

8. A Tale of Two Literacies: Girls Growing Up Biculturally Literate in Two UK Communities

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This paper draws upon on-going research into the influence of literacy practices on the development of bilingual and bicultural identity amongst two groups of 11-13 year old girls from different bilingual communities in the UK. One group is British-Asian living in an English inner-city; the other group is from North Wales. Through the examination of examples of the girls' talk about their reading and writing the paper outlines the ways in which they make use of texts in both their first and second language to develop, consolidate and display their complex and multifarious identities. The questions addressed include: what do the girls read and in which language? How do the experiences of reading in English and in their home languages compare? Ultimately, how does the use of text influence and demonstrate their burgeoning bilingual and bicultural identity?

Introduction

This study examines the role of text in demonstrating and developing the bilingual and bicultural identities of two groups of 11-13-year-old girls from different communities within the UK: a group of British-Asians girls living in an English inner city, and a group of girls from North West Wales. Despite many differences, both groups are speakers of a minority language, defined by Huws (1998) as 'one where the speakers of that language accept that they receive most of their culture and communications through the medium of the majority language'. For these young bilinguals, there exists an opportunity to use language, a 'unique window on reality' (Edwards, 1985:34), to establish their own position

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both within and on the boundaries of two cultures (Heller, 1987). This study aims to illustrate some ways in which they engage with various texts, using them to explore and consolidate their own realities.

Data

Data were collected from a series of semi-structured group interviews conducted termly over a period of two years with two groups of nine girls. Interviews took place at the girls' respective secondary schools both in North West Wales and in an English inner-city. Various staff involved in the literacy development of the girls were also interviewed, such as their teachers of Welsh, English and Urdu. At the outset of the study, a questionnaire was administered to the whole of the girls' year group at both schools (Year 7, aged 11). This provided data with which to contextualise the language and literacy practices described by the bilingual girls who were the focus of the study. The names used here are pseudonyms.

The non-dominating languages in context

The term 'mother tongue' is problematic in this context as the languages referred to - Urdu, Punjabi, Mirpuri and Welsh - are often not the speakers' first language, nor are they, in many circumstances, their preferred option (Tulasiewicz and Adams, 1998). Although the term 'home language' is frequently used in the context of bilinguals, these languages are often not the main languages of the home. However, the term 'non-dominating languages' (Robertson, 2002:119) clearly demonstrates the relative position of these languages within the context of the bilingual experience.

Asian community languages

At the English inner-city school attended by the British-Asian girls studied, 49% of the year group in question speak a language other than English at home, 25% reporting that they speak Punjabi and 24% Urdu. However, for the vast majority, their main language other than English is actually Mirpuri, a dialect of the Mirpur region on the Kashmir-Pakistan border. Edwards (1985) explains that 'dialect' is a term often used to refer to a form of language seen as substandard, without social prestige or powerful

speakers. The Urdu teacher at the school, however, suggests that this is not the main reason for the confusion over language:

Miss Yaqoob: They come from Pakistan; Urdu is spoken in Pakistan, so they think they speak Urdu.

There is sometimes confusion over the use of the term 'Punjabi', as some in the Pakistani Muslim heritage community in the UK use the term to refer to their spoken dialects, which include Mirpuri. References to *reading* in Punjabi included here are made by girls of Indian Sikh heritage, referring to reading the language in the Gurmukhi script.

The girls themselves explain the complexities of language use in their lives.

Zobina: English, I can talk to my friends when I'm out at school and stuff like that. When I'm at home, sometimes, I speak, like, a mixture. When I go to my grandma's house, I speak Urdu, then with my aunties I speak English.

Shabnam: My mum speaks Punjabi. She loves it. ... We don't speak Urdu, I just learn that in school... I speak Mirpuri.

Welsh

The community of the second group of bilingual girls is in the centre of *Y Fro Gymraeg* – the Welsh speaking heartland. Over 80% of the population of this area have some knowledge of the Welsh language and of those, 72% are able to speak, read and write in the language (Aitchison and Carter, 2004). Welsh is the main medium of education, with English not being introduced to many primary classrooms in this area of Wales before age seven. The girls in this study are all now in a bilingual class at secondary school and come from homes where there is varied language use:

Anna: I speak English in the morning when I get up because Mum, Dad and my brother speak English, and then when I go to school, I speak Welsh all day and then when I go home, I speak English.

Ffion: In the morning I speak Welsh, then in school, it depends on who I talk to ...When we go home, the children on our bus speak English, usually.

The girls reveal an insight into their position within two languages:

Anna: English is like a half mother tongue for us, isn't it?

Sara: A second mother tongue.

Sara: If I was daydreaming that I was bilingual, I would have one body and two heads – one speaking Welsh and one speaking English.

Code-switching is clearly a key part of the girls' lives, a process which, according to Heller (1987), is used by some bilinguals to break down the boundaries between their two languages. However, it also shows exactly how these individuals are often positioned in the context of two languages: 'bilinguals *are* the boundary' (ibid, p.199).

The Welsh girls demonstrate how the two worlds either side of this boundary can also cause tensions and ironies.

Sara: Well, if you're born in Wales, then you're Welsh, then, aren't you? But speaking Welsh makes you more Welsh.
[...]

Llio: There's being Welsh and being pure Welsh.

Ffion: You have to have the Welsh language to be solid Welsh.

Despite these comments, which suggest that speaking the language defines a person as Welsh, many Welsh speakers will be acutely aware that within the Welsh population, they are in a minority. The historical position of the language has led to a significant campaign for its preservation, involving government policy, including that concerning education, and the considerable efforts of the media. This will have permeated all aspects of the girls' experience. Lois describes her primary teacher's role in teaching not only the language itself, but also the responsibility of its young speakers:

Llio: She wasn't strict, but she was a bit because the Welsh language is going a bit and she wanted everyone to learn it.

It might seem easy, therefore, to predict these girls' tastes when it came to cultural practices:

- SJ: If you had a choice, to do something in English or in Welsh, which would you choose?
- Anna: English
- Sian: English.
- Ffion: English.
- Sara: English.
- Charlotte: English.

This illustrates the irony with which the Welsh girls' talk was riven and is an example of how the 'lived realities of a Welsh identity, like any other, are complex' (Peate *et al.*, 1998:99).

Reading in the non-dominating languages

Fry (1985: 96) suggests that 'what we choose to read, or simply the books we have in our possession, are indices of the ways in which we want to be seen and the ways we see ourselves'. Given that there is little difference in the reading choices of ethnic and linguistic groups (Hall and Coles, 1999; Jones, 2004), one could assume that bilingual readers are not necessarily making the same use of texts in their non-dominating languages as those in English.

At age 12, the British-Asian girls embark upon the first stage in the acquisition of new literacy skills, with lessons in either Urdu or Punjabi beginning at school in Year 8. A few already have experience of the different alphabet and graphology of these and other languages such as Arabic, from out-of-school classes. However, all the girls will already be very familiar with the difference in literacy practices between the two cultures they inhabit.

Fiction does not have a prominent place in the non-dominating languages of the British-Asian girls in this study. Bilingual respondents to the questionnaire at the start of this study were significantly more likely to

source fiction or get inspiration for reading from school or the library rather than from home. Young British-Asians within the community are encouraged to acquire literacy skills in their non-dominating languages in order to maintain links with family in India or Pakistan or to engage in religious practices. When asked whether fiction similar to their favourites in English would be popular in the non-dominating language, the girls' awareness of an area of dissonance between their cultures was clear:

Farah: In *Girls in Tears* [by Jacqueline Wilson], they cry because they've lost their boyfriends. In Urdu, you don't have boyfriends.

Although there are many young readers who master reading in more than one language from an early age (Robertson, 2002; Kenner, 2000), the girls in this study do not feel their skills are adequate to read whole texts in either Urdu or Punjabi. As such, their experience of fiction in their non-dominating languages differs greatly from that in English.

Zobina: I can't really read in Urdu, well I can a bit, but not much, but if I listen to a story that's sweet or something, I like it.

Priya: I can't, I got the mother tongue, but I can't really, like, read them [books in Punjabi], but sometimes when I hear stories I like them, they're good as well.

A significant proportion of the girls' reading experiences in Urdu or Punjabi comes in the form of educational texts aimed at language acquisition. The teacher of Urdu acknowledges the fact that, as the textbooks used to teach this language are published in Pakistan and are often outdated, they do not match the needs of young people in the UK today. As such, she recognises how the learning experience of her students differs to their peers learning French or German.

Similarly, despite the efforts of the Welsh publishing industry to provide enjoyable reading material for young readers (Huws, 1998), there is little room in the reading choices of the girls in Wales for texts in Welsh that are comparable to their favourites in English, such as Jacqueline Wilson or J.K. Rowling. Part of the problem is economic. As the teacher of Welsh

explains, 'it is impossible for Welsh to compete' with the dominant English-language culture on this front.

Anna: There aren't that many good books in Welsh, are there? The English books are good. So we read them and we don't want to read the Welsh ones because they're boring.

Translations are available in Welsh of many popular English authors. However, as with their British-Asian counterparts, these young Welsh readers have a lack of confidence regarding the written form of their language:

Gwenno: Even when they translate them [into Welsh], they have difficult words in them.

Written Welsh has kept its historical association with religious and literary forms, and written texts do not always reflect the language spoken by many young readers. Even when a book is written in dialect form, the attitudes of speakers of various regional dialects towards each other, which are often pejorative (Peate, et al. 1998), can create a barrier to enjoyment:

Sian: It would be better if *Gogs* [people of North Wales] wrote it. Because the only thing you get is what the *Hwntws* [people of South Wales] have written.

Magazine reading

Welsh girls

The reading of magazines forms a large part of the literacy practices of young readers, particularly girls (Hall and Coles, 1999), with 82% of the females in the year group questionnaire in this study reporting to read them. The Welsh girls read a range of magazines. Unlike their British-Asian counterparts, whose reading is discussed further below, the preferences of Welsh girls are firmly with the popular English magazines, exposing the cultural capital of such texts (Bourdieu, 1977):

Catrin: They mention people you all know. Like, there's only one programme in Welsh, but in English, there's lots, so it's about them.

Elin: In the Welsh ones, there's only about four pages and you haven't heard of the celebs in them.

This taste for texts in English may indeed be related to 'the perceived trendiness' (Gruffudd, 1997: 207) of magazine celebrity culture, or possibly, in the choice of English fiction, it may well be a reaction against Welsh as the language of authority.

The context of reading in the non-dominating languages of both groups of girls is clearly heavily influenced by social, political and linguistic issues. However, both groups of girls revealed how text does play a significant part in their exploration of their unique position as bilingual and bicultural individuals. Below are two examples which illustrate the ways in which girls from each group, in their different ways, demonstrate how their engagement with text enables them not only to explore their own realities, but, as is outlined by Cope and Kalantzis (2000: 23), means they are also able to be a part of the 'redesign' of that reality, at the same time being able to 'remake themselves [as they] reconstruct and renegotiate their identities'. For the British-Asian girls, their discussion of magazine reading reveals ways in which this practice can have a social impact on their reality. The girls in Wales have engaged with electronic text in order to explore the linguistic flexibility afforded them by their bilingualism.

Magazine reading: British-Asian girls

The British-Asian girls in this study read a wide range of magazines, both popular British titles and those aimed at an Asian market. The Asian magazines, such as *Stardust* and *Cineblitz*, which focus on Bollywood films and celebrities, are written in *Hinglish* or *Bombay English*, 'a mixture of non-standard varieties of English with the odd Hindi, Marathi or Gujarati word or phrase inserted' (Dwyer, 2000:182) e.g.:

Currently, home-maker Madhuri seems to have thoroughly learnt and mastered the lesson of independence and dancing to the cherub's tunes. *Ek do teen!*'

Stardust magazine, February 2004

In reading magazines from the non-dominating culture, the girls find an opportunity to link with other female family members.

Jaspreet: I like to read these Indian magazines that my mum brings, like *Cineblitz* and *Stardust*.

Priya: There's Indian ones as well, that my cousin gets for me.

Farah: Because I'm subscribing [to *Stardust*], well my auntie did it, then I did it, she recommended it to me so I do it as well ...

In this way, these magazines become a way of sharing aspects of the non-dominating culture across generations.

When they talk about reading British teen magazines, however, a very different attitude is revealed by some of the Muslim girls, which contrasts with the one explained above by Farah towards teen fiction:

Sonia: There was this questionnaire that they [*Sugar* magazine] had and they asked these thirteen to seventeen year old girls if they think they should be allowed to read *Sugar* and most of them said yeah, because they said they should be able to read what they want because some of their parents don't really like talking about sex with them because they think it might fill their heads with something.

Farah: How does it feel, basically, I just want to know.

There is also a contrast between the open sharing of magazines from the non-dominant culture and the response of some (mostly male) parents towards the content of the British teen magazines:

Zobina: When I go to the shop I do get magazines if I like them. When I come home, I put it in my bag and take it in my coat or something and put it in my room. Under my pillow. Just in case my dad and my mum's there. My mum don't really mind, but my dad looks through it to see what's in it, to see what I'm reading and stuff.

This situation is, of course, not confined to British-Asian culture (McRobbie, 1997), although in this context, it is a window into the position within the community of Muslim girls and women described by Afshar

(1994: 131), where they are 'perceived as transmitters of cultural values and identities and are standard-bearers of the group's public and private dignity'. However, despite (and, perhaps, because of) the covert nature of the girls' reading, they show how they use these texts in a way that reflects Rogoff's view that 'culture is not static' (2003:.51), and that 'people develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities that themselves develop with the involvement of people in successive generations' (ibid. p.52).

Farah: Once my stepdad came in and he looked round and because in *Sugar* they have, like, fashion things for summer and they had, like, bikinis and stuff like that, you know. In our religion you don't wear stuff like that. When he looked through them he told me off and he said 'why do you get these magazines?' and I said I don't get them 'cos of that, I get them 'cos of other stuff and he said 'alright, then, make sure you don't, you know, things, stuff like that'.

Farah's defence of her reading of teen magazines could be seen here to lead to a modification of attitude, however small, within her home culture. In their talk about their reading of magazines, these British-Asian girls show how these are important texts that are used to explore the girls' identity and role within a particular culture as well as to contribute to the developing cultural processes of their communities.

World Wide Welsh

Towards the end of the interview schedule, it appeared that the Welsh girls could report little that was positive about their literacy practices in Welsh. However, it then emerged that many of them, like many of their peers around the world, have set up personal webpages, features of which provide a small but telling insight into their bilingual experience. This was not a practice in which their British-Asian counterparts engaged. The Welsh girls' literacy practices on their webpages are explored here.

The on-screen identities created begin with the name, either immediately pronouncing the Welshness of the author - *CymraesCymreig*, *Angelcymru*

- or anglicising their own Welsh name: *loopy-lowz*, or *loisy-mez*. The main language used is English, although much of each website relies heavily on text downloaded from a central source, such as *www.piczo.com*. Away from school and possibly family contexts, the girls recognise English as the language of communication with a wide audience. Gruffudd (1997) indicates that many young Welsh speakers actively choose English during adolescence, as a reaction to the language of authority, often returning to the non-dominating language by their late teens. These websites are a space made by young people for young people, where they are free from the prying eyes of authority.

There are interesting examples of the ways in which the girls *are* demonstrating their Welshness, however. The use of the Welsh flag as a signifier of identity is common (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Welsh flag as signifier of identity



Figure 2. Use of images to demonstrate Welsh identity

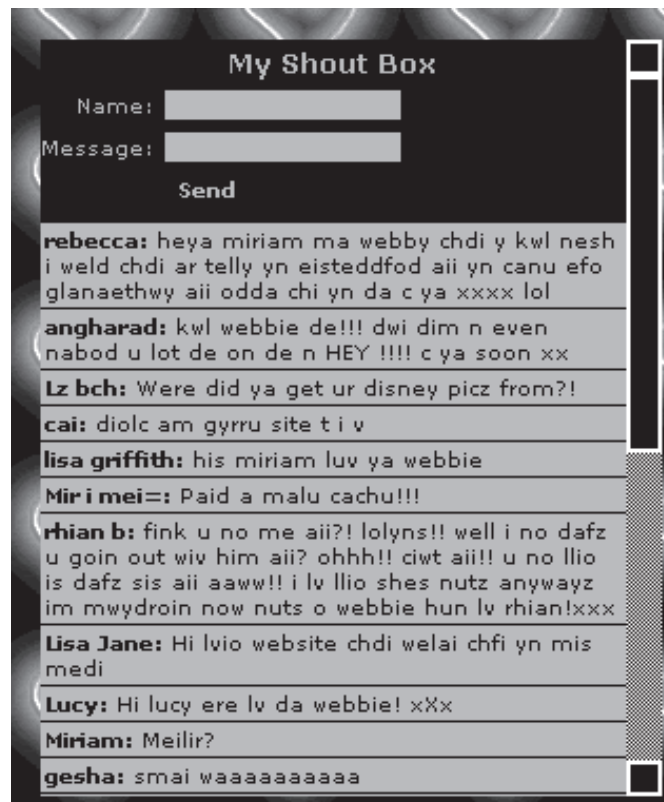


Another way is through the network of the guest book (see Figure 3). Mor-Sommerfeld (2002) applies the concept of ‘language mosaic’ to a bilingual’s written combination of languages. The guest books of these websites are examples of a similar process at work, where young bilinguals combine features of both languages in order to communicate, one could argue, in what is almost a ‘third language’: the abbreviated, ‘txt’ language of on-screen communication. The following messages are taken from two guest books:

Haiia bbz v hebdi weld chdi ers ages na (missin u) *lol*
 ‘Hiya babes. I haven’t seen you for ages, have I? (Missing you) *laugh out loud*’
 Diolch am gyrru site t i v
 ‘Thank you for sending your site to me’

The first shows code-switching between languages, with phrases such as ‘haiia bbz’ and ‘missin u’ added to what is essentially a communication in Welsh. Both messages demonstrate an interesting ‘language mosaic’. The letters ‘t i v’ are used in the second message to represent the words ‘*ti i fi*’ (‘you to me’). In doing so, they are combining letter names from both English and Welsh (the letter ‘v’, for example, does not exist in Welsh) and the reader, in order to decode the message, has to switch between the two languages, a ‘letter’ at a time. A similar example can be seen on a page about ‘mi family’ where the author mentions ‘My 9’ – *nain* being the Welsh for grandmother.

Figure 3. Examples of ‘language mosaic’ of Welsh/English/txt in a guest book



The authors of these electronic texts are showing how language is not only 'a component of culture...it also moulds culture' (Hamers and Blanc, 2000: 199). They are choosing to display aspects of their identities on-line, and living with two languages is a key part of that identity.

Conclusion

Despite coming from two very different communities, the bilingual girls in this study show an awareness of the ideological context of the literacy practices of both their dominating and non-dominating languages, whether religious, political, cultural or social. They also demonstrate how text is used to explore the possibilities within two cultures, to subvert expectations and to bring about a change in the culture, whether social or linguistic.

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