

## Mother Tongue Other Tongue multilingual project for schools: Add your voice to the Poet-Tree

---

*Angela de Britos*

*University of Strathclyde*

---

**Abstract:** Language and culture are arguably central to identity and it is also the right of every child to maintain these elements of 'self'. Nevertheless, the Home Office mantra of quickly learning English and 'new arrivals' homogenising with British culture and values is at odds with current Scottish educational policy aiming to foster children's home language. This paper outlines the impact of the recent Mother Tongue Other Tongue multilingual poetry project which allowed pupils to use their home language, or a language they are learning in school creatively, and also reflect upon culture within a mainstream school environment. The themes of multilingualism and multiculturalism explored within the project will contribute to my PhD thesis which explores the extent to which Scottish educational policy is meeting the needs of multilingual children. Regarding the benefits and importance of plurilingualism, I argue that there is a lack of awareness and knowledge on the part of teachers and parents. Furthermore, children's well-being would be enhanced if their linguistic and cultural heritage were nurtured. The impact of the project on the children and young people involved has been profound - it has given them a voice!

---

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, languages, culture, multilingualism, identity

---

### Background

As a former Development Officer for Ethnic Minority Achievement, my working practice has developed in line with government policy for meeting the needs of 'newly arrived' children and their families within the education sector. This Local Authority role involved working with schools to upskill teachers in pedagogical theory, planning and practical activities for pupils with *English as an Additional Language* (EAL) and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Although some emphasis is given to meeting the holistic needs of immigrant children and their families (DCSF, 2007; Scottish Government, 2012), the main focus is placed upon learning English as the most efficient way which some believe to increase academic achievement and facilitate integration into the school and wider community (May, 2010). However, this strategy risks reducing the status of the family's home language; Safford & Drury (2013) believe that plurilingual children are being prevented from activating their linguistic, cultural and community expertise through institutional and professional lack of recognition and skill. In addition, Conteh (2012) argues that there is still a substantial void between EAL policy and practice in schools.

Working in cooperation with parents and the extended family is vital to good pedagogical practice (Baldock, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). Families should not need to cast off the language and culture of the home, and live and act as though

school and home represent two totally separate and different entities which have to be segregated (Bullock, 1975). Fostering additive bilingualism to maintain 'home' language is promoted as best practice (Thomas and Collier, 2003; Cummins, 2008; NALDIC, 2013; Cameron, 2001) yet UK government policy contradicts the maintenance of home language (Cameron, 2012; Pickles, 2013; DCSF, 2007; Ofsted, 2013) as the aforementioned strategy of English language immersion is endorsed in schools.

Whilst we have been aware for some time that the social, emotional and physiological needs of human beings must be met to ensure optimum cognitive and behavioural function (Maslow, 1943), policy makers may be placing economics before the holistic development of pupils. It could be argued that policies are developed from a rather egotistical stance benefitting the host society and meets the needs that they perceive the citizens to have, rather than listening to voices and experiences in order to best meet the unique needs of various ethnic minority communities in our country. Politicians and civil servants could be more effective in supporting linguistic and cultural development of children and young people by listening to their stories, meeting their expectations and understanding their needs. The MTOT project contributes to my further PhD research which intends to bridge the gap between policy and practice to best meet the needs of the 'end users', i.e. the children and families from ethnic minority communities and those who have EAL. This process of discovery may challenge current policy and attempt to persuade that a more holistic and innovative approach is necessary.

Recognising that language and culture are integral elements of one's identity and self, therefore how is the holistic development of children growing up plurilingually and pluriculturally being facilitated in practice in Scotland?

In 2011, the Scottish Government launched Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), a new approach to improving outcomes for children and young people and supporting their well-being through joined-up provision across the various public services such as health, education, housing, social care. Based on Article 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

*Children and families are valued and respected at all levels in our society and have the right to have their voices sought, heard and acted upon by all those who support them and who provide services to help them. (United Nations, 1989)*

GIRFEC sets out eight indicators of well-being and aims to ensure every child in Scotland is:

- Safe
- Healthy
- Achieving
- Included
- Nurtured
- Active
- Respected
- Responsible

*(Scottish Government, 2011)*

It could be disputed that if a child's home language and culture are not celebrated and given the opportunity to be developed, then they are not being 'respected' and treated as individuals. Moreover, 'included' does not have to be interpreted as included and homogenised into the host Scottish/local community; it can also be viewed as being

able to be included in ethnic minority communities, religious communities or one's own family community. Therefore, the right to maintain one's language and identity is paramount. Crucially, Article 30 of the aforementioned United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

*In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.*

Also consider Article 13.1:

*The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.*

In other words it is a child's legal right to be able to maintain their own language and culture in order to be able to express themselves freely and so that their voice is heard. From my experiences working with teachers and pupils, I would argue that this is not true for the vast majority of children with a home language other than English in Scotland, where the 'assimilation' that Cameron (2012) describes is more accurate. She describes how social anxieties regarding immigration have affected UK immigration policy (in which Scotland does not have devolved powers) which in turn is driving other policies and strategies. She says:

*Speaking English has become a touchstone in discussions of what is now referred to as social "cohesion", "integration", or "inclusion". Essentially these terms are code for "assimilation": both new immigrants and settled minorities must demonstrate their allegiance to British culture and values. (Cameron 2012: 240)*

## **The Project**

Developed from the highly successful 'Routes into Languages' initiative in England, the Mother Tongue Other Tongue (MTOT) project was rolled out across Scotland by SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages after a pilot in the Glasgow area in 2015. The multilingual poetry project comprises two categories – 'Mother Tongue', which asks non-native English speakers to write poetry in their mother tongue language, and 'Other Tongue', which gives young people the opportunity to write poetry in a language they are studying in school.

The broad aims of MTOT are to celebrate and promote plurilingualism, to promote the use of mother tongue languages, and to give all children and young people the opportunity to enjoy using their language learning in an expressive way so that their 'voice' is truly heard. MTOT also supports the Scottish Government's 1+2 approach to languages by allowing pupils to apply languages they know, or are learning, in a creative context and strengthen their literacy skills.

Pupils from P1 – S6 entered poetry, raps, rhymes or songs and worked either collaboratively or individually. Over 400 learners aged between 5 and 17 participated, using their language skills to create poems, songs and rhymes in 36 different languages including, for the first time ever, British Sign Language and Gaelic.

In March 2016, twenty award winners received their prizes on the main stage at the SECC as part of the wider Languages Show Live Scotland event and took the opportunity to perform their poems and rhymes to the audience, showcasing the many languages used by children and young people both in school and at home. The award winners, their families, friends, teachers and audience members were asked for feedback on the event, and the competition in general, by adding their voices to our Poet-Tree.



*Pupil – “It was breath-taking to see and hear everyone’s poems and how they are all so different”*

*Pupil – “What a great day! I really enjoyed taking part and meeting lots of nice people”*

*Parent – “A wonderful event! Great to showcase the talented youngsters. Love languages!”*

*Teacher – “The proudest moment of my teaching career”*

*Teacher – “An opportunity for children to let their souls fly!”*

*Audience member/guest – “Every language is a window to a new world”*

## Perceived Benefits

Over the past two years, Malika Pedley (Bordeaux University) has supported SCILT and the MTOT project as it aligns with her own PhD research. She conducted qualitative research in the form of group interviews with primary school pupils aged between 8 and 11 years old who participated in the Mother Tongue category. The following are the main perceived benefits of participating in the project and using their home language and improving their skills:

### A novel and unique opportunity to use and improve home language skills

*I liked the competition because I could speak my language and I could write it. My poem is a song it's Lion King, the circle of life that my mum likes. That's why I wanted to come here, because I could learn more my language.*

*[The teacher] helped me chose a poem; at first I couldn't write in Polish and then I started writing in Polish.*

Children were also able to talk about aspects of their mother tongue, as they perceive it, whether they are formal or social aspects of the language; They developed thoughts on the mother tongue / metalinguistic skills:

*There's eleven languages that in South Africa they speak. There's Afrikaans, IsiNdebele, Zulu and there's many others and they've got the same similarities of the pronunciation of words and, hm, some of the words are the same but they'll have different meanings to it.*

### Development of creative literacy skills

Many children reported their writing skills in the mother tongue to be low. If parents were unable to assist their children in this process, the pupils still managed to produce a piece of poetry by transcribing the sounds of their mother tongue based on English phonics:

*I found it was great because it was actually my first time spelling in my own language and I remember I was at home and my mum was in the bedroom and I was just thinking of using syllables*

*[...] nobody knows how to write it in my house so I just thought why don't I just use English letters to spell the word*

### Prevention of language attrition

A lot of children expressed their fear of losing their mother tongue as English becomes dominant in their everyday life so MTOT has been a real relief for them:

*[The project] helps me because I normally used to talk a lot of Polish and I've known how to talk Polish but now because I talk in English a lot with my friends and the teachers, I kind of forget some words in Polish now.*

*I was really happy because I thought I would never ever be able to speak my language in school ever again and that I might forget it [...]*

Overall, participating in Mother Tongue Other Tongue was seriously seen as an important task of representing one's own language and culture:

*I think actually it saved my life (...) it did because see if there were no languages well maybe / no languages, poems they wouldn't actually exist*

*It's like betraying your own language, if you just don't wanna use it ...you feel bad*

### **Sharing knowledge and memories about home languages**

Despite having a real impact on each child's individual perceptions, Mother Tongue Other Tongue has also been felt as a genuine collaborative experience. Children enjoyed sharing languages, being part of a group and learning about others' languages too.

*[...]I can share my own language with far more other people in the group and we were all excited to learn what other languages everybody speaks.*

For many, finding or creating a poem in the mother tongue meant recalling memories from their early years. Children were happy to share these memories, whether they were stories, songs, life experiences or parts of their cultural heritage.

*I'd look to see other things that I liked when I was younger maybe when I was 2 or 3 that my mum and dad used to say or things that go on in the family like sayings or songs that they used to sing to my big brother and sisters.*

As a follow-up project to MTOT, some children have expressed the idea of then teaching their mother tongue to the rest of the school and sharing their knowledge of languages. Along with the language itself, some children feel it is important to pass on both their linguistic and cultural heritage to make other pupils aware of language diversity:

*Yeah and like other people who like want more information about your background and where you come from and what languages you speak and they would want to know how you say some stuff and I think sharing that a bit of your language with other people will actually have a change because they never know they might go to these countries that you're from and they might end up speaking the language.*

### **Confidence Booster**

Children's first reaction when the competition project was put forward was not always a positive one; reluctance to participate was sometimes due to a lack of confidence using their mother tongue in the school setting. The project boosted their confidence:

*I think that once you do something that you've never done before then you overcome your fear about it.*

## Valuing ALL languages

Writing the commentary in English has also been appreciated. Children got to express their feelings and feedback on the experience. Children appreciated using both languages and felt it was important to keep bilingualism balanced:

*I would like to do it in Polish and English .... (other pupil) or half Polish half English.*

## Concluding Thoughts

Mother Tongue Other Tongue has given multilingual pupils a unique opportunity to use their home language(s) in a mainstream education context and has allowed practitioners and the wider public to see the benefits of celebrating children's linguistic and cultural heritages. Although evaluations from teachers via an on-line questionnaire is still pending at the time of writing this article, informal feedback indicates just how powerful the process has been for them and their pupils:

*Being part of the Mother Tongue Other Tongue project has been a privilege. I have heard the 'other voices' of my bilingual pupils, witnessed them careful craft their poems, laugh about the differences in language and, above all, feel valued and respected for their ability to speak with another voice. This event has opened my eyes to the importance of supporting children to continue to learn in their mother tongue and of engaging with my pupils' voices, in whatever language that may be. (Teacher, Renfrewshire Council)*

*Congratulations to these hardworking and creative pupils. They have demonstrated excellent language skills against a very competitive field. Knowing other languages is such a great skill for life and this project shines a light on some excellent work throughout the country. (Convener of Education, East Dunbartonshire Council)*

*Don't stop using your mother tongue! It helps us remember who we are! (Teacher, Glasgow City Council, via Twitter)*

Many practitioners, especially those involved in the teaching of EAL and complementary education, consider the recent 1+2 Languages Approach (Education Scotland, 2012) as a unique opportunity to encourage language diversity and move away from the MLPS model of one European language being taught (Crichton & Templeton, 2010). The Scottish Government committed to introducing a new norm for language learning based on the European Union 1 + 2 model, Action 44 of the EU 'Barcelona Agreement' (EU European Council, 2002). In practice this means it will create the conditions so that every child can learn two languages (L2 and L3) in addition to their own mother tongue (L1). This new model for language learning in Scotland will be implemented with an ambitious plan for all children entitled to be learning at least three languages by 2020. This policy advocates that the teaching of EAL is incorporated into local authority strategies so that, in theory, pupils with EAL will have their home language recognised as L1 with English as L2. Furthermore, schools and local authorities have the flexibility

to celebrate community languages and cultures via teaching of the L3 which starts no later than Primary 5 at the age of 9. This freedom for schools to respond to local language and cultural contexts is arguably vital in appreciating diversity and promoting community languages (Leung and Creese, 2008; HM Inspectorate of Education, 2009).

In reflection, this could be a chance to perhaps finally capitalise on the recommendations made in the report 'Citizens of a Multilingual World' (Ministerial Action Group on Languages, 2001) which was one of the first policy documents to acknowledge the fact that an increasing number of Scottish pupils no longer have English as their mother tongue language (L1). The Ministerial Action Group made reference to these additional languages in the body of its report and recommended that local authorities should diversify to enhance the learning and teaching of community languages, as well the more customary modern European languages:

*Ministerial Action Group Recommendation 5: At the national level, a variety of languages rather than French alone, and including heritage or community languages such as Scottish Gaelic and Urdu, should be taught as a first modern languages. (Scottish Executive, 2001)*

An appreciation and inclusion of community languages within mainstream education could also strengthen links with community language groups and complementary or supplementary schools (McPake, 2006) so that school and home languages, identities and cultures need not be isolated.

For more information see the MTOT page on the SCILT website: <http://www.scilt.org.uk/MTOT201516/tabid/5255/Default.aspx>

## References

- Baldock, P (2010) Understanding Cultural Diversity in the Early Years. London: Sage Publications
- Bullock, A (1975) A Language for Life. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office
- Cameron, L (2001) Teaching Languages to Young Learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Cameron, D (2012) Verbal Hygiene. London: Routledge.
- Chow, P, and Cummins, J (2003). Valuing multilingual and multicultural approaches to learning. In S. R. Schecter, S and Cummins, J (Eds.), Multilingual education in practice: Using diversity as a resource (pp. 32–61). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Conteh, J (2012) Teaching Bilingual and EAL Learners in Primary Schools. London: Sage Publications Ltd
- Cummins, J (2001). Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J (2008) BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction, Encyclopaedia of Language and Education, 2:1, 71-83.



- DCSF (2007) *New Arrivals Excellence Programme Guidance*. Nottingham: Crown Copyright
- Edwards, J (2009). *Language and Identity: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hernandez, D J (2014) Child Well-Being and Ethnic Diversity in Affluent Societies. In Ben-Arieh, A, Casas, F, Frones, I, & Korbin, J E (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Well-Being* (pp. 3159–3192). Dordrecht: Springer
- Lundy, L (2012) Children’s rights and educational policy in Europe, *Oxford Review of Education*, 38: 393–411.
- Lundy, L (2014) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child Well-Being. In Ben-Arieh, A, Casas, F, Frones, I, & Korbin, J E (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Well-Being* (pp. 2439–2462). Dordrecht: Springer
- Lustig, M W (2013) *Intercultural Competence Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*, 7th ed. New York: Pearson
- Maslow, A H (1943) A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4) 370-96.
- May, T (2010) www.gov.uk. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/migrants-marrying-uk-citizens-must-now-learn-english> [accessed 31 May 2016].
- Ofsted (2013) *English as an Additional Language*. London: Crown Copyright
- Pickles, E (2013) New £6 million competition fund for English language learning [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-6-million-competition-fund-for-english-language-learning> [Accessed 31 May 2016]
- Safford, K and Drury, R (2013) The ‘problem’ of bilingual children in educational settings: policy and research in England, *Language and Education*, 27(1): 70-81
- Scottish Government (2011) *The vital importance of getting it right for every child and young person* (leaflet) Scotland: Crown Copyright
- Scottish Government (2012) *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach: Scottish Government Languages Working Group Report and Recommendations*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/05/3670/downloads> [Accessed 31 May 2016]
- Siraj-Blatchford, I and Clarke, P (2000) *Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years*. Berkshire: Open University Press
- Thomas, W P and Collier, V P (2003) The multiple benefits of dual language, *Educational Leadership*, 61(2) 61-64.
- United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf) [accessed 31 May 2016]

