
'Tweetalig Onderwijs': Effective education or pointless pedagogy?

Robert Jones
BA Modern Languages
University of Sheffield

"To have another language is to possess a second soul"
Charlemagne

The acquisition of a second language may be done through studying at a school that offers bilingual education. This essay will explore the concept of bilingual education with a specific focus on the Netherlands and Belgium. The benefits and disadvantages of undergoing bilingual education will be looked at as well as how bilingualism is socially and politically perceived by the respective countries' population. The benefits of bilingualism will equally be applied to bilingual education as it is, by virtue, a product thereof. The overall aim of this essay is to answer the question: *'Is bilingual education a positive and beneficial aspect for a population?'*

Bilingual education is the teaching of academic subjects in two languages, the student's native language and a secondary language, within an educational institution. The aim of bilingual education is to provide students with access to a secondary language, with educational equity being the ultimate aim.¹ The importance of a second language has long been a topic of consideration in Belgium, with their 1846 census being one of the first national censuses to ask language related questions². The language censuses, however, were abandoned in 1961 due to the controversy they caused by asking children as young as 14 to answer questions based on their language identity³. Up until now bilingual education has been restricted in Belgium due to the language legislation.⁴ According to Belgian law education may only be carried out in one language with any bilingual teaching being limited to 'experimental level'.⁵ This is very restrictive compared to the Netherlands who boast approximately 130 bilingual institutions or *'tto-scholen'*.⁶ Bilingual education in the Netherlands is usually a combination of Dutch and English, with native English speakers as teachers⁷. There are however a number of schools that offer other languages such as Frisian as the complementary second language.

The benefits of bilingualism have long been disputed, from the early 19th century up until the 1960's, the prevailing opinion was that bilingualism had a negative and detrimental

¹ Jean Jacques Weber, *Flexible multilingual education: Putting children's needs First* (Multilingual Matters 2014), p.3.

² Colin Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education and Bilingualism* (4th Edition edn, Multilingual Matters 2006), p35.

³ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.39.

⁴ Rita Rymnemens, 'Een gemiste kans? – Klasse Archief' (January 2001) <<https://www.klasse.be/archief/een-gemiste-kans/>> accessed 25 May 2016.

⁵ Orhan Agirdag, 'Exploring Bilingualism in a Monolingual school system: Insights from Turkish and native students from Belgian schools' [2010] *British Journal of Sociology of Education* <https://www.academia.edu/258896/Exploring_Bilingualism_In_a_Monolingual_School_System_Insights_From_Turkish_and_Native_Students_From_Belgian_Schools> accessed 25 May 2016 307–321.

⁶ 'Is er een tto school bij mij in de buurt?', (2012) <<http://www.ikkiestto.nl/is-er-een-tto-school-bij-mij-in-de-buurt/>> accessed 25 May 2016.

⁷ Stichting Opvoeden, 'Tweetalig onderwijs' (*Opvoeden.nl*, 1 March 2012)

<<https://www.opvoeden.nl/puber/onderwijs/voortgezet-onderwijs/tweetalig-onderwijs/>> accessed 26 May 2016.

effect on thinking due to poorer results on IQ tests in bilingual children.⁸ This attitude helped shape a belief that a child should be raised monolingually in order to prevent any language confusion or late language development. The popular argument for this is that social ridicule may ensue should a child code-switch at a young age in front of his peers which can cause negative feelings of disdain towards the secondary language⁹. This argument should not be given any consideration in the debate as to whether bilingual education has a negative effect on child development. As all of the students in the class are experience similar levels of unfamiliarity with the foreign language, there is no isolating factor in this instance that would put a student at any further disadvantage than his peers. The opposite could in fact be argued as the innate linguistic flexibility of a bilingual setting might make any potential code-switching less pronounced and thus there would be less perceived stigma attached. An alternative viewpoint towards bilingualism is that it encourages creative, flexible thinking and makes children more socially adept.¹⁰ Further research has shown that divergent thinking, the use of creative thinking to produce multiple solutions to a problem, present in bilinguals may give them an advantage over matched monolinguals.¹¹ For any population aiming to engineer great thinkers through their education system, this certainly gives credence to the argument that bilingual education is a positive aspect.

Bilingual education has existed in the Netherlands since 1989,¹² and offers a wealth of opportunity to those who choose to follow it. More and more students are choosing this route as a means of making themselves more employable, especially within the European Union. Foreign language learning has been relatively more successful in the Netherlands and Belgium compared to other European countries such as the UK.¹³ This is in part due to the emphasis placed on learning a second language, with German speaking Belgians being the youngest in Europe to learn a foreign language as a compulsory subject at just 3 years old.¹⁴ There are many arguments in support of the benefits of learning a second language, which in turn reinforces the benefits of bilingual education as it is, at the core, an immersive method of learning a second language. The University of Southampton goes as far as to list 700 benefits of bilingualism;¹⁵ one of the most favourable arguments in support of bilingual education is that the younger a student learns a second language, the greater the long-term proficiency.¹⁶ This suggests that bilingual education is certainly advantageous as children, as young as 3 in Belgium, can benefit from the long-term proficiency it provides.

The interest in learning English in the Netherlands is very high, with the number of bilingual institutions increasing in recent years as well as the number of students that undertake

⁸ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.144.

⁹ Kerry Robinson and Criss Jones-Diaz, *Diversity and difference in early childhood education: Issues for theory and practice*. (McGraw-Hill Education 2005), p.119.

¹⁰ Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys Jones, *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and bilingual education* (Multilingual Matters 1998), p.8.

¹¹ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.154.

¹² 'Bilingual Education in the Netherlands', (*zsc.nl*) <<http://www.zsc.nl/bilingual-education.html>> accessed 27 May 2016.

¹³ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.120.

¹⁴ EACEA, 'Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe - 2012 edition' (2012)

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143EN.pdf> accessed 27 May 2016.

¹⁵ LLAS Centre, 'LLAS centre for languages, linguistics and area studies' (2016) <<https://www.llas.ac.uk/700reasons>> accessed 27 May 2016.

¹⁶ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.128.

bilingual education.¹⁷ This is reflected in the Netherlands' "world ranking of countries by English skill", coming in at 2nd place.¹⁸ It is arguable that the success of bilingual education in the Netherlands is one of the contributing factors to such a positive result. In comparison, Belgium is ranked at 17th. Given the mutual use of Dutch between the two countries and thus excluding any linguistic disparity between the countries' respective L1 and English that could lend advantage to easier English acquisition, the difference between the two rankings could imply that a social or political factor is involved. It does however need to be considered that as a multilingual country, Belgium's ranking includes statistics from people whose L1 is not necessarily Dutch. This is reinforced by further statistics that show Flemish speaking regions have a ranking of 62.2% whereas the French speaking region has a ranking of 57.94%.¹⁹ Flanders' percentage still falls far short of the Netherlands 70.58% rate of English proficiency, despite the fact the Belgian government dedicates a greater amount of spending on education.²⁰ It is worth noting that whilst the uptake of bilingual education is on the rise in the Netherlands, there are no bilingual schools in the bilingual city of Brussels,²¹ requiring the citizens to choose which language they wish to take their education in. As well as a legal requirement for general subjects such as maths to be taught in either French or Dutch.²² These statistics could be indicative of the effect the countries' sociopolitical views and schooling systems have on a population's ability to master a second language.

The Netherlands' political approach towards bilingual education can be seen in their attitude towards the value of language promotion. The *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* is a standing agreement since 1992 of European member states' commitment to the protection and promotion of regional or minority languages. The Netherlands, being one of the co-signatories, has protected and promoted the use of Frisian, Limburgish and Low Saxon.²³ The protection and promotion of these languages has been assimilated into the multilingual education system, by running bi- and trilingual programmes that offer minority languages such as Frisian to attract learners and their families.²⁴ This can be easily described as a positive aspect for a population as it ensures the survival of a language that may otherwise go extinct. This model of bilingual education is often used to restore a dying language as well as to increase harmony between two language groups;²⁵ in this case the Frisian and Dutch communities, who may consider themselves separate, can benefit from an increased understanding of mutual language and

¹⁷ Nationale Onderwijsgids, "Nederlandse basisschoolleerlingen goed in taal" (19 May 2016)

<<https://onzetaal.nl/nieuws/nederlandse-basisschoolleerlingen-goed-in-taal>> accessed 27 May 2016.

¹⁸ EF Education First, 'EF English proficiency index - A comprehensive ranking of countries by English skills' (2015)

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¹⁹ EF Education First, 'EF English proficiency index - Belgium' (2015) <<http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/regions/europe/belgium/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

²⁰ EF Education First, 'EF EPI - compare countries' (2013) <<http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/compare/regions/nl/be/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

²¹ de Rand, 'Living in translation' (2011) <http://www2.derand.be/livingintranslation/taal_school.php> accessed 26 May 2016.

²² de Rand, 'Living in translation' (2011) <http://www2.derand.be/livingintranslation/taal_school.php> accessed 26 May 2016.

²³ Council of Europe, 'European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages' (COE, 2016)

<<http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/148/signatures>> accessed 27 May 2016.

²⁴ Durk Gorter, Victoria Zenotz, and Jasone Cenoz, *Minority languages and multilingual education: Bridging the local and the global* (Springer Science & Business Media 2013), p.23.

²⁵ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p121.

culture. It is therefore arguable that Belgium may benefit from a similar model of education in order to unite the two main language groups, French and Flemish, as well as in order to protect their own minority languages such as West-Flemish, Brabantian or Walloon. However, despite any noble intentions of promoting a minority language, there is often trouble locating suitable resources.

Regional languages that correspond with an official language of another country are more often used in educational institutes than those which don't benefit from such official status. For example, in Belgium it is far less difficult to come across study resources in German than in West-Flemish. This problem can also be seen in the Netherlands where there are only secondary level texts available in Frisian, Drenthese, Groningese and Zeelandic.²⁶ The Netherlands introduced Frisian as a compulsory subject in Friesland in 1974, making primary education the only domain where Frisian had some official recognition.²⁷ Due to the lack of available quality resources, including proficient teachers – only 40% of whom are fluent in reading and writing Frisian,²⁸ it was soon considered to be an interruption in the education system. Despite being considered more important than English by the majority of teachers,²⁹ it was eventually concluded that the implementation of Frisian was not as successful as it could have been due to “loosely connected booklets and projects”³⁰ as well as a lack of motivation on the students' behalf.³¹ Despite the drawback of not having enough valuable resources, the institutionalisation of Frisian into bilingual education has provided the language, and the respective culture, with a greater level of recognition and application, and thereby benefitting the Frisian population.

One of the problems bilingual education may have on a Dutch speaking society is the proliferation of ‘Anglicisms’. This can either be the assimilation of an English word into the Dutch vocabulary such as ‘computer’ or ‘selfie’; or the use of an English word in place of a Dutch word for a desired effect such as: ‘Hij is crazy’. With 72.3% of Dutch people self reporting that they have a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ level of English,³² it is no surprise that it has permeated into the Dutch language itself. There are a number of Dutch organisations who strive to fight against the use of English such as ‘De Stichting Nederlands’ and ‘De bond tegen leenwoorden’.³³ These two organisations take a very formal and academic approach towards the protection of Dutch by providing translations of untranslatable English words such as ‘zelfkiekje’ for ‘selfie’. Their use of propagandistic material: “*Het Nederlands wordt intellectueel onthoofd*” clearly demonstrates a social rejection of the use of English within their own language. However, this is not to say that these organisations are against the use of English *per se*. The aim of bilingual education is not to create one fluid, interchangeable language, but rather to provide students with a means of learning a second language fluently in an academic setting - this does however carry with it certain risks. It is possible that a group of students who have a mastery of English thanks to their bilingual education

²⁶ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education* (Ofelia Garcia ed, John Benjamins Publishing Co 1991), p.71

²⁷ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.127.

²⁸ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.127.

²⁹ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.129.

³⁰ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.127.

³¹ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.128.

³² Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.123.

³³ OnzeTaal, 'De invloed van het Engels' (*OnzeTaal*) <<https://onzetaal.nl/dossiers/dossiers/de-invloed-van-het-engels/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

may use more English words on a day-to-day basis. There are numerous reasons why a person may not choose to use a Dutch word in place of an English word, such as the dominance English has over the technological and business worlds as well as the fact it is perceived as “cool”.³⁴ However, bilingual education may reinforce the use of Anglicisms in a different way, it is established that not all bilinguals have an equal mastery of both languages due to the contexts in which the languages were learnt.³⁵ This means that a student’s language proficiency may vary in different domains and that they may struggle to explain a concept, such as a mathematical formula or computing process, in a different language than that which they learnt it in. Bilingual education clearly has an influence in this area as it could unwittingly generate an influx of English, or another secondary language’s, words into the daily vernacular of a population by way of teaching complex topics in a foreign language. Although it is feared in Belgium that Dutch will be relegated to the role of “*huis-, tuin- en keukentaal*”³⁶ should the second language overtake the role of Dutch in education, these fears may be unfounded as it has been shown that the use of English in *basisscholen* has no effect on Dutch language development.³⁷ As well as this, it is also a legal requirement for Dutch students to undertake regular examinations in Dutch so as to ensure that they maintain an academic level of language use.³⁸

The opinions of the students undertaking bilingual education, as well as their parents, is a very important factor when considering whether it is a beneficial process or not. Although it is posited that sequential acquisition of a language alongside your own native language would not double your “*intellectual and spiritual growth[...] but halve [it]*”,³⁹ self report data has shown that students generally regard their bilingualism as a “*dynamic process*” that demonstrates their knowledge of both languages, as well as “*shifts in meta-cognitive awareness and identity*”.⁴⁰ It is clear from this testimony that, in general, the students of bilingual education regard it as a positive aspect and not something which limits their intellectual capacities. We can also glean from a European Union barometer survey that parents within the EU consider it important that their children learn “*one or more EU languages other than the mother tongue*”,⁴¹ with the 93% responding so. With the third highest incentive being stated as “*if they could find a course to fit their schedule*”. From these results it can be concluded that bilingual education meets these requirements, it provides an opportunity to learn another EU language as well as fitting comfortably into students’ and parents’ schedules as it takes place during normal schooling hours.

³⁴ OnzeTaal, 'De invloed van het Engels' (*OnzeTaal*) <<https://onzetaal.nl/dossiers/dossiers/de-invloed-van-het-engels/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

³⁵ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.6.

³⁶ Ludo Beheydt, 'Maatschappelijke effecten van tweetalig onderwijs in Vlaanderen - Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond' (*Algemeen Nederlands Verbond*, March 2014) <<http://www.anv.nl/tijdschrift/inhoud-2014-3/maatschappelijke-effecten-van-tweetalig-onderwijs-vlaanderen/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

³⁷ Omroep West, 'Eerste resultaten tweetalig basisonderwijs positief' (*OnzeTaal*, 2 April 2015) <<https://onzetaal.nl/nieuws/eerste-resultaten-tweetalig-basisonderwijs-positief>> accessed 27 May 2016.

³⁸ 'Bilingual Education in the Netherlands', (*zsc.nl*) <<http://www.zsc.nl/bilingual-education.html>> accessed 27 May 2016.

³⁹ Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.143.

⁴⁰ Ofelia Garcia, Zeena Zakharia, and Bahar Otcu (eds), *Bilingual community education and Multilingualism: Beyond heritage languages in a global city* (Multilingual Matters 2012), p.227.

⁴¹ 'Special Eurobarometer 'Europeans and Languages Executive Summary', (2001) <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_147_summ_en.pdf> accessed 27 May 2016.

Learning English as a second language is a growing trend across the EU, in order to increase intercontinental interaction.⁴² As a result of this, one of the benefits of bilingual education is that foreign students might not be at such a disadvantage as their peers if a considerable portion of their classes are in a language that is equally as foreign to them as it is to Dutch students. This does however have a very obvious drawback for the Dutch population, namely that foreign students are less likely to assimilate into Dutch culture as easily. For this reason, bilingual education may be seen as a threat to Dutch culture and identity by the citizens, in that not only are their children not fully immersing themselves in Dutch culture at school, but it may promote the idea that the Netherlands is a multilingual, multicultural society. Whilst the idea of a cosmopolitan country is, in itself, not necessarily a negative concept, it is something that certain citizens and politicians are staunchly against - as could be seen in the 'In Rotterdam Spreken we Nederlands' campaign from the *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)*. As such, the influence that bilingual education may have on the perceived values of Dutch culture could indeed be seen as a negative aspect by certain citizens.

As well as hypothetical suggestions, it is important to evaluate authentic feedback from the bilingual education programs in the Netherlands in order to ascertain whether it has been well received. One of the major concerns for some is the amount of money that is invested into 'tto scholen', with €2,000,000 being invested in one Amsterdam school,⁴³ which some experts (and opposers of bilingual education) think could be better spent on more important things such as teacher training.⁴⁴ A further look at newspaper articles on the subject shows a very negative opinion of bilingual education in the Netherlands, expressing worry over becoming a "tweetalig land" and suggesting that English is dangerous for social cohesion⁴⁵. Another suggests that it is better to be "goed in één taal, dan matig in twee".⁴⁶ This type of alarmist conjecture has already been explored earlier on, with studies showing that bilinguals go on to be more proficient in their native language than their monolingual counterparts and that learning difficulties were not an issue⁴⁷. It also needs to be remembered that the medium through which these articles are presented, a centre-left newspaper, is more propagandistic and sensationalist than that of an academic study. As such, whilst articles such as these are useful in monitoring the reception of bilingual education in the Netherlands, they are not necessarily an accurate representation of factual information.

Bilingual education attracts a lot of controversy due to its political nature. Within the world of academia, bilingual education appears to be well received and supported as a positive model of education, with a plethora of studies going on to list cognitive benefits as well as real-life advantages such as increased social abilities, employability and geopolitical benefits such as harmonisation between neighbouring countries/languages. Those opposed to

⁴² Baker, *Foundations of bilingual education*, (2006), p.122.

⁴³ Orhan Agirdag, 'Onderwijs niet alleen witte maar ook zwarte talen' *De Volkskrant* (30 September 2015) <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/onderwijs-niet-alleen-witte-maar-ook-zwarte-talen~a4153249/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

⁴⁴ Arno Schrauwers and René Appel, 'Voorstanders tweetalig onderwijs gaan nooit in op argumenten' <<http://www.stichtingnederlands.nl/Artikelen/VraaggesprekReneAppelSN.pdf>> accessed 27 May 2016.

⁴⁵ Jaap Dronkers, 'Sluipenderwijs wordt Nederland tweetalig' *De Volkskrant* (17 July 2013) <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/-sluipenderwijs-wordt-nederland-tweetalig~a3476812/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

⁴⁶ Sebastian Gruschke, 'Beter goed in één taal, dan matig in twee talen' *De Volkskrant* (29 July 2013) <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/-beter-goed-in-een-taal-dan-matig-in-twee-talen~a3483390/>> accessed 27 May 2016.

⁴⁷ Joshua Fishman, *Bilingual Education*, (1991), p.98.

bilingual education generally make use of alarmist statements, preying on people's fears of cultural loss, immigration and the threat of English on the Dutch language. Whilst these are all valid opinions and very real issues, the extent to which they are played upon is somewhat exaggerated, with counter-studies disproving these concerns. It has been examined that the overall feedback of students who engage in bilingual education have a positive opinion surrounding it, as well as their parents who deem bilingualism a desirable trait for their children. In regards to the respective positions Belgium and the Netherlands have on bilingual education, there is a very perceptible rejection of it on the Belgian front. The legal restriction of bilingual education is perhaps the most prominent indication of the sociopolitical views towards it whilst the subsequent, inferior level of English proficiency compared to that of the Netherlands may well show a casual rather than a causal link. Nonetheless, the consideration that a country's political views towards bilingualism may possibly have an effect upon their linguistic abilities is very relevant in this case. In the role of preserving a dying language, bilingual education adopts a very beneficial role by reinvigorating and restoring a tongue that may otherwise be lost, as well as the culture and history that accompanies it. It is important to take into consideration the numerous advantages bilingual education has on cognitive development, cultural and social awareness and protection of minority languages. Compared to the feared and disproven disadvantage of not mastering Dutch as well as a monolingual, it appears that the benefits heavily outweigh the drawbacks. Although no studies have yet proven the linked existence of a second soul, bilingual education is indeed a positive and beneficial aspect for a population.

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