



# Bilingual teachers' language strategies: The case of an Arabic–Hebrew kindergarten in Israel



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigated the bilingual teaching strategies.
- The most frequently used strategy was translanguaging.
- The teachers' orientation was to avoid translation.
- The teachers aimed to increase Jewish children motivation to acquire Arabic.
- The study highlights the need to rethink traditional bilingual language strategies.

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the language-teaching strategies used in a bilingual Arabic–Hebrew kindergarten in Israel. We used an ethnographic approach by applying a mixed methods design. The results demonstrate that the language-teaching strategy most frequently used by teachers was flexible bilingualism, through translanguaging that involved code-switching. This is in contrast to traditional instruction using language separation. In the teachers' opinion, translanguaging enables bilingual children to learn their second language efficiently, especially since Arabic is a socially weaker language in Israel, and it encourages children's interactive involvement in the kindergarten.

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## 1. Introductory part

The issue of bilingual education has occupied researchers, policymakers, and educators for some decades, and a variety of bilingual teaching strategies have been examined. Recent research calls for rethinking and reevaluation of constructions of traditional pedagogy, e.g., usage of translation, and language separation and negation of flexible transfer between languages (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2005). This study aimed to investigate language-teaching strategies which are applied in a bilingual Arabic–Hebrew kindergarten in Israel and challenge the term “parallel monolingualism” (Heller, 1999) by

stressing flexibility and *no* language separation as main principles of their bilingual pedagogy. To reach this aim, we used linguistic ethnography as a methodological framework including field-notes, video-recorded observations, the documents pertaining to kindergarten and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

The introduction of the paper is structured as follows. First, we present a short theoretical overview of the main models of bilingual teaching. Second, we provide a description of the main groups of language-teaching strategies for young bilingual children that were implemented in the framework of bilingual and monolingual education. Finally, we present a brief description of the socio-linguistic context of the current study with regard to the status of Hebrew and Arabic languages in Israel followed by general information about Arabic–Hebrew bilingual education.

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## 2. Theoretical overview

### 2.1. Bilingual teaching

Bilingual education around the world is based on several different models. Most of these indicate that languages should be strictly segregated in learning. Thus, parallel monolingualism was traditionally considered as a positive means of acquiring a new linguistic system. This approach is in keeping with the rationale of the two-way system used in the USA, in which half of the students are L1 speakers of English and half are L1 speakers of another language, such as Spanish (Freeman, 2007). In this system, all the children receive instruction in both languages, but separately, using the “language-time” strategy. The aim of this strategy is to produce high-level bilingualism in children from English-speaking families and children who speak a minority language at home. In the two-way system, a mixture of languages or code-switching in the classroom is rarely endorsed. It is stressed that languages should be kept discrete and separate; in this case, bilingualism is accepted as double monolingualism. This pedagogy of language separation has been criticized in current ethnographic studies on the application of language-time strategy in bilingual preschools and kindergartens in the USA (see Lee, 2007).

Recently introduced in the research literature was an interactional approach to the teaching of two languages (Arthur & Martin, 2006). This approach allows code-switching, claiming that flexible transfer between languages is necessary for effective learning. In an educational context, code-switching is defined as the practice of switching between a first and a second language or discourse (Coffey, 2009). In this context, it was claimed that for bilinguals and multilinguals, languages are not discrete, but form an integrated language system (García, 2009a). The following section presents the main language strategies for teaching bilingual children.

### 2.2. Strategies of language learning in bilingual and monolingual education of bilingual children

Based on the research analysis performed for the purposes of this study, we distinguished four main groups of language-teaching strategies for young bilingual children that were implemented in the framework of bilingual and monolingual education: (1) bilingual resource strategies; (2) metalinguistic strategies; (3) nonlinguistic strategies, i.e., gestures and (4) translanguaging (e.g., Creese & Backledge, 2010; Cummins, 2010; Kenner, Gregory, Ruby, & Al-Azami, 2008; Nicoladis, 2002).

#### 2.2.1. Bilingual resources

The first group presents strategies that provide bilingual resources. In this context, Kenner et al. (2008) mentioned strategies such as *using translation* and *presenting key vocabulary and language structures bilingually*. In applying these strategies, two teachers (each speaking one of two languages) work collaboratively to rehearse typical phrases in the two languages (each in his/her native language), to facilitate discussion of literary meanings and to enrich thinking skills. Manyak (2004) suggested that encouraging bilingual students to be engaged in translation in the classroom is a powerful way to facilitate their literacy learning.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that translation, as a dominant strategy, is inefficient in bilingual education (Cummins, 2005; Montague, 1997). Montague (1997) claimed that translation as a main strategy leads to passive waiting for translation instead of active involvement in L2 learning. Thus, there is an increasing call to critically address an overreliance on translation as a bilingual resource.

Providing bilingual resources such as parallel versions of storybooks and poems in L1 and L2 and creating dual language multimedia books and projects was also found to be an effective

language-teaching strategy (Cummins, 2010; Kenner et al., 2008). This strategy facilitates children's understanding of the content, and enables them to compare meanings that were expressed in the different languages. In addition, Ernst-Slavit and Mulhern (2003) found that the presence of books in the classroom in children's L1 conveys a clear message to the children about the value ascribed to minority languages, scripts and cultures.

#### 2.2.2. Metalinguistic strategies

The second group includes metalinguistic strategies. The goal of metalinguistic strategies is to develop metalinguistic awareness, which is defined by psycholinguists as a person's explicit knowledge about language, knowledge that can be brought into awareness, verbally reported and declaratively presented (Bialystok, 2001; Bruck & Genesee, 1995). Concerning bilingual education, a growing number of studies have shown that this education can provide a basis for progress in young bilingual children's cognitive and linguistic development (Cummins, 2000). Several studies suggest that, at least at an early age, bilingual children appear to be more sensitive to the structure of language, in both L1 and L2, than monolingual children (Bialystok, 2001). For example, Kenner et al. (2008) found that the children within a community class strengthened their explicit knowledge of how language works. They discussed differences between language structures in Bangla and English in regard to the presence and absence of the definite article in these languages.

In the present study, the focus was on the metalinguistic strategies which involve issues such as awareness of cognates and association between words. Cognates are words in different languages that share a common historical origin (Whitely, 2002). Cognates are defined as vocabulary items in two different languages that are similar both “orthographically and semantically” (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). For example, the English word *advance*, the Spanish word *avance*, and the French word *avancer*. Research studies provide evidence of a positive cross-linguistic transfer between L1 and L2 through the use of cognates. Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) found that bilingual English–Spanish students made use of cognate relationships in their English reading. L1 Spanish-speaking students recognized many cognates with English and had an advantage in English vocabulary recognition, but they often required explicit instructions to optimize transfer for comprehension. The findings led the researchers to conclude that students had an emergent concept of cognates, and used cognate strategies in their reading. However, García (1991) noted that cognate strategies have constraints. For example, it appeared that some aspects of word knowledge are understood only through experience. Furthermore, it was stressed that a positive transfer of vocabulary knowledge can occur if languages involve similar origins. In our case, Hebrew and Arabic share a large number of cognates which are unambiguous in their meaning since they represent concrete objects, e.g., animals, vegetables. This is a reason to believe that cognate awareness facilitates vocabulary learning for Arabic and Hebrew speakers.

#### 2.2.3. Nonlinguistic strategies

The third group of strategies addresses nonlinguistic approaches. It was suggested that teachers use nonlinguistic strategies such as spontaneous hand and arm gestures together with their speech to foster L2 understanding among bilingual children during classroom instruction (Zukow-Goldring, Romo, & Duncan, 1994). Researchers have found that gestures may improve speech recall and enhance the learning process (Church, Ayman-Nolley, & Mahootian, 2004). In addition, the use of signs and gestures appears to facilitate speech articulation (Alibali & Nathan, 2007). Finally, concerning bilingual education, Hadar, Teitelman, and Dar (2001) claimed that L1 speakers tend to use more gestures in their L2 speech.

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