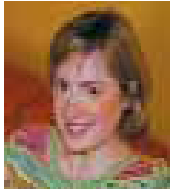


Squiggles and Dots: Bilingual Books for Children

Patricia Billings



Faced with new and seemingly strange texts, children don't turn away: they look. They ask: what does this mean? Can a stream of what looks like squiggles and dots actually say something? Bit by bit, they learn that it does, that the stream of unfamiliar letters or characters is imbued with rich meanings, as well as visual beauty. They may not understand every letter, word or character, but they have begun to understand and appreciate a new language – the strange is demystified, normalized, embraced.

While Britain is often bemoaned as a monolingual nation, voices on the ground speak differently. There are no firm statistics on how many people in Britain are bilingual, but a recent study reported that more than 300 different languages are spoken in London alone, and that one third of London schoolchildren speak a language other than English at home. While the big cities will have the greater share of bilinguals, most corners of Britain are now host to many language groups. Despite the sometimes unhelpful discourse on 'home' languages emanating from officials, in schools, homes, offices, and on the streets, bilingualism in Britain is thriving.

Old anxieties about bilingualism in children, fears that the speaking and reading of home languages would interfere with the learning of English, gave way as the science of language acquisition in the young showed that the young mind is eminently capable of, and indeed ideally suited for acquiring multiple languages; that the skills used to learn one language can be readily transferred to other languages; and that these skills have overall cognitive benefits for the child, even beyond the realm of language. On the social level, as the recognition of the benefits of multiculturalism has increased over time, so too has the appreciation of the value of languages, including the retaining of home languages, of learning new languages and of being bilingual.

Likewise, corresponding myths that surrounded bilingual books in their early days were soon debunked. The belief that children brought up with English would always focus on English when reading bilingual books because it was the 'easier' language was dismissed by studies showing that the child attempts to read both languages. The understanding that multiple languages complement rather than compete with each other helped to allay worries among parents of bilingual children that the study or active use of their home language would adversely affect their learning of English.

The first generation of bilingual books, though groundbreaking and valuable, might be seen as tending toward the worthy, covering titles and themes that were explicitly multicultural and with varying production quality. More recent waves of bilingual books, more confident in their purpose and their ability to grasp a larger market, have broadened thematically, choosing stories as much for their narrative and visual pleasures as for their meanings. These books have excelled in design and production quality as well, recognizing that readers of languages other than English deserve the same high standard books as readers of English. So bilingual books are beautiful, engaging and innovative; they encompass everything from story books to picture dictionaries to flap books to multimedia materials.

Young readers, their parents, carers and educators now have a rich variety of materials to choose from in a broad range of languages, from more commonly

learned European languages like French and Italian, to the languages of the country's largest bilingual communities, like Bengali, Urdu, Chinese and Turkish, to those spoken by smaller groups, such as Serbo-Croatian and Dinka.

And bilingual books can be read and enjoyed by all: they can help bilingual children raised here to develop literacy skills in their home languages; for newly-arrived immigrant and refugee families, the books can be crucial aids for developing literacy in English, and for inclusion in reading at school and at home; they are important and enjoyable learning aids, as well, for English-speaking children learning other languages, used on their own or alongside textbooks; and even for those not yet learning another language, they provide an ideal introduction to the wealth of languages and scripts in the world, helping to inspire interest in other languages, and in other cultures and countries.

Bilingual books are available for all age ranges, with the greatest number of titles aimed at the pre-school and primary levels. There are far fewer titles for older children and teenagers, reflecting an assumption (not necessarily correct), that children from other language groups will have learned English by the secondary education stage. Also, for publishers, longer texts are more costly and difficult to produce in dual-language, so, with an uncertain market, they can be hesitant, but there is hope that the range of materials for this age group will grow.

Indeed, publishers of bilingual books face many challenges. The publisher must choose titles that translate smoothly cross-culturally. They must investigate the languages in current demand – the pool of languages is constantly changing, based often on political events and their associated migrations. When translating, publishers must consider different dialects and scripts, and how far to go in innovating with the translation, rather than adhering strictly to the original English text (my publishing company has favoured innovation). The dual language publisher must be attuned to cultural sensitivities when considering the text and pictures, as many different cultural groups will be addressed at the same time in one print run of multiple language editions. Text design in the books is more complicated, as it must accommodate and respect more than one language. There are the additional printing costs for running many languages, then special research and efforts are required to market and distribute the books to their target language groups.

Bilingual publishing is intensive on all levels, so it may not be attractive to all publishers. But it has certainly proved attractive to some publishers: Britain boasts a large, diverse and growing selection of bilingual books which offer eye-opening experiences, learning opportunities and, not the least, pleasures and delights to young readers.

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Patricia Billings is Director of Milet Publishing, the leading publisher of bilingual children's books, with over 350 bilingual editions in English with 25 languages, including Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Kurdish, Somali, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese and so on. Milet also publishes a line of artistic children's books in English, thirteen of which were translated from other languages, such as French, German and Turkish. Before founding Milet with her partner Sedat Turhan in 1995, Patricia worked as a journalist, editor and researcher on Middle East and human rights issues, based in Washington, DC and in the Middle East. Her academic background includes a degree in Political Science and Middle East Politics and post-graduate work in Arab Studies and Film Studies.

