

Dispelling the monolingual myth: Exploring literacy outcomes in Australian bilingual programmes

What this research was about and why it is important

The research discussed in this article shows how the researchers examined the achievements of students at four primary schools in Australia where bilingual/CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) programmes (in either Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean) were implemented to teach subject content (any one, or a mix of geography, social studies, creative arts and/or science) through an additional language. The National Assessment Programme for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test is the instrument which measured literacy achievement. NAPLAN tests all Australian children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. As this research was conducted in primary schools, the NAPLAN data for Years 3 and 5 are presented. While all schools in New South Wales had explored their own NAPLAN results, none had compared the students in the bilingual/CLIL programme as a subset of all students, comparing them to all students' test results.

What the researchers did

- Data were collected in four primary schools in the state of New South Wales, Australia, in 2015, 2016 and 2017 and the NAPLAN data were 2014, 2015 and 2016.
- The data were collected (i) from full sets of standardised test (NAPLAN) results from Years 3 and 5, and (ii) qualitative interviews with teachers in the bilingual programme about their assessment practices and who supplied their assessment and reporting documents.
- The research questions investigated (i) how the bilingual/CLIL students' NAPLAN results for literacy in English compared with their non-CLIL peers in the same school (and with students in similar schools where two streams do not exist) and (ii) how teachers perceive the literacy learning of their students in the bilingual/CLIL programme.
- The methods comprised statistical analysis, document analysis and interviews with teachers,
- The researchers compared student performance in the NAPLAN assessment, by separating the results of students in the bilingual stream from those in the standard classes. The researchers also interviewed teachers regarding their perceptions of the children's literacy development.

What the researchers found

- The results of the four separate literacy strands of the NAPLAN test (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation) for bilingual and non-bilingual stream students from Schools 1, 2 and 3 were compared.
- At the first stage of testing in Year 3, the bilingual students in all schools outperformed their non-bilingual peers. Overall NAPLAN band results for Year 3 students from year 2012 to 2016 showed that bilingual students outperformed the standard classes by an average of 8%. Overall here indicates both literacy and numeracy.
- In 2014 at Year 5, the bilingual stream performed significantly higher than their non-bilingual peers across all four domains of literacy across three different schools. For 2015 and 2016, data significance was not shown between the groups, that is, the bilingual stream performed higher although differences were not statistically significant.
- Teachers believed that the bilingual style of learning suits children irrespective of many contextual factors and children's literacy in English is enhanced by the addition of a second or subsequent language. Teachers mentioned the range of ways in which students develop cognitively and their belief about the positive impact the bilingual/CLIL programme has on students' ability in English. The teachers found that children appeared to be better able to talk about language, to deal with language at a metacognitive level, and better able to manipulate language, decode and understand languages as systems.
- NAPLAN test analysis comparisons and teacher perceptions would indicate there is no detrimental impact to student literacy outcomes by being in these bilingual programmes.

Things to consider

- This study can provide evidence to dispel the myth that bilingual programmes are detrimental to a student's first language literacy.
- In a range of different contexts with differing socio-economic and linguistic levels in the different rural and urban school communities, students performed at a higher or equal level in standardised literacy tests compared to their peers who were not part of a bilingual programme.
- Learning content through language (CLIL) offers a solution to the often-cited challenge of the crowded curriculum with no detriment to student outcomes in English literacy.