietary preferences, main religious traditions, some historical background, major celebrations, heroes and heroines. Of course, to teach all of this would take rather a long time, though much of it can be learned informally by observing and interacting with teachers from different English-speaking countries.

The second part to any question about the learning outcomes intended for teaching about culture is: What do we want our students to be able to do with this knowledge? One can sit back and learn about culture or observe culture in action with our teachers, but is that all we want to do? The educator's answer is No! At the end of any instruction or learning experience students must not only know something, but be able to do something as well, even if it's just a matter of putting into words or representing visually what they have learnt. One would not be happy with a pilot's course that taught you all about theory of flight, the instruments, safety procedures, air traffic requirements and communication conventions, but didn't actually teach you how to fly a plane. So also, an English program that teaches students about culture but

doesn't actually give them a chance to practice and develop cultural competencies is not doing its full job.

In part two of this topic I shall say a little more about the conditions for success in developing cultural competence and then examine the question of what "English-speaking culture" is anyway. We shall also look at what happens to your own cultural values when you use another language in cross-cultural interaction.