Bilingual Education for Immigrant Children: the AKI research review in brief

The AKI research reviews

The AKI research review on “Bilingual Education for Immigrant Children: Results of Evaluation Studies on the Effects of Bilingual Education on Second-Language Acquisition and School Performance” records and evaluates the current status of knowledge on this topic. The general aim of the AKI research reviews is to organize and evaluate the information available on a selected topic, to differentiate between adequately substantiated hypothetical insights and controversial views, to highlight information gaps and requirements and hence provide bases for the further development of research on the topic and for political action.

Starting point: below-average academic performance of immigrant children

The starting point of this study is the below-average performance of children from immigrant backgrounds in German schools. A significant reason for this is these children’s insufficient knowledge of the German language. Many of them first acquire a language other than German at home. If they have not reached mother-tongue level in German when they start school, the risk arises that, without targeted action, this initial deficit will continue to impact negatively on their performance throughout their school careers.

Bilingual instruction: a controversial model

One of the models that aim to improve the school performance of such children is bilingual education. In the context of migration, bilingual education involves the development of literacy skills in both the immigrants’ mother tongue and the language of the country of immigration; instruction in other subjects is also given in the two languages. The extent to which children of immigrant families benefit from this is contested. The main arguments proposed in support of bilingual education are linguistic and political. On the one hand, it is viewed as promoting second language acquisition and cognitive development. On the other, it expresses the acknowledgement of the primary language of immigrants as an important resource in a culturally and linguistically diverse society. As opposed to this, those who disapprove of bilingual teaching models primarily fear that it is only possible to teach in the mother tongue at the cost of second-language acquisition and that such an approach is ultimately incompatible with equal educational opportunity.
Question addressed by the research: bilingual education – an obstacle to or cornerstone of a successful school career?

This report asks about the effect of forms of bilingual instruction on second-language acquisition and school performance. The promotion of bilingualism or skills in the primary language is not the focus here. The effect of bilingual teaching is evaluated in comparison with the teaching of pupils with the same mother tongue in monolingual classes (i.e. regular curriculum or special teaching of the national language as a second language). The spotlight here is on bilingual models used in primary schools.

Empirical basis: examination of existing evaluation studies

This AKI research review is based on two recent meta-analyses and individual studies which evaluated the bilingual instruction of immigrant children. Most of these research studies examined Spanish-English teaching models in the USA. The two meta-analyses and selected evaluation studies were examined primarily from a method-critical perspective focusing on research design and data analysis. From these points of view, only a few studies were able to throw any light on the question investigated in this research review.

Main finding: neutral effect on second language acquisition

These few reliable studies prompt the conclusion that as compared with the monolingual alternative, as a rule, bilingual instruction does not have any negative effect on the measured performance in the second language. Yet, it is not possible to prove a consistently positive effect either. In particular, no reliable evidence has hitherto been found in support of the linguistic hypothesis that children should first become literate in their first language and then, based on this, in the second.

Lack of information on bilingual instruction in Germany

Few bilingual education models involving German and a typical immigrant language as a partner language exist in German primary schools. Due to their evaluation design, the rare academic studies carried out on this topic have not been able to answer the question as to whether bilingual education is preferable to exclusively German instruction.

Conclusion 1: first-language instruction no obstacle to second-language acquisition

Based on the American studies, it has emerged that bilingual instruction and, specifically, simultaneous literacy development in the first and second language does not have a negative impact on second language acquisition. If part of the lessons is given in a language other than that of the regular curriculum, this does not automatically lead to deterioration in performance in the second language and in other subject matter. Thus, if children participate in bilingual school programmes, there is basically no need to fear that they will perform worse than those in normal classes.
Conclusion 2: no panacea for educational disadvantage

The inconsistent research findings show that bilingual instruction is not a panacea that can compensate for poor educational starting positions, e.g. due to educationally deprived family backgrounds. However, as the majority of immigrant children in Germany come from such families, instruction in the language of their country of origin could not be adopted as the main method of achieving substantial improvements in their educational performance.

More research needed on the effects of monolingual and bilingual programmes

A future systematic evaluation of innovative and competing German and bilingual educational strategies should help to indicate the best way of fulfilling the potential of students whose mother tongue is a language other than German. The comparison of children who have taken part in bilingual programmes and children with the same mother tongues who have been taught exclusively in German should constitute an important methodical criterion of such effect analyses. Equally important is the surveying and systematic consideration of other individual features of the students and of characteristics of the school context that typically influence second-language acquisition and school performance. A strongly interdisciplinary cooperative research approach which would incorporate the methodical and theoretical strengths of education, linguistics, sociology and psychology is desirable.

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The full report is available in German. 
It may be downloaded in PDF format from: http://www.aki.wz-berlin.de

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