

Learning to Read 'Properly' by Moving Between Parallel Literacy Classes

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This paper explores what kinds of advantages and strengths the process of learning to read simultaneously in different languages and scripts might bring about. It is based on a socio-cultural view of learning and literacy and examines early literacy in three parallel literacy classes in Watford, England. It analyses the learning experiences of five bilingual children who are of second or third generation Pakistani background. At the start of the study the children are five years old and they attend the same school and class. They learn to read in English during their daily literacy hour lessons; their home language is Pahari¹. They attend weekly Urdu lessons that take place in a community language school. They also learn to read in classical Arabic – in a language they do not speak or understand – in their daily Qur'anic classes and, typically, in the local mosque. The data shows that the children learn to switch between three literacy systems. They talk about their literacy learning in terms of 'how you got to do it' and 'do it properly', which varies from class to class. They use a different range of learning strategies in establishing how to read with meaning. Rather than finding these – or the different related languages and scripts – confusing, they have a powerful impact in enabling the children to see literacies as systems that change and that can be manipulated. This kind of analytical approach of understanding 'proper' reading is based on the children's varied experiences of parallel literacy classes.

Keywords: reading, parallel literacy classes, Urdu, Pahari

Introduction

A windy playtime. Many of the five to seven year old pupils of this English school bolt and flit about the school's playground, whilst a group of six-year old girls stand huddled together. Some kind of serious negotiation is going on. I watch the girls from the distance and suddenly they notice me, and one of them, Neela runs to me. 'I saw you', Neela shouts cheerfully and continues, 'in the mosque'. I confirm that I had seen her, too, and comment on her Qur'anic reading by saying that soon she will be ready to start the real Qur'an. At the moment Neela is practising the classical Arabic alphabet (the language of Qur'an) and learning to read short phrases; this is a language she does not speak or understand. Like Neela's class mate Ikram, who earlier has told me that he 'can do it', he can now read the Qur'an 'properly, really properly!', Neela is also aware of the many aspect of 'proper' Qur'anic reading. She beams at my comment and continues, 'In the mosque, do you know, some people cheat. I NEVER cheat!'

The focus of this paper is on multilingual literacies and on five to seven year old bilingual learners of Pakistani-British origin in Watford, England. It draws on a larger, longitudinal, ethnographic doctoral study that sets out to discover what kinds of advantages or additional strengths bilingual children might bring from their community literacy practices into their English literacy lessons. In

particular the focus is here on children's experiences of learning to read in two or more languages in formal school settings.

Traditionally, the theories of early literacy have not focused on the simultaneous process of learning to read in two or three languages. In most theories the starting point is a monolingual child – typically a middle-class child – who learns in his or her home language. When second language literacy is considered, it is commonly viewed either as a process of learning to read in a new school language, different from the home language, or as a consecutive process – school literacy following home literacy. One of the aims of this paper is, therefore, to raise mainstream teachers' and researchers' and policy makers' awareness of early simultaneous literacy and of community language schools and to begin to recognise these schools as valuable domains for learning.

Over two years this study follows the literacy progress of a small group of British-Pakistani children, two of whom are Neela and Ikram², who move between three schools. Rather than feeling confused about the different languages and literacies, the parallel literacy experiences enable the young readers to see clearly the differences between the practices – the salient features of each practice as they see them – and to demonstrate that they can 'do it'. They show readily that they know how to learn to read 'properly' in each school. A highly useful and analytical approach.

The bilingual children's approach – identifying the rule-governed nature of each practice and aiming for 'proper' reading in each class – is here perceived as a strength that tends to be overlooked in literature which deals with young bilingual children and their early literacy progress.

Community Language Schools

The term 'community language school' is relatively new in Britain. Here it is used as an umbrella term for schools and classes that teach the language and culture of a minority community, and that occasionally take place in people's homes or more commonly in local schools and community halls after school hours. These schools are establishments of various sizes, functions, histories and needs, and they are organised by voluntary and community organisations and exist outside the mainstream school provision. Often they take place in the evenings and /or weekends, or during school lunch times. Due to the differences between them, in Britain they have come to be known by a whole range of names, such as 'supplementary', 'complementary', 'mother-tongue' or 'Saturday' schools. At times, the names are tightly related to the religion of the community, as for example 'mosque schools' or 'Hebrew classes'.

In adopting the term 'community language schools' I seek to acknowledge and accept the complexities and the wide range of differences between these schools, whilst at the same time pointing out some overriding similarities between them. As Hall *et al.* (2002) put it, when reviewing the British and Norwegian situations, in the majority of cases these schools have been established as a direct response to the lack of home language provision within mainstream schools:

The impetus for the development of supplementary schools stemmed from the mainstream's inadequacy of addressing the educational needs of ethnic

community members. Several teachers, pupils and parents talked passionately, about, for example, the links between their mother tongue and a sense of community identity and how their home language is not supported in the mainstream system. (Hall *et al.*, 2002: 412)

The word 'community' comes from Latin 'communitae' and means 'held in common'. In the case of linguistic minority communities, learning the language of the community and maintaining and developing it further, is one of the central ways in which children are initiated into what the members of the community 'hold in common'. In this process of learning, appropriating and negotiating shared values, beliefs and practices, the role of homes and families is indisputable; participation in a range of everyday activities at home and with different family members has a profound and durable influence on children's learning (Brooker, 2002; Gregory, 1998; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). Becoming and remaining multilingual and multiliterate often takes place informally in homes and communities, but here I also argue that the process of becoming multilingual and multiliterate is greatly supported by community language schools.

According to Kempadoo and Abdelrazak (1999) the number of these organisations in Britain easily exceeds 2000. In Hertfordshire alone (the location of this study) the Minority Ethnic Curriculum Support Service (MECSS, 2003) lists 53 permanent, well-established community language schools. These range from African-Caribbean, Bangla, Bosnia-Herzegovinian, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Guru Nanek Gurdwara, Finnish, French, Italian, Punjabi, Qur'anic, Somali, Spanish, Tamil to Urdu schools and classes. But there are others, too, recently established schools or small organisations that never make official lists, and additionally, two large, well-established local Hertfordshire groups, Jewish with their Hebrew classes within synagogues, and Travellers with the teaching of Romany within their close-knit communities, are conspicuous in their absence.

The governmental recognition of community language schools in terms of education can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s when there were some calls to include community languages in the mainstream curriculum (Levine, 1990; LMP, 1985; Rees & Fitzpatric, 1981). A major shift took place in the mid-1980s when the Swann Report (DES, 1985) recommended that all 'mother-tongue teaching' should be taken care of by the communities. This was followed by the Education Reform Act (HMSO, 1988) and the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS). LMS allowed schools to control their own budgets which had a direct effect on community language schools: fewer schools were, for example, interested in paying their caretakers extra money for opening schools in the evenings or weekends (Rutter, 2001).

Theoretical Perspectives

Traditionally, much of early literacy research and theories that govern the acquisition and the development of early literacy have, on the whole, tended to focus on monolingual and native-language speakers (see e.g. Bryant & Bradley, 1985; Bryant *et al.*, 1989; Clay, 1976; Goodman, 1969; Smith, 1985). More recently, when the focus has been specifically on bilingual children's learning, some studies have explored the difficulties of learning to read in a new language and in a new cultural context (Edwards, 1983; Wallace, 1988).

But research literature also draws a distinction between 'simultaneous' (earliest examples in Leopold, 1939–1949 and in Ronjat, 1913) and 'successive' bilinguals. Both are possible and well-established routes into bilingualism (e.g. Cummins, 2000; McLaughlin, 1987; Swain, 1972). Many children learn two languages from birth, simultaneously, and many others learn one after the other. However, in studies that have combined bilingual pupils and *literacy*, the focus has been typically on 'successive readers' – one literacy succeeding another – rather than on 'simultaneous readers'. Very few studies (although there are some, see e.g. Gregory, 1996; Kenner, 2004; Rosowsky, 2001; Verhoeven, 1987, 1994) have explored the process of learning to read or write simultaneously in more than one language.

Others have examined the transfer of knowledge from one language to another. Edwards (1998) points out some of the advantages of this process:

Additional language learners with experience of the Roman alphabet will find themselves at an initial advantage in learning to read other languages which also use the roman alphabet. However, fluent readers use similar strategies, irrespective of the writing system: children who are already literate in one language will be able to transfer a whole range of skills when they start to read a second language. (Edwards, 1998: 52)

This is an important affirmation. There are positive benefits in being and becoming bilingual and biliterate. The important question in terms of this paper grows out of this position: can young learners, who are in the process of becoming bilingual, and who are not yet fluent readers of any writing system, transfer their accumulating skills of different writing systems when they learn to read for the first time *and* simultaneously in two or more languages? Since this kind of simultaneous process calls upon a wider range of skills than those associated with one language and writing system alone, might this enhance learners' overall understanding?

For bilingual children, multilingual appropriateness, knowing how to speak and when and to whom, as well as what is to be read, and how, when and to whom, is dependent on having knowledge of two or more languages and acquiring the related skills and differing types of socio-cultural knowledge that are needed to make use of this knowledge. That literacies are ideological constructions (Street, 1984) with long histories and traditions of their own – and not neutral or autonomous – is evident when listening to children like Neela and Ikram. Their comments on 'cheating' and on 'proper reading' are an immediate give-away and reveal their deepening understanding of literacies as rule-governed practices and their related values. But in theories that focus on early literacy the school's literacy is generally presented as a single authoritative norm against which all others, such as multilingual early literacy or Qur'anic literacy, should be judged.

In England not many bilingual learners are routinely invited to transfer their deepening knowledge and skills of home or community language when learning to read in English in their English classrooms. Their prior knowledge and learning is marginalised. One of the starkest example of marginalisation in literacy studies, however, must be the Muslim children's Qur'anic literacy in today's Anglo-American world. This is virtually absent in all studies that explore school

literacies, even though, historically, the focus on memorisation and Qur'anic literacies at large, has been highly influential in shifting the paradigms of literacy knowledge (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wagner, 1993).

A monolingual literacy perspective has been fully endorsed in all English primary schools in recent years after the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998). The NLS presents a 'searchlight model' of reading that identifies different cueing strategies (phonic, grammatical, contextual). These are taught within a 'Literacy Hour' and at its core is a reader, who becomes skilled in turning on different types of searchlights to make sense of his/her own reading. According to the NLS, progression is achieved by focusing on a tight structure of termly and yearly 'learning objectives' – none of which address the learning processes of simultaneous, multilingual learners and readers.

The literacy hour consists of whole class, group or 'guided' and individual reading and writing tasks. Group and individual tasks take place in ability groups. The pace is fast both within one lesson and during one school year. The NLS builds on the National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999) and recommends the use of 'Big Books'. The texts are often large to enable the whole class to read together. During one week the same text is used to examine various aspects of reading. The teacher's role is to guide, model and monitor reading.

According to the NLS, 'Literacy is at the heart of the drive to raise standards in schools' (DfEE, 1998: 2). The raising of standards is to be measured by yearly national tests (SATs) and the schools' OFSTED³ inspections will identify the individual schools' and teachers' ability to engage in 'successful teaching' which is defined as:

The Literacy Hour is intended to promote 'literacy instruction' but this is not a recipe for returning some crude or simple form of 'transmission' teaching. The most successful teaching is: discursive [. . .] interactive [. . .] well-paced [. . .] confident [. . .] ambitious [. . .]. (DfEE, 1998: 8)

Studies on 'schooled literacy' show some complexities in the process of marginalisation. For example, Baker and Freebody (1989) discuss 'text-teacher partnership' and point out some of the ways in which *all* pupils' knowledge is subordinated to textual knowledge. This subordination is routinely done by the teacher working in association with the text. Baker and Freebody's research (1989) demonstrates how teacher authority is established and maintained and notes how school reading knowledge is located with the teacher. Teachers' instructional interaction patterns in lessons appear to be the methods for training children to participate in 'anticipation routines' (such as 'guess what the teacher is thinking about') and to acknowledge the teacher – together with the text but only as appropriated by the teacher – as the arbiter of their competence and as the source of their actual knowledge.

There are very few studies on 'parallel schooled literacies'. It is this simultaneous, multilingual and socio-cultural aspect of literacy learning that remains neglected. There are scholars, like Gregory *et al.* (2004), who have begun to draw attention to the cognitive aspects of the learning processes when studying literacy in its social contexts. They show how a tight focus on *syncretic* experiences – children moving daily from one type of practice to another and learning to

operate appropriately in all – provides new insights into learning, and not just into literacy. Within Syncretic Literacy Studies, syncretism is best understood as:

First [. . .] to be more than a mixing of existing cultural forms (Apter, 1991). It is, instead, a creative process in which people reinvent culture as they draw on resources, both familiar and new (Shaw & Stewart, 1994). The focus is on the activity of transformation, not on fossilized cultural forms. Second, syncretism is described as an inherent feature of cross-cultural encounters and negotiations (Solsken *et al.*, 2000) and is, thus, often characterized by contradictory elements arising out of disparities of power. The reinvention of the new forms is generated by the juxtaposition of these elements. (Gregory *et al.*, 2004: 4)

Regular cross-generational meetings – such as community language schools – are not a prerequisite for the development of literacies, but they tend to play a part. They facilitate the shared and social contexts in which both linguistic and cultural fluency (Glazier, 2003) and appropriateness can flourish. It is likely that when the mainstream education system fails to provide learning experiences which enable children from linguistic minority communities to develop and maintain their languages, the need for the community language schools is greatly increased.

Methodology, Participants and Parallel Literacy Classes

The study from which the data is selected is based on a socio-cultural, neo-Vygotskian view of learning and literacy (Moll *et al.*, 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). Following from Cochran-Smith's (1984) work, the overall study begins from the outer layers of school literacy practices and moves on to examine the inner layers, the teachers' and children's participation in literacy lessons. The methodology includes ethnographic research methods ranging from field notes, participant observations, audio and video tapes to interviews with teachers and parents.

The focus is on five children of Pakistani background, who attend the same mainstream school, Watford Garden Infant School, and class in Watford, Hertfordshire. Around 15% of this school's pupils are of second generation Pakistani background. At home they speak Pahari which no longer has a written form. This is a language spoken in the Mirpur district of Pakistan, and more specifically in the remote hills of Mirpur ('hill language' is its literal translation).

At the start of the study the children are in the Reception class and aged between 5:0 and 5:3 years. At the end of the study they have finished their Year 2 class, taken their national tests (formerly SATs) and are all between 7:4 and 7:7 years old. The two girls, Neela and Saira, and the three boys, Amil, Bashir and Ikram, have all had a year in the school's nursery. They were all born in Watford.

The children's parallel literacy classes are organised by three different schools (see Table 1).

At the age of five or six years, the children have begun to attend both Urdu and Qur'anic lessons. Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, is a new language to these children. The Urdu lessons are organised and taught by a local Ethnic Minority Achievement⁴ (EMA) teacher, Zara Gani, who knows the school and its

Table 1 Parallel literacy classes

	<i>English Class</i>	<i>Urdu Class</i>	<i>Classical Arabic/ Qur'anic Class</i>
Type of school	Mainstream infant school	Community language school	Community language school
Type of class	One year group 25 children in total	Three year groups (aged between 5 and 7 years) together. About 20 children in total.	All ages together. Boys' and girls' classes organised separately; more boys than girls attend (approx. 28–38 boys and 6–15 girls).
Type of lesson	Daily literacy hour lesson Monday–Friday around 9–10am	Weekly 40 minute lesson during the school's lunchtime 12.20pm–1pm	Daily, after school hours around 5–6pm. (Also weekends and school holidays).
Funding	State funding	No state funding. Run voluntarily by community members. Mainstream school supportive in providing space and some resources.	No state funding but some funding through the local mosque. Also supported voluntarily by various community members.

community well. Zara grew up in Mirpur, and now spends her own lunchtimes for this kind of work and receives no additional funding. She describes learning Urdu as 'learning a foreign language' and emphasises the need for the children to learn the national language of Pakistan. Zara summarises the rationale for learning Urdu as:

- enabling personal/ familial communication with people in Pakistan (occasionally with extended family but most importantly with professional people);
- educating children in the language and literature of Pakistan;
- signalling appreciation and respect for family background;
- facilitating the future use and appreciation of media: newspapers, books, satellite TV channels, videos, films, music (see Robertson, 2004, for a more detailed discussion).

However, since there is little time for this (only one lunchtime every week) Zara aims to teach the 'basic' Urdu vocabulary, alphabet and a few written words, the main emphasis remaining on the spoken language and 'having fun and enjoying it like a club'. Zara is well aware of the criticisms that surround community language schools, such as Urdu and Qur'anic. The mainstream school's teachers view these schools as 'old-fashioned', 'rigid' 'authoritarian' and 'formal', and less effective in their approaches than the English schools. Identifying 'fun' as a starting point is an attempt to shake off these perceptions.

The Qur'an is written in classical Arabic, a language that none of the British-Pakistani children know or understand, but its script system shares many similarities with that of Urdu. Children from about five to six years onwards are

invited to attend Qur'anic classes every day, for an hour or so, after school hours, and many of them do. It is here that children learn to read *and* memorise the Qur'an. It is estimated that about 90% of all Muslim children in Britain attend from time to time (Parker-Jenkins, 1996). Some are taught at home, in small groups, others attend classes, or madrassahs, that take place in community centres or mosques (Anwar & Bakhsh, 2003; Weller, 1993).

Much of the data comes from the children's English and Urdu lessons which were generally either audio taped or video recorded. After many discussions with the members of the Watford Muslim community – parents, teachers, children – and with the mosque's teachers, it was not considered appropriate to record Qur'anic lessons on an audio or video tape. The logistics of this were difficult, especially in the boys' large class. As a woman and a non-Muslim researcher my presence in many parts of the mosque was always problematic, even though I was warmly welcomed. Since these classes were also spiritual experiences, audio taping or video recording were considered intrusive.

In this study then, there is an imbalance between the different types of literacy classes. English and Urdu lessons dominate in terms of the data collected. But in the children's real lives all the different literacies played an important part in the construction of their understanding.

English Literacy Class

When beginning to review the participants' interactions in the English lessons, certain initial patterns emerge clearly. The first is the fact that *all* children say very little in these lessons. Teacher talk dominates. The second is the observation that when the bilingual children do talk, they offer suggestions and answers, but their contributions are typically confirmed as wrong. The bilingual children have far fewer opportunities to get their answers right than their monolingual peers. The third is a pattern that I describe as the 'drilling of words'; the teacher 'teaches' English words to everyone. Each lesson begins with the recitation of related vocabulary, such as or 'What's a title?' or 'What's an author?'. These formulaic questions are asked by different teachers from Reception class to Year 2 and often they take on the function of signalling the start of the lesson. But in the case of the bilingual children this kind of teaching, drilling of words that they already know and use, takes place more often and includes a wider range of words than 'titles', 'authors' or 'illustrators'. Added together, a *closed system* of literacy begins to emerge. These metaphors, 'opening and closing', are used as they are helpful in illuminating some differences between the classes.

The closed system of English literacy is directly related to the teachers' views of the child as a learner. The bilingual children are grouped together in the two 'low ability groups' in their Reception year, and they – apart from Bashir – remain in these groups for the next two years. Bashir is the only one to move on to the second highest group in Year 1. He never makes the top group. But once the Year 2 test results arrive, the whole school celebrates with Bashir: he has achieved level 3 in reading and writing tests⁵. It is now confirmed that Bashir is one of the most achieving pupils in the whole *school*, and not just his class, a fact that went unnoticed when 'ability groups' were considered. The girls, Neela and Saira, too, achieve a good score, and at Level 2 are not amongst the 'low ability' readers and

writers. During the two years, the children's bilingualism – rather than their actual level of English – is a decisive factor in the teachers' decisions and teaching. This leads to daily literacy tasks and interaction patterns that begin to question the teachers' expectations.

The following extract from the Reception class shows a highly typical exchange of turns between the bilingual pupils and their English mainstream teacher Pippa Lorenzo (herself a bilingual English/Italian teacher). Recently Pippa has been confirmed as an excellent teacher by the school's OFSTED inspection report. She has been assessed as 'good' or 'very good' in all aspects. Here, five-year old Bashir is reading with Pippa, and on the previous page the book's character Sam is playing in the park (Better & Park, 1996). On this page Sam's parents carry plastic shopping bags. One apple has fallen on the ground (see Table 2).

Typically in English lessons the literacy knowledge and understanding that is being practised upon is fixed. The knowledge is, as Baker and Freebody (1989) point out, arbitrated by the teacher and located within the nexus of the teacher-text relationship. The multiplicity of meanings, interpretations, points of view, anomalies and the pupils' individual and idiosyncratic responses are rejected – even when they are logical and correct as Bashir's responses are here. There is only one possible meaning which must be established – quickly! – rather than jointly negotiated. The teachers' overall presumptions, that the bilingual readers do not understand their reading material, neither the lexicon nor the illustrations, is evident, and yet, these presumptions are not based on firm evidence. It is possible that the monolingual children's experiences are similar and that their understanding is not recognised either (there is insufficient space to explore this in detail here) but it does seem that the bilingual children have fewer chances to 'get it right'.

That corrections have their place in these lessons is not questioned. It is the fact that they dominate – even when multiple correct possibilities exist – that is the focus here. English literacy, as presented by this school, is dependent on viewing

Table 2 Exchange of turns

<i>Pupil/Bashir</i>	<i>Teacher/Pippa (Reception class)</i>
	Why were they busy? What were they doing?
They putting the, the bags into the car.	
	Where do you think they've just been?
Er, to the park.	
[sneezes]	Do you think they've been to the park? Were else do you think they've probably been? Bless you. Where else you think they might have been?
Er.	Do you think they might have been to the shops. Which shop they might have been?
Er, fruit shop.	
	Fruit shop, yeah, cause there's an apple, isn't it? They could have gone to Tesco's ⁶ as well, couldn't they?

literacy from a monolingual perspective, and especially from an 'English-Only' perspective, as recommended by the NLS. The extract in Table 3 illustrates this.

Only one possibility, the English left-to-right directionality of print, is accepted here; others are not acknowledged. Yet, it is possible that Amil is drawing upon his deepening understanding of script systems (both Urdu and classical Arabic scripts use right-to-left direction). The teacher's question '*Where do we start reading?*' and her evaluation '*Good boy, at the beginning*' establish the English way as something universal, rather than one possibility amongst many and as an arbitrary, language-specific system. Much of the ability to operate within this closed literacy system is dependent on understanding and speaking English and possessing and accepting the schooled, canonised and English version of 'correct' literacy knowledge. An impoverished, 'monolingualising' and closed system of literacy is put forward.

English as a universal system is further consolidated by the teachers' adherence to the NLS learning objectives. The children's other languages and scripts have no place in the lessons which the teachers themselves cherish as the most important: there are no instances over the two year period when other languages are referred to or acknowledged during the actual teacher-led literacy hour lessons. This kind of closed set of possibilities fails to acknowledge that many scripts, already familiar to these bilingual children, use different conventions, and by doing so, some of the bilingual children's previous learning experiences are rejected. The literacy lessons do not build on *their* prior knowledge.

Table 3 Literacy lesson

<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Teacher/Pippa (Reception Class)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
	Are we ready? Amil, where do we start reading from?	
Amil:Eh		Amil goes to point at the text.
	Is it going to be in the middle? We don't start reading from the middle, do we? Are we going to start at the end? No, show me where we're gonna start reading?	
		Amil thinks carefully and points to both ends of the sentence.
	N-not quite. Somewhere, round here. Where do you think it might be?	
Ikram:I know		Amil points to the bottom of the page.
	No, not at the bottom. No, let's see someone can help you out. Ikram d'you want to come up and help Amil out? Wiggle back, Ikram's gonna find out if he knows. Where we're gonna start reading?	
		Ikram points to the left of the sentence.
	Good boy, at the beginning.	

It is also evident that at the age of five years the children have understood what counts as 'proper' reading in this class. Here they never talk about 'cheating', as they do in the Qur'anic class, but are equally keen to show me 'how you got to do it'. When beginning an English literacy lesson Bashir says, 'You got to do title first. What's the title? Do the title!'

Urdu Literacy Class

In the following extract the school's British-Pakistani children and their Urdu teacher, Zara Gani, are reading an English/Urdu dual language book, 'Lima's Red Hot Chilli' (Mills, 2000). They discuss food, and, more specifically, onomatopoeic words that relate to food and eating (see Table 4).

All languages have onomatopoeic words, but in each language these are based on its specific rules of phonology and morphology. That 'crunch' and 'kachar' refer to the same sound of eating is accepted as a starting point. For the children there is nothing new in this, and routinely in all Urdu lessons the teacher invites the children to examine and translate words in the two languages, whilst using a third language, Pahari, and occasionally drawing everyone's attention to the fourth language, classical Arabic. The lessons provide a shared, social context for *opening* literacy systems. In all lessons the teacher's and her pupils' discussion moves quickly from the level of lexicon to syntax, phonology and orthography within the two, three or four languages, and the expected level of metalinguistic awareness and knowledge is high.

In all Urdu lessons the participants switch systems. Zara engages the children to spot similarities and differences and builds on many aspects of their prior literacy knowledge and understanding. Yet, it is also evident that the children are *not yet* knowledgeable or skilled in Urdu. As in the English class, here, too, 'correct' answers are practised, but a wider range of possibilities is accepted. Furthermore, the children say very little, and when they do, they tend to prefer English. In fact, though this community language school is always described as an Urdu school, and its aim is to teach Urdu language and literacy, the lessons also consolidate English. The lessons are perhaps, first and foremost, lessons in language awareness rather than in Urdu language or literacy. Undoubtedly these go hand in hand. Learning literacies enhances language awareness and metalinguistic

Table 4 Reading in English/Urdu

<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Teacher/Zara (Urdu Class)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
	So, it goes 'crunch'. What's that in Urdu? A special word?	Zara routinely switches between the two languages, Urdu and English, and asks questions in both.
All: Crunch, crunch, crunch!		
	Crunch, how do you say that in Urdu?	Asks in both languages.
	Kachar!	
All: Kachar! Kachar! Kachar!	Kachar! Kachar! Kachar!	

knowledge; language awareness and metalinguistic knowledge are prerequisites for learning literacies.

It is interesting to note that though Zara's intention is to teach some 'basic' Urdu words, they analyse language and consider further, broader dimensions. This often raises the cognitive level of the lesson. For example, Zara draws attention to the fact that even though 'chilli' is 'mirsch' in Urdu, the word 'mirsch' is actually used less often than 'chilli'. Languages change. Together they focus on the fact that that words themselves have histories. By the very nature of the task – teaching 'basic' words in another language – develops cognitive flexibility and language awareness, and the children demonstrate sound understanding of the fact that words are arbitrary, that the signifier can be easily separated from the signified and be replaced by another word. The replacing word may also be from another language. Words, like bilingual families, travel across language borders.

The level of analysis is often higher than Zara, perhaps, intends. Her aim, to teach 'basic Urdu' words, is immediately challenged by the act of translation. There is nothing 'basic' about words in different languages; their meanings have nuances which are often difficult to explain. For example, when using the dual language book (Mills, 2000, as mentioned above) the English text states 'shouted her mother', and as soon as Zara begins to read the Urdu translation 'jellichahar', she feels uncomfortable with it. To Zara this word 'jellichahar' is inappropriate in this context. She interprets it as a kind of high-pitch screaming which does not fit in within the context of mother–daughter dialogue. To Zara it feels wrong and she moves on to discuss this with the children.

Directionality of writing is also an intriguing aspect of these Urdu lessons, but rather than practising direction in its most simple form (left-to-right in English, right-to-left in Urdu) Zara also asks a difficult, open-ended, higher-order question 'why are they different?'. As with the onomatopoeic words, directions, too, are at once established and accepted as different – difference as a norm is the starting point – and as a convention. But why should this be so, why and how have conventions become established, is a highly challenging question to which it is difficult to find an answer. Zara and the children smile and their smiles signal a kind of defeat. Together they conclude that 'because this is in English and this is in Urdu.' They are different because they are.

Qur'anic Class

As the opening vignette of this paper shows, these young British-Pakistani children are aware of the rule-governed nature of their literacy practices. Especially in the Qur'anic classes it is easy to 'cheat' and to read and recite wrong phrases, but clearly this is not acceptable: 'I NEVER cheat!' says Neela, her voice full of pride. Older boys, too, demonstrate knowledge and understanding of this aspect of their reading and when in the Qur'anic class taunt each other loudly: 'You're cheating. You're not doing it properly!'. I do not observe the girls challenge each other in this way, but once back at their English school, both boys and girls refer to the Qur'anic reading as something that has to be done 'properly'. Everyone is knowledgeable about 'cheating', and like all types of inappropriate behaviours, this one, too, is something that is talked about energetically.

I want to emphasise here that the concern of this paper is *not* on whether or not these children cheat, or to what degree cheating does or does not take place, but on the fact that the children so readily focus on 'proper' or honest reading. This demands a high level of self-discipline, which together with accurate reading are seen as the basis on which Qur'anic literacy is built upon. Undoubtedly the children's self-discipline and honesty is also bound up with the notions of spirituality.

When Ikram reads to me at his Qur'anic lesson, he comments on his own reading, 'This is very difficult. But I can do this one. Shall I show you?' He then puts his book away and recites a long and difficult section and shows how the most meaningful part – and the most valued and cherished part – is the ability to recite by heart. Looking at his body posture and his sustained concentration there is no doubt that Ikram is doing it as properly as he can, and with no cheating.

In these classes children as learners are expected to demonstrate willpower and honesty from the earliest age onwards. It is easy to cheat but they decide otherwise. In that sense they are in control of their own reading. But they are also keen to show that they know and understand how other aspects of 'proper reading' are to be achieved. Back at his English school, Ikram talks to me about his Qur'anic reading and says, 'I'll show you how you got to do it'. He proceeds to kneel down on the ground, bows low and starts to recite the classical Arabic alphabet. Whilst reciting, carefully pronouncing each sound, he sways gently backwards and forwards. Bashir joins him and agrees, 'This is how you do it'. Their physical actions are combined with careful attention to detail. The need to recite the alphabet accurately and correctly demands their full concentration.

It seems that some aspects of autonomy and independence awarded to individual learners are far greater here, in the Qur'anic class, than in the English and Urdu class. Here the learners are expected to take control over their own learning and to manage and be in charge of their own individual lesson. As in the English and Urdu class, the teacher is there to guide, to model and to monitor, but unlike in the other two classes, here the learner is free to select many aspects of the daily lesson. In effect the learner decides which specific parts he or she is practising, and how fast and how many times, all of which rests on the individual's independence.

Conclusion

The examples of data demonstrate how the bilingual children are learning to be learners in their parallel literacy classes and learning to belong to their literacy practices. This movement from class to class is advantageous since it enables the children to perceive clearly what is the most prestigious aspect of each, and what appropriate forms will count as 'doing it properly'. The children are in the process of learning the appropriate linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and understanding and blending these to create new forms. Their syncretic literacy knowledge is directly linked to these shared, social experiences and a result of this movement. By going to different classes and learning to read in three languages enables the children to see literacies as systems. Rather than finding the differences confusing, they seem to be the driving force in analysing them

further. This is a highly analytical approach, and one which is a direct result of their parallel classes. It is a strength that these children have. It is also an approach that remains hidden in the English lessons (Robertson, 2002).

It seems that the procedural knowledge and understanding of literacy lessons – how it is to be done – are amongst the first to be acquired. For the children there is a pressing need to establish what gets taught, and when, and how, and what the participants actually do with their interaction with texts and teachers. This kind of understanding takes place in the context of learning different alphabets, phonic systems, onomatopoeia, script systems. Following from Street and Street's (1995) work, these children demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the areas which are 'privileged' in each lesson, such as titles in the English lesson. They understand that these are given a different 'pedagogic status', such as 'doing the title' in the English lesson and reciting by heart in the Qur'anic lesson. They are in the process of sorting out the 'philosophy of language', such as 'no cheating', as the process of establishing units and boundaries within elements of language.

The English teacher, within the daily literacy hours, starts with a curriculum area that has to be covered – and covered *quickly*. This is tightly related to the need to get a good school inspection report; all the teachers mention this. The bilingual children are presented with a closed system of literacy which is based on a monolingual 'English-Only' version of literacy and as such rejects the bilingual children's prior knowledge and understanding. It is aimed at 'monolingualising' the children.

In the community language schools the teachers have different kinds of starting points. The children's Urdu teacher begins from the emotional, social and cultural needs of individual learners. She also aims to have 'fun' to counter-balance the negative views associated with Urdu schools. Occasionally she asks challenging, difficult questions, to which she does not always know the answer. The act of translation presents new demands. Difference as a norm in reading is a starting point on which their deepening literacy knowledge is built upon. The children's bilingualism – already achieved in Pahari and English – is used as a springboard for teaching and learning a third language, Urdu.

It is interesting to discover that a disciplined and respected view of a young learner, who is in control of many aspects of his or her own reading, emerged within the Qur'anic classes, thereby challenging the notion of 'old-fashioned', 'rigid' and 'formal' methods of teaching. Independent learning and pupils taking control of their own learning is, of course, the first aim of the National Curriculum for England:

Aim 1: The school curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve. The school curriculum should develop enjoyment of, and commitment to, learning as a means of encouraging and stimulating the best possible progress and the highest attainment for all pupils. It should build on pupils' strengths, interest and experiences and develop their confidence in their capacity to learn and work independently and collaboratively. (DfEE, 1999: 11)

Community language schools and classes are a significant language and literacy resource. They are a resource in finding out how to achieve the above

National Curriculum aim. In order to 'build on pupils' strengths, interest and experiences' the teachers need to know what they are, before they can build on them. The community language teachers are in a prime position to support others in finding out what these strengths might be. These schools can enhance our understanding of how to foster the 'capacity to learn independently and collaboratively'. They are a vital, untapped resource for researchers and policy makers; using them directly, collaborating with their teachers and pupils, and learning *from* them, can significantly enhance and deepen the understanding of the early literacy learning process.

The children learn to read in English whilst switching between different literacy systems. In each class they talk about their literacy learning in terms of 'how you do it properly'. They are keen to demonstrate what they can do. Rather than finding the different languages and scripts or classes confusing, they have a powerful impact in inspiring the children to show that they have learnt what counts as 'proper' learning and 'proper' reading in all their classes as the girls in this final extract show:

End of a school day. I wait with Saira and Neela for their family members to collect them. Together we read notices in the cloakroom and labels in forgotten lunchboxes: Jamie, Shannon, Hope. The girls show off, Neela noisily and Saira quietly, both wanting to impress me with their reading. I try to engage them talking about the earlier Urdu class, but this time they will have none of that – their focus remains squarely on English words. Saira reads 'Hope'. She looks at me, smiles, and says, 'Soap', and continues, 'Coat. And Hope.' Rhyming pairs have been a focus in this class for some time. Neela joins in immediately, and claims, 'No, no, no! It's not Hope and coat. It's Hope and soap. You do it like this! Hope and soap!'

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Notes

1. After countless discussions with a wide range of people I opt to use 'Pahari' to refer to this community's first language. I do this whilst fully accepting that there are various opposing points of view, and that I am in danger of offending some Pahari-speaking people. In most sources and literature, this language is typically referred to as Mirpuri or Punjabi dialect. Here I have rejected Punjabi dialect since this term locates the language in Punjab rather than in Mirpur, where Pahari is spoken. I have also rejected Mirpuri, since there are various dialects in Mirpur, such as Kashmiri, Potwari and Pahari. I use Pahari because this is what the community itself used.
2. All the participants' names – children, teachers and schools – have been changed and where possible the participants have selected their own pseudonyms.
3. OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, see www.ofsted.org.uk) is the schools' inspection service that regularly inspects schools in England and Wales.
4. Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) teachers provide support and additional teaching for English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils.
5. The tests comprise different parts of reading and writing, and they are taken by all children in state schools during the summer term of their Year 2 class (at the age of six

or seven years). The levels refer to the National Curriculum level descriptors (DfEE, 1999). 'W' is the lowest and refers to 'working towards' Level 1, which is the anticipated level of four or five year old children. Level 1 is the anticipated level of Reception and Year 1 children and Level 2 that of Year 2 children. Bashir's achievement, at Level 3, is therefore notable. The results were:

	<i>English 1/Reading</i>	<i>English 2/Reading</i>	<i>English 3/Writing</i>
Neela	2	2	2
Saira	2	2	2
Amil	W	1	1
Bashir	3	3	3
Ikram	1	2	2

6. Tesco is a large supermarket chain in England, and the plastic bags in the picture have blue stripes similar to those in Tesco's bags.

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