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School language survey in Gorton Mount Primary School

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Introduction:

As outlined in our fieldwork report, the school language survey has formed the basis for the further study which will be outlined in the following essay. As a group, we were particularly interested in the proficiency and preservation of the home languages of school children alongside their use of English. This is primarily due to the fact that, essentially, it is the younger generation who will determine the status and continuation of their home languages in Britain. Additionally we were interested to see how English and the home language of the child interact and whether the proficiency levels of one affects the other. Furthermore, we were eager to play our part in a larger project within the community which could lead to the permanent reformation and improvement of provisions towards home languages in schools. We conducted our research through the use of the established school language survey which is currently being employed by the 'Multilingual Manchester' project. This comprises of three sections, the first section focuses upon languages spoken to and by immediate family members within the home domain and it is primarily aimed at an elucidation of the languages, other than English, that the child will encounter in everyday life. Section two of the survey goes on to focus upon the different domains a child may encounter, for example media and which languages they usually experience these in. Additionally this section aims to clarify the child's use of languages along the modalities of speaking, reading and writing. The third section is focused upon generating comparative proficiency scores relating to the child's use of English and their home languages separately, this is achieved through the elicitation of verbal tasks, such as counting from one to ten in both languages.

We chose to conduct our research in a southern Manchester primary school, hereon referred to as the case study school. This school is known for its high levels of linguistic diversity, namely a 2011 OFSTED report showed that 54% of pupils have English as an additional language. Therefore we thought this would be an appropriate setting which would generate interesting results. We focused our survey upon two year groups, year three and year six, as we believed these children to be old enough to provide an adequate level of cooperation whilst having a large enough age gap between them to be at least partially reflective of changing patterns in multicultural Manchester. In conducting the survey our main aim was to fulfil our research questions of:

Where and to whom is the native language spoken?

What is the child's level of proficiency?

What is the child's proficiency in their home language(s)?

With reference to our original fieldwork plan, there were a few amendments which had to be made. Firstly, after further discussion with our contact at the school, we decided that due to our own as well as the schools timetables and commitments it would be more practical to conduct our survey continuously over one school day rather than visiting the school on separate occasions. Therefore our survey was conducted in its entirety on Friday 19th April 2013. Additionally although we managed to interview our lower bound of ten students each, due to absence of children as well as other educational activities taking place, our final sample comprised of thirty four pupils. However we still found that this was adequate to provide us with interesting results which we could advance further.

Findings:

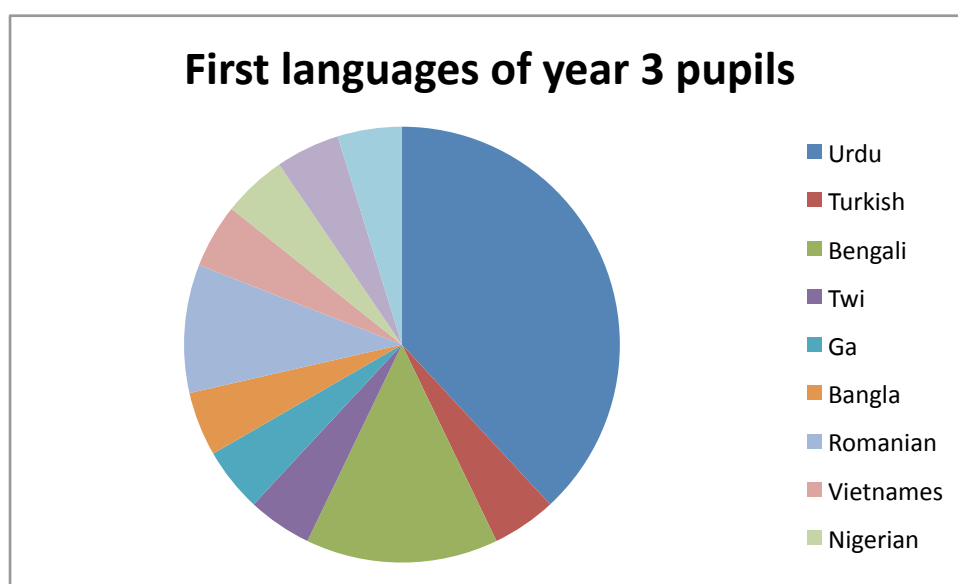
With the nature of our study being based around a questionnaire format we felt that our data would benefit from an analysis which incorporated a consideration of qualitative elements. However we felt it necessary to provide a comparative consideration of both the different home languages present in the year groups studied and of each year group's respective English and home language proficiency scores. Therefore to fulfil this need we have also included a quantitative aspect in our analysis.

In terms of the year three data we have found nine different home languages spoken by the pupils, the origins of which are spread across many different continents. This supports the idea that the introduction of multilingualism to Manchester has its roots in a variety of different cultures, countries and subsequently languages. This fact is given more weight by the fact that the data for year six pupils is just as diverse, suggesting that multiculturalism and the resulting multilingualism existing in Britain today is not a new phenomenon.

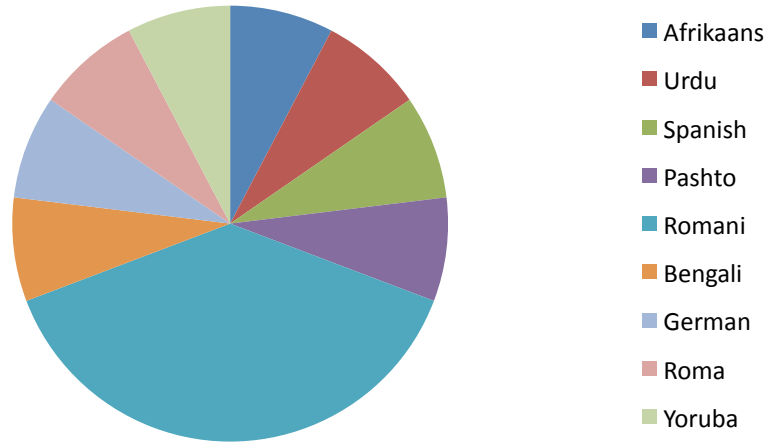
However despite the similarities outlined above, differences have emerged in the data. With regards to year three data, we have found that the most common home language is Urdu, with 38% of children questioned stating this as their first language. In contrast we found just 8% of year six pupils reporting Urdu as their first language. A potential reading of this may be drawn from the linguistic concept of clustering; the idea that once speakers of a particular language have settled in a specific community, the area will become more appealing to those speaking the same language and subsequently they are more likely to follow. Thus explaining an increase in Urdu speakers within younger year groups.

In terms of year six data, we have found that the most common home language is Romani with 46% of children reporting this as their home language. The comparably increased number of Romani speaking year six children may actually be a result of the fact that a number of children of Romani origin in the year three cohort were absent and therefore couldn't partake in our survey. This supports the findings of Matras et al. (2009) who suggest that although 'regular school attendance is an aspiration' this is often interrupted and 'that immediate family activities are often allowed to take priority' instead.

The pie charts below show the number of languages spoken by year three and year six pupils.



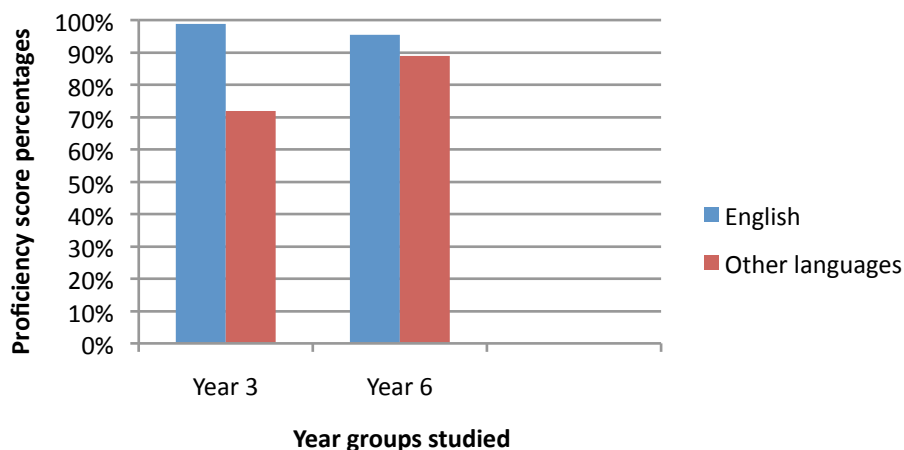
Languages spoken by year 6 pupils



When analysing proficiency scores across the two year groups we found some interesting patterns.

With regards to English proficiency, pupils maintained a consistently high command, manifested in the scores of 99% and 96% in year three and year six data, respectively. However, what we have found most interesting is the difference in proficiency of home language scores, with the year three pupils scoring an average of just 72% compared with the much higher 89% for year six children. This is a surprising result given that recent years have seen an increase in the acceptability and promotion of a multicultural society, and the retention of home languages. However it is possible that the deficit shown could be a result of a lack of the promotion of home language preservation by the government. For example a recent DfES (2002) report, based on languages and education, puts the greatest focus on language learning as an effort to equip young people with skills to 'access opportunities in the world of travel and work'. They seem to implement this desire by focusing upon Modern Foreign Languages including German and French, therefore diminishing the emphasis on language learning as an effort to preserve heritage and cultural identity. As a result home languages such as those spoken by the pupils studied may have suffered.

Student's proficiency scores



Concerning our qualitative analysis a definite trend, which seemed to arise from a number of the surveys administered across year groups, suggested that those children who reported more English use at home also provided a poorer proficiency score on their home language test. For example, one child whose home language was Ga indicated that the majority of the activities he took part in at home were carried out in English, for example reading and watching television. It may be as a result of this that he also showed significantly lower scores on his home language proficiency test, which was highlighted by the fact that two of the verbal tasks could not be completed at all. This may be a result of a lack of home language support in both an educational and home domain, therefore raising the question of whether schools should take more responsibility in the maintenance of heritage languages as these needs aren't always fulfilled, in the traditional sense, at home.

Another point of interest which arose during our data collection process was the confusion which was evident amongst all of the children of Romani origin who provided answers to our questionnaire. This misunderstanding was based around the fact that, when asked for their home language, they reported this as Romanian. However under the advice of our contact in the school we were told to ask them to expand upon this by counting to ten in their said home language. This further task was then carried out in their actual home language of Romani. Although many of the children were also fluent in Romanian, we were told that this was actually the official language of their country of origin Romania and would have been used in a public setting whilst Romani was used for home interactions. The children's confusion may be a result of a state of affairs described by Matras (2005) who explained that Romani does not 'have an established tradition of a single standard written variety'. Instead Romani communities all practice bilingualism in their 'respective state language' and Romani itself. It is this state language which assumes functions such as education, broadcasting and media for these children. Therefore, the children reporting this as their language when asked may be a result of them interpreting the questionnaire as a formal process requiring a response in the language they are used to in this domain.

Another clear trend amongst the data was that, even when children reported speaking to all other relatives in their home language, they always, with the exception of Romani children, claimed to use at least some English with their siblings. For example one child maintained that they spoke exclusively Pashto with their mother, father, grandparents and all other adults. However, on being asked to specify the language used to communicate with siblings they replied that any interaction was conducted in English. This was a common pattern across our questionnaire data for both year groups and may be evidence of the presence of language shift amongst young generations in multicultural societies. Namely, this embodies the fact that as children move to a new country, or are born to non-native parents, they will show a general drift towards the official language of the said country. Therefore, this would explain why children communicate with others in the same generation in English as they are taking part in a community wide rather than individual language transition.

Discussion:

We intend to use our discussion section to discuss the implications of local, practical and wider cultural issues which have arisen through both the execution of our school language survey and our consequent findings. The practical issues we wish to address have implications for future use and application of the school languages survey and they particularly focus upon the elicitation of appropriate answers from respondents and the obtaining of objective, and therefore representative, results. Whilst conducting the surveys a trend noticed by all three interviewers was that a number of additional questions were required in order to coerce the target response from the respondent in question. Additionally these questions generated interesting results which we feel may have been worth including within the final answers documented. For example, it was often the case that a child

would not give a reliable response to questions enquiring about the language they spoke to their parents until asked which language their parents spoke to one another. Therefore it seems that the inclusion of this question in the survey would not only facilitate easier data collection, it would also help elucidate further upon language influences within the home.

Another common practical issue commented upon by all of the researchers was the difficulty of confidently and objectively providing proficiency scores, particularly pertaining to the child's home language. This was primarily due to the fact that, although the ranking scale provides a comparative tool, we all struggled to define what would qualify as each of the performance categories. For example, if a child initially hesitated but then continued on to exhibit fluency then we faced the dilemma of whether to classify them as responding 'immediately and fluently' or 'slowly and hesitantly' as their response showed aspects of both. Therefore we feel that in future the survey may benefit from further guidelines which give more concrete guidance on how to approach the process.

As mentioned in the findings section, a significant trait displayed by Romani children concerned confusion over what could be reliably classified as their home language. However a more in depth review of our results showed that this was not only an issue with the Romani population but also extended to children with other home languages. For example we found that a year three pupil classified as being of Pakistani origin stated that she spoke 'Muslim' and asserted this repeatedly even when asked for further clarification. Our initial evaluation of the situation, based only on general knowledge, was that there was not a language in existence described under this title. Furthermore, after extended research we were still unable to locate a language which fitted this or a similar title. Therefore, the only assumption we were left with was that the child felt unable to identify their home language and therefore looked to other aspects of their culture, in this case their religion, which they were more familiar with. This kind of confusion may be a result of the 'highly fluid' inter-language boundaries described by Verma (2001) which has resulted in a number of countries such as India and Pakistan, where various home languages originate, becoming less definitive in their approach to what are essentially different languages. This situation is further confused when the languages in question are transported to Britain and become further conflated due to cultural stereotypes. Therefore it is not surprising that younger children may misunderstand and conflate their language with other more familiar aspects of their heritage culture. However this is not a tendency which is isolated to only children with home languages of Asian origin. In fact there are a number of children of African, particularly Nigerian origin, who classified themselves as having 'Nigerian' as a home language when on further questioning it was revealed that in fact Yoruba served as the language spoken in their home domain.

Furthermore the child's confusion was not the only obstacle presented to us in the correct identification of a child's home language. Another prominent aspect we found when conducting the school languages survey was that, often, the language assigned to the child in official records was not always representative of the home language that they reported themselves as speaking. This was particularly common when looking at children of Bangladeshi origin. It seems that these children were, by default, attributed as having Bengali as their home language, however when asked by ourselves to define their home language, they nominated themselves as Bangla; a regional dialectal variety of Bangladeshi. This finding can be directly linked to a study carried out by Kenner et al (2008) who conducted a study looking at second and third generation children in an East London primary school. It was found that although these children could use Bengali they wished to define themselves as speaking Bangla as it was more representative of their identity. Therefore, this further shows that schools and, more widely, the government need to practice greater care in their classification of individuals and their native language particularly focusing on the individual's identity wants.

A further implication of the Kenner et al (2008) study which we found to be relevant to our experience of the school languages survey in the case study school was the feeling of embarrassment and hesitation of the children when asked to complete verbal tasks in their home language. For example, one child expressed such unease in using their first language that they

refused to do so until they had witnessed another perform the task in a language other than English. This inhibition is one clearly mirrored in the Kenner et al. study where children showed difficulty in using their home language within an institutional setting due to the fact that they believed English to be the only appropriate language in this environment. Therefore our findings show that greater promotion of the status of home languages to that held by English in all domains would be beneficial.

Another finding which we wish to discuss centres around the status of Romani children within a mainstream educational setting. As already mentioned Romani communities, as a product of their culture, often have a different attitude towards education. This is highlighted by their tendency towards lower attendance in schools, as was the case at the case study school (Matras,2009). However it is thought that the differences in attitudes are affective on a child's educational experience beyond that of attendance alone. For example Smith in her 1997 article maintained that it is the whole mainstream learning environment including the concrete school setting which is alien to Romani children. Therefore, it is this which may cause distress and a consequent lack of cooperation from them. This is an idea which we found to be relevant in our own study when a number of Romani children were unwilling to cooperate at all with the survey process, or showed hesitancy towards at least some aspects of it. In fact, one child of Romani origin refused to even partake in the formality of sitting down with us to begin the survey. This reluctance on the part of Romani children may be further linked to Grosso-Nicolin and Osella (1975) who set up a school in order to conduct a study in Italian 'Gypsy' camps. They found that when Romani children were asked to partake in unfamiliar tasks they would become uneasy and immediately lose interest. Therefore this may explain why they were unwilling to engage in what was essentially an obscure task conducted by complete strangers.

In conclusion we believe that our findings and the issues highlighted by them suggest that, despite advances, more could be done by the relevant institutions to provide a solid cultural grounding for children whose home language is not English. These measures could include the promotion of heritage languages as a key aspect of their cultural heritage.

Word Count: 3,041

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