

## Language Minority Children Walk In Two Worlds

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**Irena Stebih** immigrated to Canada in 1992. She taught primary grades in Slovenia and Canada for over eleven years. In June 2003 she received her Master of Education degree from York University, Toronto. She has explored how young minority children learn their first and second language in bilingual social environments.

### Abstract

This article explores why language minority children need to learn their first language and asserts that teachers be encouraged to help children to develop their bilingual potential in mainstream classrooms. *Population mobility is at an all-time high in human history. One result of this unprecedented movement of peoples around the world is that in many school systems monolingual and mono-cultural students are the exception rather than the rule, particularly in urban areas. (Cummins, 2000).* Citations in this article are woven with the author's own experience as mother of a young minority child in a monolingual classroom.

### Introduction

*Immigration to Ontario increased by 23 per cent in just one year - from 1999 to 2000 - yet the number of ESL teachers has declined 30 per cent over the past five years, according to the parents' advocacy group People for Education, which surveyed school boards to gather the information. (The Toronto Star, October 25, 2002).*

According to the Immigration Legislative report in 1997, Canada admits approximately two hundred thousand people every year as immigrants. Immigration to Canada in past decades has resulted in linguistically and culturally diverse communities. The Toronto District School Board claims that it has

become the most multilingual and multi-cultural school board in the world with more than 50% of students who come to schools speaking English as a second language (Helping Newly Arrived Students, 2002). Some of these students have arrived in Toronto from many countries around the globe; others are born in Canada but have little exposure to English until they start school. A significant number of students are therefore not being educated in the language of their home that we refer to as L1 (first language). Canada is not the only country that is dealing with the question of how to educate children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in mainstream schools. Researchers and educational professionals around the world grapple with the question of how to help minority students succeed in mainstream classrooms, as for example, Spanish-speaking students in the United States, Finnish children in Sweden, etc.

Thus, across the world, many young minority children face learning in a language they do not understand or over which they have limited control. Their academic and social success in school depends entirely on interactions that are conducted in a language they have not yet mastered. In addition, many learn literacy in a script that is foreign to them.

These are the challenges that many minority students around the world are experiencing every day and they are challenges that are still not yet understood by many teachers and educational practitioners.

I am a language minority parent, who came to Canada from Slovenia in 1992. As a mother of two language minority children, I know how hard it is for children to deal with two linguistic worlds and two cultures. In this article I will draw on my personal experiences with my daughter Tia to show that if minority children's first language is not supported in the classroom their language development in their first and second language might suffer.

### Purpose

To gain better understanding of the experience that language minority students deal with, I collected data by observing my daughter Tia at home and in school. Although data collection took multiple formats, this article will include only my journal notes, her written work, and her report cards. It is not my intention to present the results of my study here. The article explores why language minority children need to learn their first language and asserts that teachers must help them to develop their bilingual potential in mainstream classrooms.

In this article, I will first introduce my daughter Tia because I use her experiences to enrich my discussion. Second, I will discuss young minority children's literacy development in their first language, research on first language maintenance, and connection between minority student's language and culture. Third, I will introduce two conflicting frameworks that operate within North American educational system. These two frameworks, one called teacher domin-

ion (the term used by Wien, 1995) and another one developmentally appropriate practice as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1997) are foundations for teachers' actions in the classroom. I argue that the teachers' understanding of issues involving language minority students greatly impacts whether these children will be able to "walk in two worlds" or whether they will experience one set of knowledge, beliefs, and cultural practices imposed on them through hegemonic (dominant) relationships in the classroom.

### Language Minority Children and Mainstream Teachers

My six-year old daughter Tia was born in Canada but she spent almost two years in Slovenia (from August 1988 to April 2000). According to her kindergarten teacher in Slovenia, she was very proficient in her first language for a child of her age. The same teacher commented that she never would have guessed that Tia was born in Canada and that she lived in Canada first three years of her life (Journal notes, April 2000). In May of 2000, Tia did not speak English when she entered Junior Kindergarten (JK). After the first few weeks, she adjusted to school very well. She was able to make friends easily although her language skills were limited. She had come to JK at the beginning of May and she continued the next school year in Senior Kindergarten (SK). I was not pleased with the school's decision to place Tia in the afternoon class while her JK classmates remained in the morning class. I went to school to argue that for Tia's linguistic needs, it was important that she stayed with the same group of children. Following the discussion with the school's principal, Tia was placed in the morning with the children she knew. By the end of SK, she was comfortable using English. Her kindergarten teacher wrote in her report card that she was easier to understand when communicating in English than at the beginning of the school year (Report Card, June 2001). At

that time, I noticed that Tia forgot how to speak her first language but she could still understand it.

Tia is just one among many language minority children entering Ontario schools every year. For teachers of young language minority children, the diverse society means that they will work with children like Tia whose linguistic and cultural contexts are not congruent with their own. For young minority students, on the other hand, exposure to English frequently results in loss of their mother tongue. The point is that these students will encounter powerful forces of assimilation as soon as they enter school. In addition, young minority students soon figure out that the language they use at home does not have value in their new community (Wong-Fillmore, 1991).

Cummins (2000) argues that teachers are ill equipped when dealing with children from linguistic minorities. He is concerned that educators emphasize linguistic differences rather than affirm minority students' linguistic accomplishments in their first and second language. On the other hand, Cummins stresses that pre-service and in-service education pro-

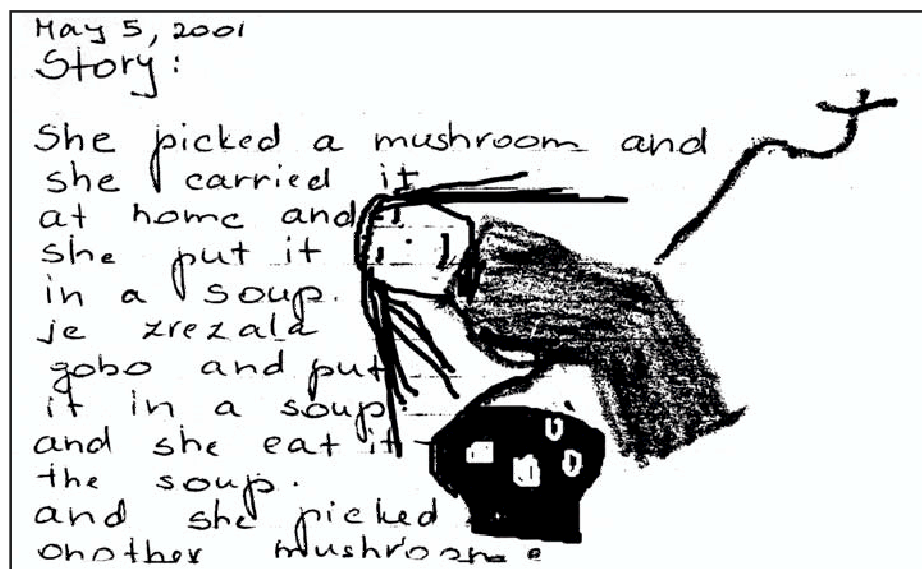
grams for teachers, together with school systems have ignored the issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity (p.6). Developmentally appropriate practice, as defined by Bredekamp and Coople (1997), acknowledges the importance of teacher's "knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for participating children and their families" (p.36).

### Young Language-Minority Children And Their First Language Literacy

Many minority students have rich exposure to their home language that is embedded in their family life and their cultural practices long before they go to school. Figure 1 illustrates that Tia's need to tell her story is in the stage where she is crucially dependent on the use of her mother tongue (Gregory, 1997).

**Figure 1.** One of Tia's stories, with drawing and recorded story she told about her experience in the forest

I recorded this story to illustrate that Tia drew on her knowledge of two languages to tell about her experience in the forest. By using two different languages Tia's



**Figure 1:** *She picked a mushroom and carried it at home and she put it in a soup. Je zrezala gobo (Slovenian) and put it in a soup and she eat the soup. And she picked another mushroom. Pia (age 5).*

story shows that her social worlds consists of two different language codes that are part of her every day life: one at home, another one in school and broader community. It also indicates that Tia's language learning is embedded in her previous experiences with two languages. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that children's learning begins long before they attend school and any learning that children encounter in school has a previous history (p. 84). In addition, Piaget suggests that "*a child's mind is not a miniature model of an adult's nor is it an empty vessel that gradually fills with information*" (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1992). Therefore, children construct their knowledge based on interactions with people and materials in their physical and social environments.

In the past, professional practices in many mainstream schools played a very important role in the eradication of many languages that children came to school with (as cited in Ashworth, 1988). Teachers were convinced that the role of education was to enable minority students to assimilate into mainstream society equipped with the language that had the official power in the country. Based on prevailing assumptions in education, they assumed that the minority students had deficiencies in English, and that they needed more instruction in English. Many also believed that a child's mind could absorb only a limited amount of linguistic information, and, therefore they argued that English would suffer if fluency in the mother tongue were maintained (as cited in Ashworth, 1988). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) explain that these kind of assumptions are based on "*what learners lack rather than what they bring to the learning activity*" (p. 169). Thus, many minority students such as Tia, entered school with the potential to become bilingual or even multilingual; however, they left the school system monolingual.

In the next part of this article will I will explore why teachers should encourage minority parents to use their first language.

### **Research on first language maintenance**

The last three decades of research on first language maintenance have demonstrated many academic benefits for minority students who develop high literacy competence in their home language. Cummins' (1981, 2000) "*interdependence hypothesis*" asserts that the more developed children's conceptual abilities in their first language, the more likely they will develop similarly high levels of conceptual abilities in their second language. In particular, Cummins and Swain (1986) acknowledge that sufficient exposure to the school language is essential for the development of academic skills. However, for minority students, it is equally or more important that they

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*the low expectations that teachers set for minority students [based on their home culture and language] reduces the children's chance to develop and learn optimally.*

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are capable of understanding the academic input in their first language. Similarly, Danesi (1991) argues that "*the only educationally meaningful way to help the immigrant child learn the school language efficiently and to succeed in school from the outset seems to be through some form of 'additive' bilingual schooling*" (p. 652). Cummins (2000), states "*the additive bilingualism refers to the form of bilingualism that results when students add a second language to their intellectual tool-kit while continuing to develop conceptually and academically in their first language*" (p. 37). We talk about additive bilingualism when second language is added to minority student's first language. Another form of bilingualism is subtractive bilingualism when one language is replaced with the other for any reason. For example minority children's first language is replaced with English.

Although strong research evidence has proven many benefits of language maintenance, power relations privileging the dominant language in multicultural social context have remained a problem. Wong-Fillmore (1991) suggests that the loss of primary language can be very costly to the children, their parents, and society. Her study of 690 families in the United States strongly confirms that exposure to English only in early education results in language loss. In addition, she explains that minority children are dropping their home language in societies like the United States and Canada where linguistic diversity is not especially valued, despite multicultural policies. For example, when I was reading stories to Tia a few months after our return from Slovenia we agreed that I would read two books: one of her favourite stories and one of my own. After reading her choice, Dr. Seuss' book *Green Eggs and Ham*, I explained to her that I have chosen a book that was read to me when I was a little girl. I started to read Pavcek's book *Juri Muri* (Slovenian) and shortly after she interrupted me explaining that she did not like it because it was written in Slovenian. She added that she does not like Slovenian because her friends do not understand it in school. According to Fillmore (1991), young minority children do not care about power relations in society, however they care about being accepted by their peers. Language-minority students encounter powerful forces for assimilation embedded in curriculum, teacher dominion practices, and peer pressure. Cummins (2000) also notes that many elementary school children in Toronto reject their home language and culture and after only two years in Canada, they "*refuse to use their first language in the home and want to Anglicize their names in order to belong to the culture of the school and peer group*" (p.13). Thus, it is important to discuss the connection between language minority children's learning and their culture.

### Language Minority students and their home culture

The problem of poor academic achievement of minority students lies in a mismatch between the home culture and the culture represented in school (Gregory, 1997; Lubeck, 1994). LeVine (as cited in Lubeck, 1994) defines culture as shared organization of ideas that govern values, meanings, and behavioral patterns in a community. Similarly, Bredekamp and Copple (1997) define culture “as the customary beliefs and patterns of and for behavior, both explicit and implicit, that are passed on to future generations by the society they live in and/or by a social, religious, or ethnic group within it” (p. 12). Therefore, the teachers who work with young minority children should understand the influence of socio-cultural context on learning and children’s development. Bredekamp and Copple (1997) describe thoroughly the influence of culture on minority students’ learning and development. They argue that the low expectations that teachers set for minority students [based on their home culture and language] reduces the children’s chance to develop and learn optimally. For these students education is not an additive process. For example, Tia’s story (see Figure 1) illustrates that an important part of her home life is to develop a deep relationship with the forest as a living environment. She visits the forest with her grandparents every fall and they pick mushrooms. This activity is a way of life passed on from previous generations. In her new land, children learn - for example, the names for different mushrooms by going to the store. Her knowledge about forest is not valued in her new social environment. It might be even misinterpreted because of her developing language competence or the teacher’s interpretations from her/his own cultural background. Ballenger (1999) acknowledges in her book, *Teaching Other People’s Children*, how the mainstream teacher might fail to recognize richness in the stories of their African-American students because they are speaking in a

style unfamiliar to the teacher (p.13). Stories of these students based on their culture often contain multiple episodes. Thus, Lubeck (1994) talks about the “*cultural clash*” that “*mainstream*” teachers and “*minority*” children can experience because of their different values, meanings, and behavior patterns.

The NAEYC’s (1997) position on teachers as “*decision makers*” states that teachers take into consideration the knowledge of children’s development and their individual interests; and, as well, the cultural context in which they live. Phillips (as cited in Bredekamp &

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Copple, 1997) states that “*understanding culture requires an understanding of the rules that influence behavior, rules that give meaning to events and experiences in families and communities*” (p. 42). Individual children, like Tia, for example, are members of more than one cultural group and they are embedded in these cultures to different degrees (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). As they grow, these children will learn how to balance the expectations of both worlds. However, some children can be confused or forced to choose to identify with just one culture. When cultural differences are equated with deficits in schools, minority students’ strengths or capabilities may not be recognized and teachers may underestimate their competence (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Ballenger, 1999). For example, visual arts are one of Tia’s strongest media to express her thoughts and experiences and could be

used as a link between her home and school. The way this area is described in her report card tells us that language arts are dominated by language competence instead of being used as an opportunity for Tia to express her ideas through different media. The teacher writes:

“*Sometimes recognizes the primary colours, describes different kinds of lines, and distinguishes between a variety of shapes and forms: - introduced to a variety of works of art (e.g., line design, collage, drawing). She is encouraged to use imagination to further explore artistic ability*”. (Taken from Provincial Report Card, December 7, 2001)

As a minority parent coming from different cultural and educational background I find these comments problematic. *First*, this description of Tia’s level of achievement clearly shows that curriculum in mainstream school values the language (written or spoken) as the only medium through which knowledge and ideas can be expressed. *Second*, it does not recognize the abilities and strengths of the individual child as do the teachers in the Reggio Emilia schools. The Reggio educators view the child as strong, rich, and capable (Cadwell, 1997). *Third*, this description can confuse parents who are not familiar with the mainstream educational system. It is also confusing for parents who place a different value on expressing one’s ideas through visual arts rather than on language, spoken or written.

Teachers work within the two existing educational frameworks that operate within North American educational context. Therefore, I would like to further discuss how power relations embedded in these two frameworks (teacher domain and D.A.P.) can either help or hinder the child’s first and second language development and consequently enhance or reduce the child’s ability to “walk in two linguistic worlds.”

### Two Frameworks: Teacher Dominion And Developmental Appropriateness

According to Wien (1995) the term “frameworks” combines theory and practice, which includes “not only the beliefs and values held by a community, its world views, and the particular language in which this takes shape, but also the notion of the specific sets of practices necessary to encompass the discourse of ideology in lived life” (p. 3). In other words, an educational framework mirrors not only the curricula, but also the way we think about and work with children in the classroom. She acknowledges many frameworks for practice. However, she argues that within mainstream education, there have been two poles in frameworks (teacher dominion and developmental appropriateness). D.A.P., a relatively recent concept reflects the location of power in the classroom, where the power is shared between children and adults as they construct knowledge together.

#### Teacher Dominion

Wien (1995) points out “*the key difference between teacher dominion and developmental appropriateness is in the conception of location of power*” (p. 4). She defines power as possibility for taking action in the world. For minority students taking action means having control over their own learning and building on experiences and languages that they bring from their homes.

In teacher dominion the location of power is in the adult (Wien, 1995). The teacher is the source of knowledge about the world. Cummins (2000) and Lubeck (1994) argue that the knowledge children are acquiring in schools is never neutral. For Lubeck (1994) knowledge is “*socially constructed, reflecting the values and life orientations of a particular group*” (p. 31). Similarly, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999), using Foucault, debate that “*knowledge shapes our understanding of the world by offering descriptions that we understand to be true*” (p. 30). Knowledge is therefore represented in schools by teachers, cur-

ricula, and schedules. In addition, the educational systems also provide the techniques that measure what is normal by using surveillance, measurement, categorization, regulation, and evaluation. For example, when a first – grade student fails to read the words that he/she is supposed to read by the end of the first term, he/she is perceived as a student who is not approaching the provincial standard. Through the process of evaluating read-

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*after a few months of formal schooling, she refused to speak and to be read to in her first language at home.*

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ing abilities of emergent readers with limited English and cultural understanding, the power enters the classroom by establishing a hierarchy among children according to whether they have reached a specific stage in reading development. Using this practice, children are given a social and personal identity (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999).

When discussing power in the classroom, Cummins (2000) refers to relations of power. The term encompasses the human relationships between teachers and students. He argues that coercive or collaborative relations of power in the classroom are an essential part of schooling, and that they determine success or failure. Coercive relations of power exercised by teachers and school systems require that minority students give up their languages and deny their cultural identity in order to succeed in “mainstream” society. For example, when my five-year old daughter entered JK in May of 2000, she soon figured out that she needed to learn English and she needed to learn it fast to fit into the school environment. Consequently, after a few months of formal schooling, she refused to speak and to be read to in her first language at home. She responded to my attempts by saying, “*I do not understand Slovenian.*” Coercive relations of power do not empower students. Through coer-

cive relationships in the classroom, students are silenced and they are unable to achieve what they are capable of.

A major study carried out in California in early 1990 confirmed that teachers have difficulty working with students who are culturally different (as cited in Cummins, 2000,). Drury (as cited in Gregory, 1997) points out that children like Tia “*present a challenge to schools because their language use, and their socialization and cultural experience in and beyond the home, does not match the norm which teachers expect to be able to build on*” (p. 34). Another study focusing on expectations that three teachers hold about ethnic minority students in Scotland has shown that teachers perceived children from minority backgrounds as having more behavioral, motivational, and social problems in comparison with their Scottish peers (as cited in Genishi, Ryan, & Ochsner, 1999). In my view, these superficial perceptions of ethnic minority children in many cases guide teacher’s professional decisions if they do not make conscious attempts to deal with the issues of linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms.

Warschauer (1999) adds that teachers are most likely to use teacher-directed procedures, such as drills, to instill in minority students the requirement of mainstream society. Wien (1995) explains that both frameworks carry the notion of power, by either offering the possibilities for being an active agent or not. In teacher dominion, power lies in the adult – the teacher. The adult offers, designs, and implements activities most likely based on mainstream curriculum and his/her cultural knowledge.

In contrast to teacher dominion, the developmental appropriateness perspective offers more possibilities for students, teachers, and parents to actively construct their knowledge based on interrelationships. Consequently, all participants can “make meaning” together through their interactions with one another.

### Developmental Appropriateness

*“Developmentally appropriate practice is not a curriculum; it is a way of thinking about and working with children”* as cited in (Vander & Wilt, 1998).

According to Wien (1995), in *“developmental appropriateness”* the power in the classroom is shared between adults and children. Children and teachers are active agents that construct their own knowledge through active interactions with others in their social environment. Therefore, the sources of knowledge are multiple. Teachers are not viewed as transmitters of knowledge, but rather as co-inquirers who along with children explore the world around them. In contrast to teacher dominion practices embedded in scripts, which are taken for granted, developmentally appropriate practice is *“much more self-conscious and consciously held by teachers”* because it is still quite new (Wien, 1995). It was initially articulated in 1987 (Bredenkamp) and then revised in 1997 (Bredenkamp & Copple). The definition of developmentally appropriate practice has been constructed based on collaborative processes by the members of NAEYC’s Panel on Revision to Developmentally Appropriate Practice and inspired by educators from Reggio Emilia in Italy. It included acknowledgment of Vygotsky’s contribution that a child’s developmental level is dependent on the kind of learning support received from the environment.

According to Bredenkamp and Copple (1997), developmentally appropriate practice is defined as *“the process of professionals making decisions, about the well-being and education of children”* (p.36). There are three major kinds of knowledge or information, which inform developmentally appropriate practices: knowledge about child development and learning, knowledge of the individual child, and knowledge of the social and cultural context in which children live. Thus, it is important for educators that they use multiple sources of knowledge

when they are deciding what course of action is appropriate for young language minority children.

### Conclusion

The first few months in grade one were extremely challenging for Tia and for me. Her teacher was extremely concerned with her inability to apply her knowledge of concepts they were studying in school. Although English as a Second Language (ESL) help was provided for her twice a week, I agree with Bredenkamp and Copple (1997) that the best educational solution for children like Tia would be a well-designed bilingual educational program. Here they would acquire competence in English needed to succeed in school with support to develop their fragile literacy in their home languages. In many communities around the world language minority students do not have access to bilingual education. Therefore, it is crucial for their success in school that mainstream teachers understand the issues these students have to deal with and the challenges they face in school.

In order to enable minority students to walk in two linguistic worlds, their voices and perspectives must be heard and they must be integrated into the classroom learning environment by teachers whose *“ability to listen, to see, and to create is [not] blocked by what they know.”* (Dahlberg, Pence, & Moss, 1999). Dahlberg, Pence, and Moss (1999) assert that, *“it is diversity, not similarity, that is fount of creativity”* (p. 185). I hope that Tia’s voice will not be silenced. I hope she will be encouraged to walk in two worlds. After many decades of research, we know more about minority children’s first and second language learning, the influences of cultural context on children’s learning and development, and the power relations that take place in the classroom. However, Ballenger (1999) warns that pre-service and in-service programs for teachers, which focus on information about cultural difference transmitted

through readings and lectures, may do more harm than good, making teachers less observant of their students.

Ballenger’s suggestion is that teachers learn experientially about students and families by reflecting on their own personal and cultural background. This would encourage teachers to be more empathetic towards second language learners. We can begin by acknowledging parents in their use of first language (L1) at home and vocalize the importance of reading to their children in L1.

While the literature documents the struggles faced by older immigrants learning second language, it is sometimes implied that the task is less stressful for young children who are still developing full competence in their first language. However, my observations of Tia suggest that learning a new language in school is a demanding task for a young language minority child, one which is full of challenges and struggles. I have learned that minority children depend on the ability to walk in *two worlds* if they are to have future success in school. With this broader knowledge base, children retain their self-esteem, self-confidence and intellectual development. How to assist language minority students in school and at home to bring two languages together is already the topic for another discussion.

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