

## **BILINGUAL STUDENTS – MONOLINGUAL TEACHER**

*Liz Ellis*<sup>1</sup>

*University of New England, Australia*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper reports some of the findings of a study into the language background of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults in Australia. The study was motivated by the author's noting, over many years of teaching ESL and of training ESL teachers, that there is no requirement that such teachers be bilingual, or have any proficiency in a second language. Still less is there any discussion of the issue in the profession. It is quite normal for ESL teachers to be monolingual, and there appears to be no questioning of this state of affairs. There are of course teachers who are *not* monolingual: who are native speakers of a language other than English or who have high levels of proficiency in other languages. However, there is no data to tell us about the language background and skills of the ESL teaching profession, so there is currently no way of knowing who is monolingual and who is bilingual. Secondly, since teachers' language background is not recognised as a subject worthy of investigation and discussion, there is no research on what significance it might have for their teaching. We do not know whether a teacher who speaks two or more languages has more to offer, when teaching English through the medium of English to mixed-language groups, than does a monolingual teacher. The study on which this paper is based makes an attempt to throw some light on this question.

### **2. The sociolinguistic context of ESL in Australia**

Australia is often described as a multicultural and multilingual society, since its population contains a high proportion of immigrants from a wide range of countries. All of its inhabitants who are not indigenous Aboriginal people (who comprise approximately 2% of the population) are either immigrants themselves or are descended from immigrants. While there is a popular misconception that Australian society was

---

<sup>1</sup> Liz Ellis, PO Box U2, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia. Phone: 61-2-6773 3639. Fax: 61-2-6773 3735. E-mail: liz.ellis@une.edu.au

until the 1950s almost exclusively descended from English-speaking antecedents, in fact there has since the late eighteenth century been immigration by people from a range of language backgrounds (see Castles *et al.*, 1992 for a full discussion of immigration and multicultural policy). The 2001 national census reveals that 20.9% of the population speaks a language other than English at home. Bilingualism and multilingualism, however, are largely confined to recent immigrants, and there is a tendency for their languages to fall into attrition and disuse by the second generation (Clyne, 1991). Social and educational policies have been only partially successful in supporting the retention of so-called 'community languages'. Native-English speaking Australians have a generally poor record in learning foreign or community languages and educational policy has blown variously hot and cold on the teaching of languages in schools (Djite, 1994). The latest initiative by the Commonwealth (federal) government has been to cut the funding for NALSAS, the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program (Lo Bianco, 2002). It is considered quite normal to be monolingual in English in Australia, and in some quarters to speak another language is even considered slightly suspect. By far the majority of ESL teachers are native-English speakers, and, as pointed out above, their skill in other languages is unknown.

### **3. The ESL profession in Australia**

The ESL profession is generally considered to have had its beginnings in the late 1940s, when Australia admitted large numbers of refugees from post-war Europe (Martin, 1998). The arrival of immigrants speaking a variety of languages posed a huge challenge to settlement services which had to devise ways to teach them English without recourse to a pool of bilingual teachers. The prevailing languages of early arrivals included Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and German, whereas Australian language teachers of the time were mainly trained in French, German, Latin and Ancient Greek. Recruitment advertisements in 1948 sought teachers who were speakers of Russian, German or other Baltic or Slavonic languages (Martin, 1998), but in recent decades there has been no requirement for another language for would-be ESL teachers. There have always been bilingual teachers in the profession (the term is commonly used almost exclusively to mean non-native speakers of English) but evidence suggests that they have often been regarded as second-best to native-speaker teachers and that they

tend to suffer a professional inferiority complex in the prevailing climate of direct method, communicative language teaching which emphasises the importance of input in fluent, idiomatic, native-like English (Ellis, 2002). (See Braine, 1999, for a discussion of issues pertaining to non-native-speaker teachers of English).

After some minor experimentation with bilingual methods, mainly in German since that was only shared language, the architects of what later became the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) devised a method known as Situational English which involved teaching English through English, with no recourse to the learners' first language. The pioneers of this approach, Ralph Crossley, George Pittman and Charles Rule, were foreign language teachers themselves (Ozolins, 1993) and were aware of the developments in 'direct method' teaching of languages stemming from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The direct method was aimed at counteracting the tendency of traditional grammar-based teaching methods to produce students who could conjugate verbs but who had no oral or aural ability. By avoiding the first language completely and concentrating on speaking and listening, learners were supposed to develop much better proficiency in the second language. This approach was supported by behaviourist psycholinguistic theories prevalent in education in the 1940s. Behaviourist views of language learning saw the learning of a second language (L2) as a process of developing a set of new habits, and the first language (L1) as constituting old habits which would interfere with acquisition (Ellis, 1994). L1 was thus best avoided in the learning process. We can see, then, that the direction of ESL teaching in Australia was laid down in its early days as being monolingual. ESL teachers therefore had no need of another language. This direction came about through the timely confluence of three key factors:

- behaviourist educational theory which lent research weight to the exclusion of L1;
- the belief that direct method teaching would enable learners to *use* the language taught (which, after all, was a major goal of the migrant program – no-one was aiming to produce language scholars);
- the urgent practical problem posed by the arrival of large numbers of migrants speaking languages which few Australian teachers knew.

This brief history serves to demonstrate the background to the proposition explored in this paper, that Australian ESL teachers may well be monolingual, or if they

are bilingual, their other language(s) are not regarded as necessary or worthwhile in their teaching. Although there have been huge advances and changes in language learning theory and curriculum development in the last 50 years (Feez, 2001), the direct method practice of teaching mixed-language groups through English-only has remained unchanged. There were minor forays into the teaching of students sharing a common language by a bilingual teacher in the 1980s, but with the exception of one centre, this has been abandoned (O'Grady p.c.). The practical difficulties of providing bilingual classes are exacerbated by the fact that the languages involved change with the influx of refugees from worldwide conflicts every few years. Teaching English monolingually, then, is seen as the only possible way of dealing with mixed-language groups, and the need to place learners in mixed-language groups is seen as axiomatic because of the problems of providing separate groups, and teachers, for many languages. The two propositions thus reinforce each other, and are themselves supported by the literature on communicative language learning which emphasises use of the target language. Since there is no attempt to utilise the language skills of teachers who have them, and no attempt to recruit bilingual teachers into the profession, there is little chance of change or even of interrogating this state of affairs.

#### **4. Research on teacher cognition**

In asking what is the significance of teachers' own second language background for their teaching, it is useful to consider the literature on teacher cognition, which investigates how teachers' thinking affects their classroom actions. Early work in this area was reviewed by Shavelson & Stern (1981) and by Clark & Peterson (1986). Freeman (1994) has studied the knowledge, beliefs and perceptions which shape what teachers know and how they put it into action. There has been an increasing focus on teachers' *experience* as a contributor to the formation of their professional thinking. (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Bailey *et al.*, 1996; Woods, 1996). Bailey *et al.*'s (1996) study of teacher language learning autobiographies calls on Schon (1983) to argue that this experience can only be significant if it becomes available to teachers through a process of reflection. Several authors have investigated the possible significance of *language learning experience* as a basis for reflection, by examining teacher education programs which include a structured language learning component (Flowerdew, 1998;

Birch, 1992; Waters *et al.*, 1990). In these three cases, however, the language learning experience was no longer than one semester and the findings do not throw any light on what might be the effect of learning a language for much longer and to a much higher level. The research question asked in this study, then, was what are the effects, if any, of language learning experience on teachers' beliefs and attitudes to language and to language learning.

## 5. Method

Thirty-one practising ESL teachers were interviewed about their beliefs and philosophies about language and about ESL teaching, and about their own personal and professional background. The semi-structured interviews of approximately an hour were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Half of the teachers in the study also agreed to permit their class to be videotaped, and thus classroom data in the form of 2-3 hours of tape was obtained for 16 of the teachers. The video data forms an important databank for the purposes of matching up what teachers actually do with what they say they do. However for the purposes of this paper, only the interviews are drawn upon, for the reason that the findings focused on here are to do with teachers' formative experiences and resultant philosophies, and these are not in most cases amenable to being observed directly in practice. In recruiting teachers, the researcher aimed for representation of three broad groups:

- non-native speaker teachers of English (who are bilingual by definition);
- native-English speakers who are bilingual;
- native-speaker teachers who are monolingual.

A detailed language learning biography was taken towards the end of each interview, and this formed the basis for allocating teachers to one of the above categories.

In constructing the interview protocol the researcher was aware that a strong emphasis on second languages could make monolinguals feel uncomfortable, and feel that they were being asked to describe a deficit, or to hypothesise what advantage it might be to have another language. The solution to this problem was to construct questions which all teachers could answer, and only to probe language learning

background once the teacher had mentioned it herself. The first half of the interview explored details of the teacher's current class and his or her approach to teaching. The first question relevant to this paper was: "*What aspects of your personal or professional background contribute most to your teaching of ESL?*". Since the goal of the study was to find out *whether* possession of another language is a significant contributor to a teacher's mental toolkit, opportunity had to be given for teachers themselves, whether bilingual or monolingual, to nominate and talk about their beliefs about language teaching, and which of their own experiences which they saw as contributing to those beliefs, without the researcher suggesting an emphasis on prior language learning. The language learning biography questions were asked towards the end of the interview, and only if language experience was revealed was the issue explored. For a monolingual teacher, these questions would have appeared, then, no more marked than the questions also asked about teaching qualifications and experience.

The three categories of teachers mentioned above (non-native bilinguals, native bilinguals and monolinguals) were used as 'working categories' during the data gathering and analysis, and the issue of assigning teachers to a category was then considered in more detail. The question of who is or is not bilingual is a complex question which can be investigated on a number of parameters. Bloomfield's (1935: 56) definition of bilingualism as "a native-like control of two languages" is largely now considered as too limited, too exclusive and unreflective of the complexity of patterns of use of two or more languages. Nor, however, are other definitions which propose that bilingualism begins when a person learns a few words or phrases in another language very helpful for this study. (For a detailed discussion of ways of measuring of an individual's bilingualism, which they term 'bilinguality' see Hamers and Blanc, 2000). A continuum of language ability and use ranging from 'most multilingual' to 'most monolingual' would in fact be a more accurate way of representing the teachers' language backgrounds. In the event, a series of continua were used, in which each of the teachers' languages were considered from the perspective of:

- proficiency at highest achievement;
- how a language was learned (eg classroom instruction/working in the country);
- at what age a language was learned;
- reason for learning a language;

- affect towards the language itself;
- affect towards the *learning* of a language;
- frequency of current use of each language;
- total number of languages the teacher mentions having had contact with.

This method of classifying the teachers' language biographies provided a very rich picture of individual experiences which does some justice to the complexity of the connections between people and their languages. However, for the purposes of making inferences about the significance of language background and its availability as a resource in language teaching, the original three categories outlined above still appeared useful in making distinctions between different kinds of experiences. The distinction between non-native English-speaking bilingual teachers and native English-speaking bilingual teachers is relatively clear-cut (though the distinction blurs in the case of those who grew up in Australia speaking another language, then whose L1 was replaced by English through the education system). The distinction between native-English speaking bilingual and monolingual teachers, though, has to be made by the application of an arbitrary standard. It was not possible to obtain objective definitions such as results of standardised tests for each language, nor was it necessarily desirable. The teachers' own perception of their language ability was seen as more relevant than external measures, and so the following definition of 'bilingual' was coined and used for this study:

Someone who considers themselves as 'speaking' a language to the extent that they can use it confidently and achieve their communicative ends in a majority of everyday adult encounters, not restricted to tourism and conversation. It does not necessarily include specialised uses of the language such as in the law or business, and does not imply 100% accuracy.

All of the teachers interviewed had *some* experience of other languages, albeit in some cases minimal, but nine of them, for a variety of reasons, did not develop any significant proficiency. It would not be appropriate or useful for this study, then, to define as 'monolingual' only a teacher who knew not a single word of another language, since few if any of these exist. 'Monolinguals' as discussed here then, are those who do not meet the above definition of 'bilingual', and the individuals concerned range from knowing only a few words of a second language to having limited proficiency.

The remainder of this paper presents and discusses selected findings from the interviews and language biographies. I have selected a total of 9 teachers from the study

to discuss: three non-native bilinguals, three native bilinguals and three monolinguals. I use this data to highlight the way major shared features of their backgrounds appear to influence their views and reported practices in language teaching.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Non-native English speaking bilinguals**

The three teachers discussed here are Lidia, a Spanish-speaker, Greta, who grew up speaking Finnish and Swedish, and has high level proficiency in English and German, and Rebecca, a Cantonese speaker who also understands Mandarin. Lidia and Rebecca are both highly experienced ESL teachers with postgraduate qualifications, whereas Greta is in her first year of teaching and possesses an initial Diploma. Lidia and Greta teach mixed-language classes through English, and Rebecca teaches a class of Chinese speakers using both English and Chinese (this, as noted above, is most unusual in Australian ESL). The interviews revealed the distinctive characteristics of these three teachers as being firstly that they had all learned English as a second language themselves, and secondly that they were all high-level bilinguals in English and at least one other language. I shall now look at how they saw these as relevant to their teaching.

All three referred several times to the fact that they were, and still are, learners of English, as a key part of their professional persona. Lidia and Rebecca were most explicit about this experience to their students, telling how they relate anecdotes from their past which demonstrate their struggles and setbacks but also their ultimate successes. They emphasised the affective aspects of being a learner of English: as Lidia said:

I know how they suffer, and how frustrated they are when they can't really get something. And I normally tell them that I went through the same thing... so for them to see me teaching it...is encouraging, so I just say 'look, if I could do it, you can too'.

In this way they are able to identify with the difficult task of learning English which their students face, and at the same time motivate them and reassure them that success is possible. Their success is highly visible from the fact that they are teaching the language they once struggled with.

Another common feature was the emphasis the three teachers gave to the insights they had gained about teaching strategies and learning strategies from their own experience. Greta, having studied three languages in a formal context, had a wealth of memories about what she considered as good teaching and bad teaching. She recalled one teacher whose emphasis on recitation of grammar rules was particularly odious, and another whose use of authentic texts, particularly songs, aroused her interest and enthusiasm. These experiences seem to have made her acutely mindful of the effect she has on her own students, and result in her monitoring and reflecting on her own teaching strategies. She says:

[...] because I've learned languages myself I do find that I look at the classroom more as if –you know– that's how I was when I was learning, and I mean I'm still learning, and you look it at and think “what do I like about my teachers and what do I don't (sic) –what don't I like”.

All seemed to have a good understanding of their own learning strategies, and were able to articulate them quite readily. They were, however, quite well aware that different learners learn in different ways. This kind of knowledge can, of course, be acquired by reading, but these teachers were able to talk about direct, lived experience of language classes which catered to their needs and preferences, and those which did not, but which suited other students.

A third aspect of these teachers' background was that they all saw the English language itself from the perspective of a non-native speaker. They know the grammar because they have learned it themselves, unlike native speakers, who have ‘learned’ it without being conscious of it, and who may know what sounds right, but not necessarily how to explain its patterns. These teachers are in the position of being ‘outside’ the target language and therefore perhaps better able to see it objectively (Hawkins, 1984). Lidia alludes to her native-speaking colleagues as sometimes assuming too much knowledge or understanding on the part of the students. In teaching their own first language, she says, they can assume that quite complex and strange structures or idioms are transparent. Rebecca's position as a teacher of a bilingual class enable her to use her knowledge of the contrastive relations between English and Chinese to good effect. She can point out difference in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, text structure and pragmatics from the point of view of the students as Chinese-speakers.

A fourth strand of shared experience is that Lidia, Rebecca and Greta all referred to their studies in TESOL and linguistics as being illuminated by their personal experience of learning language, and specifically English. There is evidence to suggest that what is learned on teacher training courses at an intellectual level is often not carried over into teachers' practice (Peacock, 2001). Where experience resonates with theoretical input, we might conjecture that there is more likelihood that both will inform the teachers' thought processes and ultimately their practice. For example, Lidia describes how her study of genre theory and linguistic analysis of texts helped her develop her own writing in English.

As a learner it helped me, I mean, nominalisation.... it opened my eyes the first time, I remember when (my lecturer) said to me –the first assignment– “this is good, but it sounds very spoken”... from there I would look at my writing and look at the length of my nominal groups and whether I was using too many verbs.

The second major defining feature of this group of non-native English speaking teachers is that they are all high level bilinguals and biculturals. Rebecca is the only one who is able to use her L1, Cantonese, in class consistently since she teaches a group of Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, while Lidia and Greta teach mixed-language groups. However we shall see that all three teachers draw on their first or other languages to better understand their students and to enhance their teaching.

An example from Rebecca's interview, in which she described a segment of the class which I had videotaped, gives a rich and illuminating picture of the skills and cognitive sophistication of the bilingual teacher. Rebecca was explaining to the interviewer how she explains to students the difference between Chinese and English word order:

[...] in Chinese the word order is completely different, so for example “Can I help you?” in Chinese would be “I + can help you + or not”, things like that, and then um “Where are you?” would be “you are where?” that's -er - that's back to front... and also the plural forms, as well, like there's no plural form - we can say “three book” in Chinese it's still “book, three book” and then not just 's', you have 'es' and child/children, and that's proving to be very confusing.

There are three significant points I wish to comment on here. Firstly Rebecca is adept at contrasting Chinese and English, as demonstrated above. She points out difference, gives a literal translation to highlight differences in syntax, (“you are

where?") and gives examples of irregular English plurals. This chimes with Leech's view that the good teacher should "be aware of the contrastive relations between native language and foreign language" (Leech, 1994: 18). Secondly she is also able to articulate her beliefs and practices –to use a metalanguage to describe them. Rebecca displays what Crystal (1996: 26-27) describes as part of metalinguistic skill: the ability to "step back from language" and to talk about what is normal and abnormal. This is an important skill for any teacher, but Arva & Medgyes (2000) claim that non-native speakers have a particular metacognitive awareness of how the language works, deriving from having learned it themselves. The third point to note about the above extract is that Rebecca makes a subtle switch when talking to the interviewer, a non-Chinese speaker. She explains the difference in the past forms, the word order and the plural forms *from the perspective of an English-speaker* for the benefit of the interviewer ("in Chinese there's no past tense form" –"you are where?... that's back to front" "there's no plural form– we can say "three book" in Chinese"). This is exactly the opposite of what she actually did in the class I observed, where she explained the differences between Chinese and English from the perspective of a Chinese speaker.

Rebecca displays in her teaching and in her reflection on her teaching the ability of a skilled bilingual not only to switch codes linguistically, using English and Chinese for different purposes, but also her ability to shift linguistic and cultural perspective. Her description of her own code-switching demonstrates a conscious understanding of its metalinguistic function, and her re-interpretation of the episode to fit into the interviewer's linguistic and cultural perspective is a kind of metacultural shift. (See Kramsch, 1997; Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999 on intercultural communication). She does all this fluidly and without hesitation. Here we see at work some of the attributes that a bilingual teacher has, and can put to good use in her teaching.

Space does not permit a similar exploration of the contribution of Lidia's and Greta's bilingual abilities, but in brief both referred to occasions when they drew on their knowledge of other languages to make sense of a student's difficulty, or to interpret a tangled utterance. Lidia occasionally uses Spanish in pastoral situations, when a student seeks her advice about a problem connected with work, finances or health.

In summary, then, these non-native bilingual teachers are able to draw on their experience of learning English to inform their teaching practice, their understanding of their students and their understanding of the process of language learning. They do this by representing themselves as learners still; by using their experience of learning and teaching strategies; by using their view ‘from the outside’ of the English language, and by linking their TESOL studies with their own language learning experience. Their high-level bilingualism gives them an awareness of how syntactical and cultural aspects of languages differ.

## 6.2. Native English speaker bilinguals

Colin is a native speaker of English, who, as well as teaching ESL, has taught German, Italian and Japanese. He describes himself as “*near-native*” in German and Italian and as “*advanced*” in Japanese. He is currently pursuing an MA in Japanese, and has spent extended periods in all three countries. Felicity studied no languages at school, something she laments as “*a real gap*”, but later spent 7 years teaching in Indonesia and now describes her Bahasa Indonesian as “*pretty good*”. She has also studied French and Italian, and speaks “*basic*” Khmer from living in Cambodia. Fiona grew up listening to Afrikaans, which she has now lost. Her main second language is Uzbek, in which she reports herself as competent, and which she acquired by living and studying in Uzbekistan for two years. She also picked up some Russian there, and began to understand some words in Persian due to their commonalities. She has studied both Japanese and Italian, but has low proficiency in both. All these teachers have a major commitment to language learning and they speak enthusiastically about their own experiences both in-country and in classroom learning. They also all report *bad* language learning experiences –poor teaching, and feelings of inadequacy in class or in-country– but these appear to be outweighed by their obvious pleasure in learning and using successfully those languages in which they have developed a high level of competence.

As mentioned in the Method section, all the teachers were asked the question “*What aspects of your personal or professional background contribute most to your teaching of ESL?*”, and it was notable language learning experience was nominated by all those teachers who had it. They were then asked “*In what ways do your other languages contribute to your teaching?*” and it is Colin, Felicity and Fiona’s answers to

this question which will be discussed here. As with the non-native speaker bilinguals, a key insight the teachers had was into what it is like to be a language learner. Colin explained:

I feel like I know what they're going through because I've spent so much time in Italy, Germany...and I've been in Japan in places where nobody (speaks English)... I'm conscious of the fact that it can be frightening for them (students) because they're not just travelling around as tourists but... trying to get phones connected and water bills fixed that are wrong, and all that scary bureaucratic stuff.

Fiona recalls the feeling of being “treated like an idiot” at first by her Uzbek family when she could not understand simple instructions about household tasks, and the stress caused by speaking only Uzbek for days at a time. She told of phoning an American friend every now and then, for the sheer relief of being able to describe daily happenings in English. Felicity talks about the importance of the psychological element of being an adult learner: how people feel about themselves, about the language, about the culture, and their reasons for learning it.

In all three cases the insights they have from their own learning appear to inform their classroom practices. Colin articulates his view of the primacy of vocabulary for learners who are learning in an English-speaking country. Speaking from his own experience, he says that despite grammar being important, you can get the grammar all wrong and people will still understand you, whereas if you don't have the vocabulary it can be hard to communicate at all, even with paraphrasing:

[...] even if you don't have the right grammar they'll still understand you but if you don't have the words... and there's an art to it isn't there, if you don't have the word you can somehow explain it with other words, but you've got to have *some* words [...].

Still on the subject of teaching vocabulary, Colin refers to the need to hear new words many times before one can remember them and use them, but he also makes the point that there are some words which “just appeal to you” or words which “just click – and you remember it on one hearing”. This kind of insight into the complexity and variability of vocabulary acquisition can *only* come from experience of learning a second language, and it is inconceivable that a monolingual could have the same experience.

Felicity is aware of the need to give learners time to process new input, having experienced it herself: “...your mind's working soooooo hard you know, taking in all this

–new data...”. She invokes her own memories of being a learner in a classroom to remind herself to slow down, to keep explanations short, and to use periods of silence to let the learners take in new language at their own pace. She had the experience of learning French in an Indonesian classroom, and relates how this gives her some insight into her own learning strategies in such a situation:

[...] it meant that I wasn’t too dependent on the language of instruction (Indonesian) –I tended to go straight to French, try to rely more on the French, and I suppose intuitively use English for thinking about French [...].

Fiona describes her tolerance of students speaking their first language in class –a tolerance which is not shared by all her colleagues– because she knows how sometimes learners feel that they simply have to be able to speak freely, without thinking too much about it, and that means using L1. She accredits her Uzbek experience directly with this insight.

Colin, like Lidia, emphasises to his students that he is a learner too. He tells new classes about his own language learning background, shares anecdotes of problems he had in Japan or Germany, and tells them he knows what it is like to be learning a new language. He also uses break time to learn or practice bits of the students’ languages, and enjoys the camaraderie this creates and the amusement of students as they watch him struggling with pronunciation. He sees this sharing of the language learning process as a valuable asset in teaching adult learners. He does not wish to be seen as a lofty expert on English, but as a lover of language who has travelled the same route as the students, and whose success, albeit in different languages, can inspire and motivate them.

A second feature of these native speaker bilinguals’ experience is the insight it gives them into language and languages. Felicity talked about the danger of becoming complacent as a native speaker, when the (English) language is so known and so obvious. She felt it was crucial that teachers learn other languages, both to keep alive the feeling of being a language learner, but also to expand their understanding of language in general and of how languages differ. She made the strongest statement of all the teachers about the importance of knowing languages other than English:

[...] if we’re language teachers, what expertise have we really got if we don’t know much about other languages?... can you imagine if you never actually had the experience of learning another language –what expertise would you

have? I mean how interested are you in language if you've only ever studied your own?... it's a bit fraudulent I think

Colin talked at length about the syntactical differences between English and Japanese, as well as the different ways in which communication is achieved pragmatically. Fiona said that her bilingualism made her aware of things that happen in English which don't necessarily happen in other languages. She gave the examples of articles and pronouns as features of grammar which do not exist in some languages, or which may be omitted in unmarked utterances: "I'm aware of how you can speak a language without articles –I think a person who's monolingual doesn't know how you can talk without 'the'...".

Felicity focused on her increased awareness of how language and culture go together, and how aspects of a culture are realised linguistically in different ways. Fiona's time in Uzbekistan also contributed to her understanding of societal bilingualism, and of the different power and status accorded to various languages and their speakers. She described enthusiastically the delighted reactions of Uzbek speakers when they found that she, as a foreigner, neither spoke nor cared to learn Russian.

[...] the Uzbeks –nobody ever learned Uzbek –they were all forced to learn Russian –so for me to come in and to say –sorry, I don't speak Russian, can you please speak to me in Uzbek –aaah, they just thought I was wonderful!

Through constant exposure to Russian she began to understand some of it, and therefore has experience of a certain amount of receptive ability in it. All of these things can be learned from reading or from lectures on teacher training courses, but the 'lived experience' of these phenomena gives them a richer quality than that of knowledge acquired indirectly.

We see then that two of the key assets of the native-speaker bilinguals are that they have direct insight into what is like to learn a language, and that they have learned important things about language, from phonological, syntactical, pragmatic and cultural perspectives, from their experience of knowing more than one language. They are well-placed to understand what their learners might be going through as they learn English in an unfamiliar environment. They also have a richer perspective on linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of language learning than would be possible for a monolingual.

### 6.3. Native English speaker monolinguals

Connie studied French at high school but claimed to have little memory of it and to have developed no ability to speak it at all, due to the grammar-translation method largely used in Australian high schools in the 1950s and 60s. She taught in an Aboriginal community for several years, and reached an elementary level in speaking Anmatyerr, but her understanding of other speakers was still by her own admission very limited. Frances had a similar school experience with French to Connie, which she described as ‘useless.’ She then attempted to learn Spanish as an adult at evening class but hated it and gave up having learned very little. Nick also studied French at high school, but hated it and says he was no good at it. His only other language contact has been picking up a few isolated words of Russian from his Russian-speaking wife and father-in-law.

I shall focus on two features of this group which stood out as shared and significant: firstly how they perceive second language learning and secondly what they see as the major contributions of their background to their teaching. These three teachers, and indeed the other monolingual teachers in the study, all expressed empathy with their students in the difficult task of learning a second language. We saw above that the bilingual teachers have all been ‘in the students’ shoes’ and can both relate to their difficulties *and* provide a role model of success. What came out of the monolingual teachers’ interviews was that their own unsuccessful experiences led them to emphasise very strongly the difficulty of the task and the fragility of the learners. Frances describes emerging chastened from her Spanish class:

I didn’t learn much Spanish and I thought ‘right! just be careful you don’t criticise any of these students for not learning because look at you! and I’m not a stupid person... just that it’s really difficult to learn a second language as an adult I think... the older you are the more difficult it is... and it takes a lot of concentration and a lot of mental energy to learn and it’s not easy to remember what you’ve done last week.

She sees frustration, too, as the lot of the advanced students, telling how they think they’ve mastered something but then they encounter it in a different context or with a different meaning or “they learn something else that is different to everything they’ve learned before”. She sees this as disheartening rather than challenging or exhilarating.

Connie, too, emphasised the effort of trying to remember new words and the fact that she needed to repeat something “a billion times”, and she would think that she had it only to find that it had disappeared again: this she found intensely frustrating. She also talked about the loss of self-esteem that she went through as a learner, not being able to express herself as an adult, and being laughed at for making mistakes. She described feelings of being humiliated and deflated when her efforts at pronunciation were met with misunderstanding. Nick told how his limited contact with Russian had made him understand the difficulties that his students have of being in a new country trying to learn a new language. The following quotations are typical of his emphasis on how hard language learning is: “(my) difficulty in learning the Russian language”; in referring to his wife who came to Australia aged 4 “...and she had great difficulty learning English...”; “I’ve learned a few words (of Russian) but it’s very very difficult”; “English is very hard for these students”. He is surrounded in his family by communication barriers: his father-in-law only speaks Russian: his wife is losing her Russian because she only uses it with her father: Nick and the children speak only English and cannot communicate with the grandfather. As a caring and dedicated teacher, Nick seems to see mainly the problems created by inability to speak another language and the difficulties caused by learning, and this, he suggests, causes him to be particularly gentle and patient with his students.

The second aspect of the monolingual teachers’ interviews discussed here is their answer to the question “*What aspects of your personal or professional background contribute most to your teaching of ESL?*”. Since all the bilingual teachers nominated, without prompting, their own language learning experience, it is worth looking at what the monolinguals said, in the absence of such sustained and successful experience.

Connie nominated the time she spent teaching Aboriginal children and becoming part of the community. She felt that learning to deal with a very different culture in which she was a novice has given her insight into the cultural dissonances felt by her students. She did not talk about the language aspects of her experience, but about learning indigenous medicinal practices and the basics of how to hunt and track animals.

I think teaching Aboriginals has been a wonderful thing for me (in my teaching) because the cultural gap was so gigantic... and they took me into the countryside and I went on these hunting expeditions with the women and

‘wow, what an eye-opener!’ because I didn’t understand a thing – I was a real learner... and I had this experience of being a total ignoramus – a *total* ignoramus – even the dopyest 3-year-old knew more than I did and that was a very humbling experience... you were totally at sea in this culture and that’s been a very salutary experience I think!

Clearly Connie sees the experience of being a learner as being useful for her teaching, and her talk suggests that her students may be equally ‘at sea’. The fact that she did not develop competence either in the hunting or in the Aboriginal language means that her experience stalls at the early stages of learning: she has little success on which to reflect or draw on in her teaching. It raises the question, too, of whether Connie sees her learners not as competent, possibly multilingual individuals learning a new but eminently achievable skill, but as ‘ignorami’ in English who therefore need lots of support and sympathy.

Nick saw his previous experience as a primary school teacher as being the major contributor to his adult TESOL work, and it appears to be the pastoral role which he sees as most significant:

I think it’s the understanding with the younger children, I think the caring aspect of it... as a primary school teacher, moving into TESOL teaching was a very short step because there is a certain amount of assistance –caring for people– you can have an empathy for them in that situation, and understand the difficulties of being in a new country, trying to learn a new language.

This statement is consistent with those quoted above which suggests that, like Connie, Nick sees himself as a carer of those faced with the enormous difficulty of second language learning.

Frances decided that the most significant contributor to her teaching was her experience in mothering four children, one of whom is profoundly disabled.

I just think I’m a much more compassionate (person) –I don’t really know how that affects me as a teacher but I just think it probably makes me– I’m much more patient and tolerant and sensitive.

One of the shared characteristics of the monolingual teachers which has been touched on here is that, in discussing their approach to teaching they do make reference to their own language learning experience. Since this is limited in scope and unsuccessful, what seems to resonate most with them is the difficulty of learning a second language, and the potential for humiliation it entails. They can therefore

empathise with their students in the hardship they face, but they have no experience of success to share or to draw on. They do not mention any positive aspects of language learning –that it can be fun, that differences between languages can be a source of endless fascination, that it can be exhilarating to experience a sudden breakthrough in ability to communicate, that seeing the world through the prism of another language can enrich one's life. The second characteristic highlighted here appears to be the development of a strong sense of respect for and sympathy for their learners in undertaking what seems to them to be an almost impossible task. The monolinguals all share a belief that language learning, and engaging with a different culture is very hard, and a great deal of pastoral care and understanding is due to those engaged in this difficult task. The following section compares the findings from the three groups.

## **7. Discussion**

The teachers reported on here all draw on their language learning experience to some extent. The non-native speaker bilinguals use their experience of learning English as a second language as a reference point for their teaching of the same language. They encourage their students by putting themselves up as learners and as successful models. They use their varied experience of good and bad teaching strategies in selecting their own, and their first-hand knowledge of their own learning strategies appears to assist in their noticing and catering to those of their students. They report that their outsiders' view of English helps them to teach its structure and idiom, and their own bilingualism and biculturalism gives them the ability not only to see where languages and cultures differ, but also what accommodation the students may be making in learning a second language.

The native speaker bilinguals share many of these features, with the difference that it is not *English* which they have learned as a second language. Some, though, like Colin, make explicit use of their learning experience to narrow the gap between teacher and learner, to portray learning as a collaborative enterprise, and to present themselves as a successful model. They also have a rich understanding of learning and teaching strategies in relation to the other languages they have studied, and have an understanding of how language systems vary.

The monolingual group also draws on their language learning experience, but because this has largely been unsuccessful, the way in which they draw on it differs quite markedly from that of the bilinguals. The monolinguals tend to see second language learning as arduous, long-winded and threatening to one's sense of oneself as an adult. This appears to transfer into their practice, at least as represented in how they talk about it, in the form of great concern for their students. They seem to see their students as needing of protection and great care in the task of learning English. Migrants, and particularly refugees, often *are* in very vulnerable positions and learning a language while dealing with traumatic life events is indeed a major challenge which demands sensitive and patient teachers. No one would argue with teachers being kind and patient with their students, but one has to wonder about the effect on teachers *and* students of teaching people to do something at which one has had no success oneself. The monolinguals do not know what it is like to learn a language beyond a low level, and have no experience of using a second language successfully with its speakers. Some of them have experience of teaching strategies, and their own learning strategies, from classes they attended, but these are usually negative. They do not demonstrate the variety of exposure, both good and bad, to the teaching of language, which both bilingual groups are able to use to inform their own teaching. This lack of language learning experience, or, in some cases, the limited and unsuccessful experience, leads them, at least in talk, to over-emphasise the difficulties and underplay the prospect of success. The monolingual teachers appear to represent language learning as something unpleasant and fraught with possibilities of failure, humiliation and loss of self-esteem.

Bilingual teachers deal with the same migrant and refugee students as their monolingual colleagues, and there was no evidence in their talk of their being any less caring or patient. The difference lies in the fact that for the bilinguals, language learning is *possible*. They know that what they have done successfully, their students can do, too. They know it is not easy, but they have direct experience of a variety of teaching practices which did or did not suit them, and of learning strategies which they themselves tried. They can, and do, reflect on their own learning as a key source of knowledge and experience from which they construct their own practice.

## 8. Conclusion

The process of learning a second language is the process of becoming bilingual, and the teachers in the monolingual group have no personal experience of bilinguality. The profession contains within it, then, the paradox that (some) teachers are preparing students for bilinguality without having a very clear idea of what it is and what it might be like to achieve it. Adult students learning English are in the process of becoming bilingual and bicultural at the very least, and many may already be bilingual or multilingual. What are the implications for them of a teacher who has only a second-hand understanding of what it means to operate in two or more languages? A monolingual teacher cannot truly 'get outside' his or her own language (Hawkins, 1984), and can only present as articles of faith his or her advice on learning strategies. It is difficult to think of another case where teachers are authorised to teach students to do something they cannot do themselves. This is at present not treated as a concern in the profession, since no distinction is made between monolingual and bilingual teachers. Nor is this paradox given much consideration in the literature on ESL. There is an occasional reproving mention of the fact that many English teachers worldwide do not possess another language (Widdowson, 1992) but despite much searching, I have been unable to locate any study such as this one which asks whether it matters, and if so, in what ways. This study, examining as it did only 31 teachers, cannot draw definitive conclusions that bilinguality is a significant contributor to a ESL teacher's professional competence and skill. However, the fact that all twenty-two bilingual teachers in the study referred spontaneously to their own language learning when describing their approach to teaching suggests strongly that it is a resource for them as outlined in sections 6.1 and 6.2. The monolinguals lack the richness of this resource, but they also appear to draw on what little experience they have to form a somewhat negative and imbalanced idea of the nature of language learning. This study suggests then that there may be some advantage in ESL teachers being bilingual, but there has been little impetus to investigate whether this is the case because of the dominance of direct method teaching of mixed-language groups. The literature on teachers' cognition and experience discussed earlier, together with the data presented here, suggests that teacher language learning is valid as a research issue. Finding out in what ways teachers draw on their languages may contribute to a less monolingual perspective within the

profession, ultimately benefiting students and making better use of teachers' bilingual and bicultural skills.

### **Bibliographical references**

- Arva, V. & P. Medgyes (2000). "Native and non-native teachers in the classroom". *System* 28(3), 35-72.
- Bailey, K.M., B. Berthgold *et al.* (1996). "The language learner's autobiography: examining the 'apprenticeship of observation'". In D. Freeman & J.C. Richards (eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11-29.
- Birch, G. (1992). "Language learning case study approach to second language teacher education". In J. Flowerdew, M. Brock & S. Hsia (eds.), *Perspectives on second language teacher education*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong.
- Bloomfield, L. (1935). *Language*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Castles, S., M. Kalantzis, B. Cope & M. Morissey (1992). *Mistaken identity: Multiculturalism and the demise of nationalism in Australia*. Sydney: Pluto Press.
- Clark, C.M. & P.L. Peterson (1986). "Teachers' thought processes". In M.C. Wittrock (ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching*. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 255-96.
- Clyne, M. (1991). *Community languages: The Australian experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crozet, C. & A.J. Liddicoat (1999). "The challenge of intercultural language teaching". J. Lo Bianco, A.J. Liddicoat & C. Crozet (eds.), *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education*. Melbourne: Language Australia, 103-12.
- Crystal, D. (1996). *Playing with linguistic problems: From Orwell to Plato and back again*. Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Djite, P.G. (1994). *From language policy to language planning: An overview of languages other than English in Australian education*. Canberra: National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia Ltd.
- Ellis, L. (2002). "Teaching from experience: a new perspective on the non-native teacher in adult ESL". *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 25(1), 71-107.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feez, S. (2001). "Curriculum evolution in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program". In D.R. Hall & A. Hewings (eds.), *Innovation in English language teaching: A reader*. London: Routledge.
- Flowerdew, J. (1998). "Language learning experience in L2 teacher education". *TESOL Quarterly* 32(3), 529-35.

- Freeman, D. (1994). *Educational linguistics and the knowledge base of language teaching*. Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Freeman, D. & J.C. Richards (1996). "Prologue: A look at uncritical stories". In D. Freeman & J.C. Richards (eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-9.
- Hamers, J.F. & M.H.A. Blanc (1989). *Bilinguality and bilingualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkins, E. (1984). *Awareness of language: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1997). "The privilege of the non-native speaker". *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* 112, 359-69.
- Leech, G. (1994). "Students' grammar – teachers' grammar – learners' grammar". In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn & W.E. Hemel (eds.), *Grammar and the language teacher*. Hempstead: Prentice-Hall, 17-30.
- Lo Bianco, J. (2002). "After NALSAS....?". *Australian Language Matters* 10(2), 1-9.
- Martin, S. (1998). *New life, new language: The history of the adult migrant English program*. Sydney, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research: Macquarie University.
- Ozolins, U. (1993). *The politics of language in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peacock, M. (2001). "Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about second language learning". *System* 29(2), 177-95.
- Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shavelson, R.J. & P. Stern (1981). "Research on teachers' pedagogical thoughts, judgments, decisions and behaviour". *Review of Educational Research* 51(4), 455-98.
- Waters, A., J. Sunderland, T. Bray & J. Allwright (1990). "Getting the best out of 'the language learning experience'". *ELT Journal* 44(4), 305-15.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1992). "ELT and EL Teachers: matters arising". *ELT Journal* 46(4), 333-39.
- Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.