



Bilingual learners and bilingual education

At Cambridge Assessment International Education (Cambridge), we use the term 'bilingual' or 'bilingualism' to refer to individuals or groups who routinely use two or more languages for communication in varying contexts. However, there are many definitions and understandings of the term 'bilingual', for example, a degree of competence in two languages.

A **'bilingual learner'** is, in its broad sense (and in this document), a student who uses their first language (L1) at home/in the community and is learning **through** a second language (L2), for example English, at school. Their learning may take place in a variety of educational contexts. They may be learning **all** subjects through the L2, or, if they are on

a 'bilingual education' programme, they may be learning only **some** subjects through the L2. Many people therefore use 'bilingual learner' instead of 'second/additional language learner' to highlight the value of two languages. However, others use 'bilingual learner' to refer only to students on bilingual education programmes.

What is bilingual education?

- Cambridge uses 'bilingual education' to refer to the use of **two or more** languages as mediums of instruction for 'content' subjects such as science or history.
- For Cambridge, bilingual education typically means that learners study:

some non-language subjects – e.g. geography and history – through their **first language (L1)**

AND

some non-language subjects – e.g. science and maths – through a **second / additional language (L2)**

- Alternatively, they might study the same subject through two languages.

- If we want to emphasise multiple languages, then we use terms such as **'trilingual'** (education) or **'multilingual'** (contexts) or **'plurilingual'** (competence, with different degrees of proficiency).
- Content subjects and language are inextricably linked. Learners cannot develop academic knowledge and skills without access to the language in which that knowledge is embedded, discussed, constructed or evaluated. Nor can they acquire academic language skills in a context devoid of academic content.
- Content subject classes can provide rich opportunities for language development.
- Learning content subjects through an L2 can focus attention and raise motivation.
- Learning one language can help learn another language.
- Research (e.g. Genesee in Mehisto, 2012, pp.18–20) into bilingual education (for learners who are members of the majority language and culture group of the larger national community) indicates that learners who are learning subjects through the L2 can, in well implemented programmes:
 - attain the same levels of academic achievement and the same levels of proficiency in their L1 as similar students being educated entirely in their L1
 - develop the same appreciation and understanding of their L1 culture as students on L1 programmes and can develop greater understanding of the L2 culture
 - attain very advanced levels of functional proficiency in the L2.



What are the benefits of bilingual education?

Bilingual education enables learners to develop the L1 alongside an L2 or global language such as English.

Also, there is a growing body of evidence (e.g. Mehisto, 2012, pp 8, 18, 117) suggesting that there are potential benefits to individuals, schools and societies in being bilingual, for example:

- increased mental flexibility
- improved inter-cultural skills
- increased opportunities for global exchange and trade.

What are the challenges of bilingual education?

- People might feel anxious about an innovation such as bilingual education and will have a lot of questions, for example, whether all learners will have sufficient L2 proficiency to cope.
- Some people see bilingual education as **requiring** proficiency in the L2, whereas others see bilingual education as **developing** proficiency in the L2. This is linked to age at when bilingual education starts.
- Each context is different and so it can be difficult deciding, for example:
 - whether bilingual education will be for the whole school or for a bilingual stream
 - what age to start bilingual education, as there are pros and cons of an early start and a later start.
- Students learning through an L2 need to be systematically supported over a period of 5–10 years in developing proficiency in the use of academic language (see the work of Jim Cummins on academic and social language).
- Bilingual education is a complex undertaking and so requires careful leadership, for example:
 - researching bilingual education
 - designing an appropriate model and policy
 - planning and managing change
 - working with stakeholders
 - providing learning materials in different languages
 - finding, training and keeping teachers
 - monitoring and evaluation.

Practical tips

How can schools support bilingual learners?

- A **language policy** can outline how to support bilingual learners. Every school will have its own language profile, so it is important that this is reflected in a policy that recognises the language needs of different groups of learners and teachers. It can consider the solution to questions including:



- How will English as a second language be supported?
- How will learners be encouraged to develop their first language?
- A long-term **training strategy** can enable local teachers for whom English is an L2 to build up their **proficiency in English** to enable them to deliver lessons in English. The strategy could also include training on **pedagogy**; how to teach and support bilingual learners. Teachers who have English as an L1 should also be considered for such training, as it cannot be assumed that they know how to do this.
- **Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)** is one way to support bilingual learners who are learning through an L2 and who need to learn the **academic language** to achieve in subjects. CLIL is a dual-focused teaching approach in which bilingual learners learn both content and language.
- CLIL can also be used to make a foreign language programme more **motivating** by teaching real content (e.g. history) through the language.
- Some teachers make only minimal use of the L1 in order to **immerse** bilingual learners in the L2. Other teachers sometimes use **translanguaging** techniques, where learners might read/listen/watch in one language, and discuss/write in another language.
- The '**CEFR**' (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is used by some schools and universities to refer to different levels of **foreign language** proficiency. This makes it easy to see the level of different curricula, materials and qualifications





and to see how learners (or teachers) are progressing from one level to another. However, not all foreign language qualifications are mapped to the CEFR.

How can schools start bilingual education?

- Cambridge schools can clarify their **type of school** by answering the question:
How many languages does our school use to teach non-language subjects?
 - We teach through one language – which is English (English-medium school).
 - We teach through one language – which is not English (non-English-medium school).
 - We teach through two or more languages (**bilingual school** or bilingual stream within school).
- A **bilingual education curriculum model** is useful for bilingual schools to plan which subjects will be taught and learnt through which language and over how much time. For example, some schools who have been teaching through the L1 and decide to become bilingual schools:
 - begin teaching through the L2 in a small way by teaching one module or project through the L2
 - teach one or two content subjects through the L2 over several years
 - teach a substantial part of the curriculum through the L2 over several years.
- Some bilingual education curriculum models **separate languages**, with some subjects taught through one language and some subjects taught through another language. Other models arrange for subjects to be taught through **two languages** by using a bilingual teacher in the classroom (**'bilingual teaching'**), or by an L1 and an L2 teacher **team-teaching**.

- Some bilingual schools need to meet the needs of both a national curriculum and an international curriculum. **Curriculum mapping** allows them to compare the two curricula for similarities and differences and to plan teaching and learning more efficiently.

Why are bilingual learners and bilingual education relevant to Cambridge?

English has become a world language. It is also the medium of instruction and assessment for Cambridge programmes. Our programmes are increasingly delivered in multilingual contexts and, for many international learners, English is an additional language. This can:

- make it hard for learners to understand lessons and exams in the L2 (English)
- cause learners and parents to worry about the maintenance of their L1
- affect learners' motivation.

However, rather than be viewed as a problem, it should be seen as an opportunity to be bilingual. Therefore, at Cambridge, we value multilingualism and believe that:

- **there are benefits to being bilingual:** for learners, society and schools.
- **every learner is a language learner:** language plays an important role in the school curriculum, either as a subject or as a medium of teaching and learning.
- **every teacher is a language teacher:** by supporting learners with the language they need to achieve in subjects.
- **every school can support multilingualism:** by promoting other languages and making use of the L1 as a valuable learning resource in the classroom.



How is Cambridge supporting bilingual learners and bilingual education?

- At Cambridge, we support:
 - schools and partners to implement bilingual education
 - parents to understand the benefits of being bilingual
 - teachers to help students learn through the L1/L2
 - students to be successful bilingual learners
 - examiners to be language aware
 - recognition of our qualifications.
- Cambridge programmes are often used for the English-medium strand of a bilingual programme:
 - Cambridge Primary and Lower Secondary programmes (including Cambridge Primary Checkpoint and Cambridge Lower Secondary Checkpoint) help prepare bilingual learners, providing feedback on strengths and weaknesses in English, maths and science.
 - Learners need to develop sufficient English language proficiency before taking Cambridge IGCSE and Cambridge International A Level examinations in the Cambridge Upper Secondary and Advanced programmes.
- Cambridge IGCSEs are available in more than 30 languages.
- We provide an online course on language awareness as well as professional development qualifications on teaching bilingual learners.
- We also work closely with our sister organisation, Cambridge Assessment English.



Where can you find more information?

- Bilingual education resources on our website: www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/bilingual-education
- Cambridge professional development qualifications for Teaching Bilingual Learners: www.cambridgeinternational.org/pdq
- Chadwick, C. (2012) *Language Awareness in Teaching: A Toolkit for Content & Language Teachers*. Cambridge: CUP/Cambridge International Examinations.
- Mehisto, P. (2012) *Excellence in Bilingual Education: A Guide for School Principals*. Cambridge: CUP/Cambridge International Examinations.
- Resources on Cambridge Assessment English website: www.cambridgeenglish.org

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