

Chapter 1

Introduction: Principles and Practices for Teaching Bilingual Learners

Jean Conteh and Avril Brock

In this book we provide principles, advice and practical ideas for promoting the learning of bilingual pupils in mainstream primary schools, including children in the Foundation Stage. Most of the ideas and activities presented in the following chapters are from teachers and teacher-trainers who have worked for many years in schools in Bradford. In some Bradford schools, as in other cities in the UK, the majority of pupils are bilingual, and many are the children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of people who arrived to work in mills and factories 40 or 50 years ago. But there are also schools where bilingual pupils are very much in the minority, and where children have recently arrived from many different countries, including Eastern European and African countries. The guidance in this book is designed to cover both kinds of school setting.

We believe that the basic principles for promoting learning for bilingual pupils are the same, in many ways, as those for all pupils, so the first and overarching principle for promoting learning is:

Good practice for bilingual learners is good practice for all learners

But, beyond these basic principles, there are important and distinctive features of bilingual learners' experiences that need specific support, and these are our main focus in this book.

In this chapter, we introduce the main ideas that flow through the book. We discuss:

- The centrality of language in learning
- Who are 'bilingual learners'? – definitions of bilingualism
- Language repertoires
- Links between first language and additional languages
- Transitional and additive bilingualism
- Whole-school benefits of bilingualism
- Key principles for planning teaching to promote additive bilingualism
- Translating principles into practice.

2 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11

In Chapters 2–7, the principles are then developed and illustrated with a wealth of practical examples. Teachers who have carried out successful projects share their experiences and analyse what made their work successful. Words printed in **bold** in the text are explained in the Glossary, which begins on page 103. You will find full details of books and other resources mentioned in the chapters in the *further reading* sections at the end of each chapter.

THE CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE IN LEARNING

Language is all around us, we hear and see language in the home, in the media, in the street, as well as in the school environment. Language forms the essence of thought; it is the medium in which understanding occurs. Through language, we construct our understanding of the world and are able to communicate with others. Language does not just occur in school as a body of knowledge in the subject called English or in the Literacy Hour. It is cross-curricular and forms the basis of learning in all the other curriculum areas. Language underpins learning, so, for young bilingual learners who are new to English, not only are they:

learning a new language

they are also

using language to learn new things.

This, of course, is true for all pupils, but it is more significant for pupils who enter school with very little English. It is essential that bilingual pupils have as much opportunity as possible to develop concepts in their first language, so that their learning is based on a firm foundation. At the same time, equal access to English should be offered to all bilingual pupils from the start of their time in formal education.

Because language and learning are linked in these ways, it can be a complex matter to identify correctly the needs of young bilingual learners who have little English and are at the early stages of schooling. It is well known that many learners new to English need a ‘silent period’ – when a child does not speak or respond to others – in order to build up their knowledge of English and their underlying proficiency before they begin to speak. Language needs can seem like learning needs, and sometimes specific learning needs can go undetected. In this book, we are not dealing directly with assessing bilingual learners’ needs, but we recognize how issues of assessment influence teaching in many different ways. An excellent book that deals directly with this area is *Assessing the Needs of Bilingual Pupils* (Deryn Hall et al., 2001).

WHO ARE ‘BILINGUAL LEARNERS’? DEFINITIONS OF BILINGUALISM

In government documentation, the term most commonly used for pupils who speak other languages besides English is **EAL** (English as an additional

language) learners. When we use the term 'bilingual' in this book, we are including EAL learners. We prefer the term 'bilingual' because we believe it is broader and more inclusive, and represents more accurately the important idea that, for bilingual children, all their languages contribute to their whole language experience and their knowledge of the world. Languages are not separate and isolated units. Bilingual children and adults naturally switch and mix between the languages they have at their disposal, they do not keep each language separate.

If you listen to groups of bilingual people having a conversation, you will often hear English words, phrases or sentences amongst the other languages they are using. This is known as **codeswitching**, and is especially common in children whose families have been settled in the UK for two or three generations, and who still maintain strong links with their homeland. Children from such bilingual (or multilingual) families will often speak different languages with different family members as a perfectly normal part of their lives; they may speak English with their siblings and perhaps their parents, but they will speak the family language (perhaps Urdu, Punjabi, Bangla, or Gujerati) with uncles, aunts and grandparents.

In talking about bilingualism in this way, we are not intending to suggest that children are fluent in all the languages they speak and write, but that – like the majority of people in the world – they have access to more than one language in normal and natural ways in their daily lives. The following, from Deryn Hall's book (2001), which she calls a 'working definition', is helpful in understanding the experiences of bilingual children in schools in England:

In England the term is currently used to refer to pupils who live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use, two or more languages at home and at school. It does not mean that they have fluency in both languages or that they are competent and literate in both languages. (2001: 5)

This way of thinking about bilingualism, as 'living in two or more languages', makes clear the links between language and **identity**. An understanding of these links is very important for success in education. Our identities are formed from the activities we do every day and the conversations we have with the people around us. Through this, we develop a sense of where we belong, and of how we identify with the social worlds that surround us. There is a great deal of evidence to show that, if pupils feel they belong in the classroom and that their teachers value them as individuals, their attitudes to learning will be much more positive, and their achievement will improve.

Official statistics currently state the numbers of bilingual children in schools in England to be about 10%, or around 650,000 children, with almost 300 languages represented. These figures are partly based on the 2001 census where, for the first time, as a population we were asked to declare our ethnicities. But, there was no specific question on the census form about the languages we speak, so the official figures are based more on information about **ethnicity** than about language. It is likely that there will be questions specifically about language on the next census forms in 2011, which will be the first time that systematic information about the languages spoken and written by the people of Britain has been collected.

Even though the ethnic minority population of Britain is currently about 10% and so quite small, DfES statistics reveal that virtually all secondary schools and about 75% of primary schools have some learners who can be defined as

4 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11

bilingual on roll. Of course, the proportions vary considerably, with a few primary and secondary schools in cities like Bradford having virtually 100% bilingual pupils, and other schools having perhaps only a few bilingual learners.

Whatever the number and proportion of bilingual learners in your school or class, the principles for enhancing their learning remain the same. An essential starting-point is to make sure you have accurate information about the languages they speak, read and write. It is very important that every school with bilingual pupils finds out as much as possible about their pupils' home and community languages – this should be done as a matter of routine with all pupils as they begin school. There is a form in Chapter 7 (page 90) which you can use to do this.

LANGUAGE REPERTOIRES – WE ARE ALL 'BILINGUAL'

In official policy, pupils tend to be categorized as either 'monolingual' or 'bilingual'. It is important to remember, however, that many children who may not be categorized as bilingual have knowledge and experience of languages or of varieties of English that are different from those they will use and learn in school. Outside school, they may hear and use different **dialects** of English, which have grammar and vocabulary different from **standard English**. They and their families may speak in different **accents** from the ones most commonly used in school. In fact all of us, whether we regard ourselves as bilingual or monolingual, have language **repertoires**; we all have access to different ways of speaking and writing which we can choose from. We make our choices according to the following factors:

- Whom we are speaking to or writing for
- What we are trying to say or write
- Why we are trying to say or write these things
- When we are speaking or writing
- Where we are speaking or writing

So, for example, we speak in very different ways and about very different things to our families at home after a tiring day at work, to our colleagues in the staffroom at lunchtime, to pupils in the classroom or to friends whom we may meet on social occasions. We read different things in very different ways: planning files, novels, emails, bank statements, letters and so on.

This notion of language repertoires is a very useful one in helping to understand how language works and in thinking about how teaching can be made more focused and effective. If we help pupils to understand the '5Ws' (the who, what, why, when and where) of any language task they are expected to do, then their learning will be more meaningful, purposeful and – we hope – more successful.

● Learning in different contexts

It is important to remember that, for many bilingual learners, formal learning does not end when they go home from their mainstream school in the afternoon. Many attend other schools in mosques, synagogues, churches, temples

and other places in the community. They learn to read and write their family languages and the languages of their religions. Many students go on to take GCSE and A-level exams in Urdu, Gujarati, Bangla, Polish, Chinese and so on.

So, many bilingual pupils experience learning in different contexts. But often, their teachers in one context know very little about what goes on in the other, and it is the children who are making sense for themselves of very diverse learning experiences. As well as finding out about the languages that the pupils in your class speak, it is very worthwhile to find out about the different schools they attend, and what they are learning there. This will make them feel that you are interested in them and value them as individuals, and will also increase your knowledge of your pupils' home and community experiences. One Year 6 boy, who was interviewed as part of a research project, talked about his learning in a very insightful way, describing the different things his teachers did in his mosque school and his mainstream school. He ended with a very simple and heartfelt comment:

'I think the mosque and school should be together ... it's like the same thing ... you're teaching something, you're getting knowledge from people ...'

LINKS BETWEEN FIRST LANGUAGE AND ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES

First language acquisition begins at birth and continues through to at least the age of 12. Throughout our adult lives, we continue acquiring new vocabulary and grammatical structures. In turn, second language acquisition is a complex process, though some people would like to think it is fairly simple for young children. It takes place over a long time. In order for a second language to be truly additional rather than a replacement of the first, the first language needs to be maintained, encouraged and valued alongside the new language. Children need the space and opportunity to communicate with other people in their first language. They need to make connections and negotiate meanings to understand the world around them and to construct new knowledge. Many researchers emphasize the need for instruction to begin in the child's first language, so that a strong cognitive foundation can be developed, which forms the basis for academic learning. Competence in the first language is a good foundation for competence in additional languages.

Also, as we have already described, it is important for our self-confidence and identity as learners that we feel we belong and are valued in the settings in which we are learning. Bilingual children need to feel that their first language is valued in school and that it is not seen as second rate to English. Children will often be using the first language in the home situation, so it is a large part of their social lives, as well as being the main constituent of their thought processes in the early stages of learning English. If, as a teacher, you do not share your pupils' languages, you can do a lot to enhance their self-esteem and show that you value their languages through using dual language texts, multilingual labels in the environment and stories from their own and other cultures. Resources such as these also help children to transfer their thinking from one language to another.

6 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11

TRANSITIONAL AND ADDITIVE BILINGUALISM

We use the word ‘promoting’ in the title of this book deliberately. We are hoping that the book will help all those involved in teaching bilingual learners to go beyond the model of ‘language support’ which was very common in the past and is implied in much official documentation. This model is based on the idea that we need to use home languages in school only to help bilingual learners gain confidence in English. But then, when their English reaches a suitable level, they do not need to use their other languages for learning any more and the bilingual support can be removed. We believe that this leads to **transitional bilingualism** in pupils, where their knowledge of English replaces rather than grows from their knowledge of other languages. Research has shown that transitional bilingualism can lead to restricted concept development and problems with learning.

Instead of this, we are advocating a model that promotes **additive bilingualism**. We hope that the ideas in this book will help teachers to value, enhance, encourage and develop their pupils’ bilingualism, so that their knowledge of English becomes part of their ever-growing language repertoire, and not a replacement for proficiency in their other languages. We believe that this is the best way to really help bilingual pupils learn to their fullest capacity and achieve the best results they possibly can, as they progress through the school system. There is a great deal of research that supports this idea, such as the work of Jim Cummins (2001) and his associates, and many others. These are some of the key findings from research into bilingualism that have important implications for the classroom:

- Bilingual children often have greater cognitive capacity and awareness of language as a system than monolingual children.
- Many bilingual learners have increased self-confidence because they operate across different cultures and social groups.
- Children take up to two years to develop ‘basic interpersonal communication skills’ (**BICS**) but up to seven years to develop ‘cognitive academic language proficiency’ (**CALP**) (see page 10 for discussion of BICS and CALP).
- A ‘silent period’ at the early stages of learning an additional language is natural and normal, and not a sign that something is wrong.
- The first language is a valuable support for learning, and *not* something that interferes with the new language. Children will learn best through using and developing the full range of languages in their repertoires.
- It is not necessarily the case that the longer you spend learning a new language, the better the learning will be; time is clearly important, but not the only factor needed for successful language learning.
- Parents and families should be encouraged to share language and literacy with children in whatever languages they are most comfortable – learning new things first in the family languages will make the learning in an additional language easier and stronger.

In Chapters 2–7, you will find a wealth of suggestions for activities based on these ideas to help promote learning for bilingual pupils.

WHOLE-SCHOOL BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

There is little doubt that helping pupils to achieve additive bilingualism has many benefits for individual pupils themselves, but it also needs to be

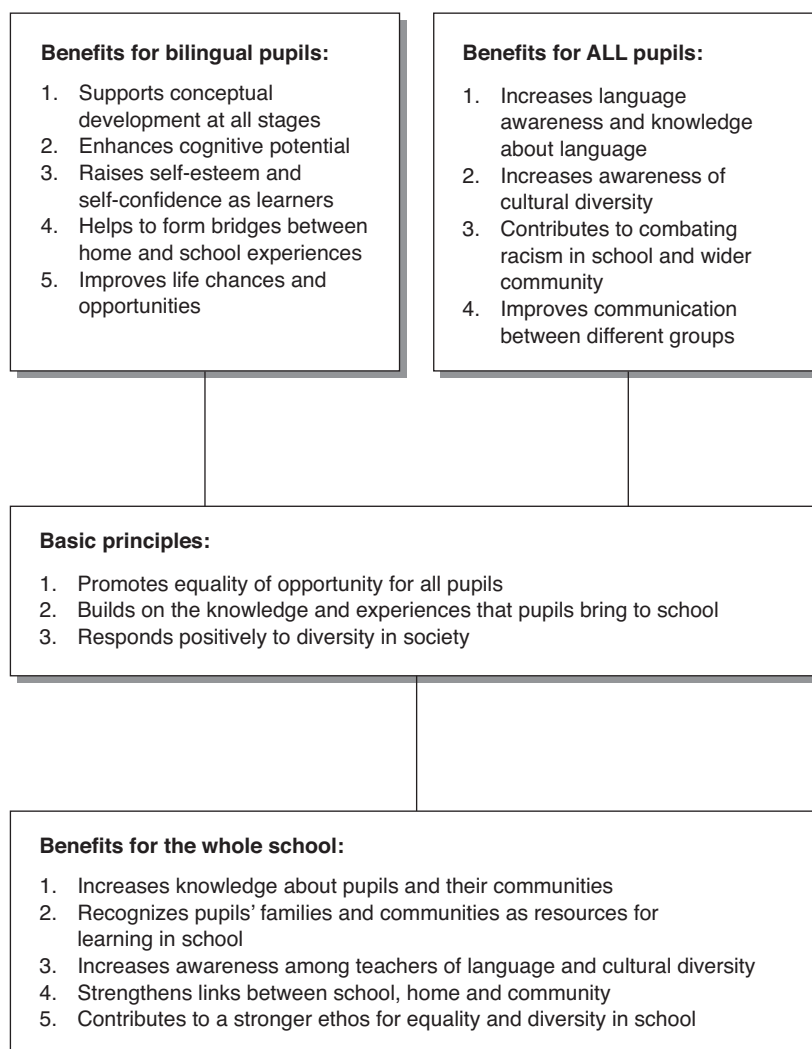


Figure 1.1 The benefits of promoting bilingualism in school (adapted from the Schools Council's 'Mother Tongue Project', 1984)

recognized that it has considerable benefits for *all* pupils, for the school as a whole and the wider society. Figure 1.1, adapted from the Schools Council's 'Mother Tongue Project' from 1984, sums up the ways in which promoting additive bilingualism can benefit the whole school.

While it is clearly very important to plan activities in classrooms for individual pupils and groups of pupils, we need to do more than this to promote bilingualism in school. It needs to be seen as part of a wider concern to promote a whole-school ethos in which all pupils are valued, their individual strengths nurtured and their individual needs met. If this is the case, in a school in which bilingualism is promoted, *all* pupils will benefit, not just those who are themselves bilingual. This is discussed in Chapter 7.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PLANNING TEACHING TO PROMOTE ADDITIVE BILINGUALISM

In this book, we are focusing on classroom strategies and approaches for promoting additive bilingualism, and it needs to be remembered that, to be

8 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11

fully successful, these must be seen as part of positive whole-school and wider national policies. In 2003, Education Bradford published a Policy on Multilingualism, which provides a framework for promoting a positive whole-school ethos and developing whole-school policies to underpin bilingual approaches in classrooms. Here are the key principles they developed for promoting bilingualism in schools:

- English is the primary language of education and communication in this country. Therefore all children have a right to effective teaching of English and in English.
- Support in all the languages in a child's repertoire helps to ensure that children have the best access to new concepts and ideas and therefore to the highest possible achievement. It is essential that this starts with a strong foundation in the early years and continues as children grow older.
- Language is a fundamental aspect of identity. Acknowledging and promoting children's ability to communicate in their home languages builds self-confidence and encourages pupils' belief in themselves as learners.
- Access to a range of languages increases social and community cohesion and is an entitlement for all pupils. An ability to communicate in more than one language is a social and life advantage.
- Promoting home languages at school and within the school's community, including communicating with parents in ways that are accessible to them, builds community links and mutual respect. This encourages families and schools to work in partnership to develop children's full range of language competencies.
- Awareness of the systems and structures of one language aids the learning of other languages.
- Achievement in more than one language develops the capacity to enjoy being a confident and competent user of spoken and written language for an expanding range of purposes.
- The approach to language development is inclusive and values the language heritages and experiences of all pupils and adults within the educational community.

Based on these whole-school principles, we have developed a set of key principles for planning and carrying out activities, which we believe should underpin bilingual learning at all stages in primary schools. You will find that these principles are woven into all the practical ideas and strategies discussed in Chapters 2–7. Together, they provide a useful checklist of criteria for planning and implementing effective teaching activities for bilingual learners. Placed together here in a list, they can be photocopied and used as a checklist for your medium-term planning, to ensure that the work you plan offers as many opportunities as possible for promoting learning for your pupils:

Principles for planning activities for bilingual learners

1. Support in the first language and opportunities to use it for themselves in different ways in their everyday classroom activities will open out potential for learning for bilingual pupils.
2. Promoting home languages at school is an important way to support home-school links, and encourages families and schools to work in partnership.
3. Talk is one of the most important channels and tools for learning; pupils construct their knowledge in the classroom in all subjects through talk and so need every possible opportunity to explore ideas and concepts through talk, not just in English and the Literacy Hour.
4. The best writing develops from powerful and meaningful personal experiences, usually mediated by talk – before beginning extended writing activities, pupils always need the chance for collaborative discussion and planning.
5. Knowledge of more than one language promotes awareness of language systems and structures; this awareness needs to be supported and can be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool.
6. All learning, and especially language learning, is enhanced and strengthened by opportunities for hands-on experience.



10 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11

TRANSLATING PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

In this section, we show how these principles can be turned into practice, in two main ways:

- Contextualizing learning for bilingual pupils
- Providing a language-rich environment for learning.

● Contextualizing learning

Principles 3, 4, 5 and 6, especially, point to the importance of *contextualizing learning* for bilingual pupils. It is vital to provide **contexts** for bilingual pupils' learning, and contexts are constructed through **scaffolding**. Learning is essentially an interaction between what the learner already knows and the new knowledge to be learnt, and contextualizing this process in familiar and stimulating settings makes it much more effective, as well as more interesting. Children's motivation, curiosity and willingness to learn are stimulated by the learning environment. Their attention is captured by what things look, smell, feel, sound and taste like and this needs to be taken into account in planning language activities. Avril Brock's book *Into the Enchanted Forest* (1999) illustrates this perfectly through describing a range of different activities in science as well as language learning that took place in a richly imaginative setting.

Young language learners need to be moved continually from the concrete to the abstract, supported at every level through first-hand experience. It is the talk that takes place around the activity which helps this to happen. Oral story is a very powerful vehicle for shaping language in very purposeful and interesting ways. Through the story, bilingual pupils can be introduced to new and complex language, contextualized in a meaningful and enjoyable experience.

Figure 1.2 illustrates the four stages in the move from concrete to abstract (or context-embedded to context-disembedded) thinking, and the kinds of activities and resources that support the transition across the stages.

Language is inherent in every curriculum area task. At times, especially in reading and writing tasks, all meaning will be expressed exclusively through oral and written forms of language. In context-embedded, face-to-face communication, meaning can be negotiated and is enhanced with a range of paralinguistic, situational and context cues. Bilingual pupils need these meaningful contexts to develop surface fluency (BICS), which is necessary to develop interpersonal communicative competence. At the same time these contexts provide a basis for the acquisition of academically related aspects of language necessary for higher-order cognitive proficiency (CALP), which is needed for children to develop and operate in the skills of literacy and the language for problem-solving.

Language used in educational settings is sometimes unique to that context and it may be difficult to transfer it to other situations or contexts. Context-reduced situations sometimes rely entirely on linguistic cues to convey meaning, with no additional contextual support. In settings such as these, it helps if children can work, talk and listen in small groups, as this makes it easier for each person to understand, concentrate and make contributions. Cummins suggests that providing bilingual pupils with tasks that are both cognitively demanding and yet firmly embedded in context, ensures a more successful

Concrete primary experiences	Contextualized secondary experiences	Two-dimensional experiences	Abstract situations
Multi-sensory	Multi-sensory	Single sense (usually seeing or hearing)	Symbols
Visits Experimentation	Drama Role play Models, Toys Videos	Pictures Flash cards Cut outs Diagrams Maps	Discussion Writing messages

Figure 1.2 Moving children from the concrete to the abstract in their thinking and learning

communication of ideas, since learners will be able to rely on a wide range of situational cues in order to negotiate meaning.

Beginning with context-embedded activities and gradually moving, with talk and action, towards less embedded activities means that children are never left without support, and at the same time are being encouraged to move to the new knowledge which is the object of the activity. This additional contextual and linguistic support is what we mean by scaffolding. Scaffolding can be developed through a variety of practical resources and multi-sensory experiences, including – again – story. Scaffolding is developed through talk. Pauline Gibbons' work (2002) shows how teachers can provide scaffolds for their pupils through their talk, and her ideas are fully illustrated with practical examples in Chapter 4.

Providing a language-rich environment

Principles 1, 2, 4 and 5 point to the need for a language-rich learning environment. Teachers of bilingual pupils are often concerned that their pupils will struggle to understand language which they feel may be too difficult, such as complicated sentences and vocabulary in English. They feel that their pupils have 'limited vocabulary' or a very narrow range of language experience. This concern is sometimes fed more by teaching materials and curriculum guidance than by the pupils themselves. The opposite is more likely to be true. A great deal of research shows that 'bilinguals' potentially have much greater awareness and understanding of language than 'monolinguals' (this is sometimes called **metalinguistic awareness**). This language awareness can be used as a powerful resource for learning, for both bilingual and monolingual children. Children can be encouraged to compare words and their meanings in different languages, and to think about how the grammars of languages can differ. There are some suggestions for this kind of work in Chapter 5.

In order to promote language awareness, it is important to provide a rich and stimulating language environment for bilingual pupils – indeed, for all pupils. One of the ways of doing this is to develop a 'rich scripting' approach to planning and carrying out activities, in all subjects across the curriculum. Such an approach is explained and illustrated in Norah McWilliam's book, *What's in a Word?* (1998), and ideas taken from this book are woven into the activities described in most of the chapters that follow, especially Chapters 3 and 4.

12 Promoting Learning for Bilingual Pupils 3–11**CONCLUSION**

To sum up, children need to be:

- Motivated to want to learn
- Supported in their learning through first-hand experiences
- Moved continually from the concrete situation to the abstract situation through talk
- Involved in context-embedded experiences such as story, which promote the target language in rich and meaningful ways
- Prompted to talk about what they are doing at every stage of the activity
- Given models of the target language, and the ways it is used in context
- Given opportunity to formulate their own questions and answers related to the activity
- Encouraged to develop awareness by talking explicitly about word meaning, grammar and other features of different languages.

FURTHER READING

- Brock, Avril (ed.) (1999) *Into the Enchanted Forest – Language, Drama and Science in Primary Schools*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Cummins, Jim (2001) *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*. 2nd edn. Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Gibbons, Pauline (2002) *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. London: Heinemann.
- Hall, Deryn, Griffiths, Dominic, Haslam, Liz and Wilkin, Yvonne (2001): *Assessing the Needs of Bilingual Pupils: Living in Two Languages*. 2nd edn. London: David Fulton.
- McWilliam, Norah (1998) *What's in a Word?* Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.