

Assessment in multilingual and bilingual education in Spain: Are we getting it right?



Introduction

In recent years, the methodology and quality of assessment of learning has largely flown under the radar in discussions of the success of multilingual and bilingual education in Spain, which has focused only on strongly contested interpretations of what the results do or do not show. This roundtable was organised by the British Council within the context of the New Directions Series EU Conference in Madrid, with a view to having a wide-ranging discussion on this topic. The theme of the conference was ‘Quality as a driving force in the changing world of assessment’.

The roundtable, chaired by Mark Levy, Head of English Programmes at the British Council Spain, commenced with an introduction of the British Council Bilingual Programme, which currently runs in 148 schools throughout Spain. The discussion was then opened up to a diverse panel of experts, with questions and comments from the audience. Professor Barry O’Sullivan OBE, the Head of Assessment Research and Development at the British Council, and Professor Ana Llinares, Head of the English Department and Principal Investigator of the UAM-CLIL research group at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, joined the conversation, along with Carmen Tovar, the Directora del Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (MEFP).



Conclusions

What are the objectives of a bilingual programme?

The vision of the [British Council's Bilingual Education Programme](#) is to **help children find their way, and to participate in, a multilingual and multicultural world**. When the programme reached Secondary in 2005, the idea was for the participating students to take [IGCSE examinations](#) at 16 years old, in their chosen subjects, including English. The popularity of IGCSEs in Spain has waned, however, and fewer students are opting to take them. This raises the issue about how best to assess the students who have reached this point in secondary education, and **what assessment would fit the purposes of the programme**. Of course, testing continues within the school system, in the form of exams set by teachers, and many regions offer (or insist on) a CEFR-aligned test for a particular level at a point in time in their studies. The challenges around testing are not unique to the British Council Bilingual programme. Many other bilingual programmes in Spain face similar issues with regards to how best to integrate assessment.

What are we testing and why?

[Elana Shohamy](#) points out that *'language testing is not occurring in homogenous, uniform, and isolated contexts but rather in diverse, multilingual, and multicultural societies, a reality that poses new challenges and questions to testers with regard to what it means to know language(s) in education and society'*. In deciding the appropriate assessment approach, clarity on the objectives for the assessment is vital. **If the aim is to evaluate comprehension of academic content in a taught subject, a test based on general English proficiency may not be the most suitable choice**. Conversely, if the intention is to assess proficiency in

general English language skills for potential application in various professional contexts, then a test of general English ability could align more appropriately with the objectives. For individuals aiming to be well-rounded global citizens with general language proficiency, these skills will naturally develop over time and with practice. Considering Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) assessments, the question arises as to whether our priority is to evaluate English language proficiency rather than subject-specific content. In such cases, it might not be necessary for content teachers to assess students. Ultimately, **the purpose of the test should guide our decisions**, ensuring alignment between assessment methods and desired outcomes.

When considering the alignment between learning and assessment, a fundamental principle emerges: if instruction occurs in English, evaluation should likewise be conducted in English. However, whether assessments accurately reflect comprehension depends heavily on the classroom approach. Are students simply absorbing facts, or are they encouraged to think critically and interpret their learning? This is not just about language skills; it is about ensuring tests genuinely measure what students know, considering the context of their learning. The philosophy of learning should drive the assessment, and getting this alignment right is vital for an effective education system.



Does the CEFR suit the bilingual context?

The [CEFR companion volume](#) considers the concept of mediation. It is defined as being an important part of communication, along with reception, production and interaction. Considering how mediation is outlined in the CEFR, it presents potential benefits when considered within the context of a bilingual programme. The descriptors within the CEFR can provide guidance on **integrating mediation and communication into both content and language teaching assessments**. Mediation tasks foster **critical thinking, cross-curricular connections, and cultural awareness**, which clearly fit well when considering assessment in a bilingual programme. Additionally, students can improve their communicative competence and be more prepared for 'real-world' language use.

While the CEFR offers valuable insights, it still exhibits some weaknesses. For example, although pronunciation remains a significant component of the CEFR, it poses challenges. Assessing pronunciation on a scale is effective up to approximately the B1 level, beyond which it becomes less reliable. At this point, prioritising comprehensibility in assessment becomes crucial.

And yet, concerns regarding students' pronunciation frequently arise among content teachers in bilingual programmes. This highlights the ripple effect stemming from teachers' own learning experiences, which have the potential to perpetuate outdated assessment practices among students. It is imperative to shift the focus towards assessing students' understanding of subject content rather than prioritising pronunciation. While accurate pronunciation of key terms remains essential in certain contexts such as medicine, **the context remains pivotal in determining the appropriateness of assessment criteria** and what needs to be focused on in an assessment.

Some research has been done in this area, notably Cooke and Tavakoli's work on the role of [comprehensibility in language testing](#). They argue that comprehensibility and pronunciation present a clear challenge for assessment with no straightforward solutions. They suggest that prioritising **interaction-based testing** with an emphasis on accomplishing tasks could help address this issue to some extent.

Should we use the same tests for all?

A big question around assessment in schools, and within bilingual programmes, is whether the same test can, and should, be taken by all. Students in bilingual education are not just learning a language, they should be learning the same content as students in mainstream education, with the only difference being the language of instruction. One of the most important considerations is that there is no difference in the content being learned, that is to say, students may go through a different process to learn the information, but all students should be at the same point at the end. It is well known that students learn at different rates and in their own time, but a **bilingual education should not be the reason that content knowledge is different**. It is important to consider the whole education sector – how does one part of the system link to the next? From primary to secondary, and secondary to higher education, the assessment should fit into the system holistically and link each stage together. There is growing interest in CLIL for pre-school education, and there are initiatives to promote multilingualism in the classroom. In this instance, it is essential to think of continuity in the education system as a



whole, and how this is communicated to parents, the key stakeholders in this. This might involve a concerted effort to change mindsets around multilingualism and its role in the education system.

Going beyond general language proficiency

Bilingual education and CLIL should be presented as more than just a means to improve English proficiency. Language classes can suffice for improving general proficiency, whereas the essence of bilingual or CLIL education lies in their broader objectives and emphasis should be placed on the overarching goals of these programmes. It is essential to recognise that general language proficiency is not the sole priority here; instead, the focus should encompass achieving academic objectives **through language immersion**, which involves mastering academic language proficiency and mastering the language of specific disciplines. Students can often approach tasks in a different way, benefiting from the ability to see things from an alternative perspective. This can only help them in the world. [Research](#) by Ana Llinares and Nashwa Nashaat-Sobhy has established that **children learning content through a bilingual or multilingual approach can transfer skills and knowledge across languages**, benefiting from a broader cognitive and linguistic repertoire.

Should these abilities be captured in an assessment, and if so, how? It may not be considered fair to test students in Spanish on concepts that they have learned in English. However, although it wouldn't be fair in terms of vocabulary, the main academic

language functions and knowledge are transferred. Considering the progress made in bilingual or CLIL programmes, some patience is needed when considering what students have demonstrated in their understanding of content taught in another language. It is crucial to make sure that academic standards do not drop due to a student's participation in a bilingual education, and **consistent academic performance matters, regardless of the language of instruction.**

[Research](#) shows that by the end of secondary education, students get to the same point even if they have fallen behind at some stage of the journey. **The process they go through may be different, but the end result is the same.**

Communication matters

Effective communication of assessment practices is essential in bilingual and multilingual education, as stakeholders often perceive assessment differently. There is a common tendency for assessment to be sidelined within the curriculum, lacking clear value or purpose in the eyes of stakeholders, and this can lead to teachers creating assessments without considering their purpose in the learning process. Furthermore, parents often desire tangible outcomes such as a certificate, and this often comes in the form of a CEFR level certificate. However, while this certificate signifies achievement, **it does not represent the child's ability in content learning or in the language that is necessary to express knowledge related to that content.** Clarifying the purpose of assessment and aligning it with relevant objectives is vital for the success of bilingual education programmes.



In promoting bilingual education, it is essential to highlight its positive aspects. Academics often struggle to communicate effectively with non-experts, particularly when it comes to highly technical validation processes that parents may not readily comprehend. **It is crucial to bridge this gap by translating complex technical information about assessments into language that parents can easily understand.** Collaboration with communication experts is crucial to ensuring that the benefits of bilingual education are effectively communicated to all stakeholders. When considering the assessment process, it is important to note that effective feedback is essential not just for parents but also for students. **We must ensure clear and transparent feedback, explaining both strengths and areas for improvement, to help students understand their performance and how to progress.** This enhances their learning experience and academic growth in bilingual education programmes.

The discussion surrounding bilingual programmes often becomes entangled in political discourse, with communication challenges arising regarding the achievements of such programmes and how they are presented to the public. There is a concern that bilingual programmes may inadvertently foster segregation, when they should ideally serve as

avenues for inclusive education. While certain implementations of bilingual programmes may inadvertently lead to segregation, this issue is not unique to bilingual programmes and efforts must be made to improve and resolve any inadequacies in programme execution. A notable finding from the [British Council English Impact Report](#) is that **attendance at bilingual schools yields gains in proficiency and fosters positive underlying motivations irrespective of socio-economic status.** Communicating this type of success is key.

Translanguaging

Is it time to move away from the idea of ‘one language, one teacher’? Translanguaging has been a topic of increasing interest in recent years, particularly in the fields of linguistics, education, and sociolinguistics. How does this fit into a discussion of bilingualism or multilingualism? It recognises that individuals proficient in multiple languages often fluidly switch between them depending on the context, audience, and purpose of communication. This approach aims to harness students’ diverse linguistic backgrounds to enhance learning outcomes. Indeed, [Janina Brutt-Griffler](#) asks ‘*why would we not make use of all of the knowledge a student brings into the classroom in the effort to help them learn more?*’ While integrating translanguaging into larger-scale standardised testing poses challenges, its application in **everyday classroom activities and formative assessment promotes inclusive and effective communication.** Moreover, it has been demonstrated in [a study by Little and Kirwan](#) that teacher and student collaboration on the use of translanguaging facilitates cooperative learning environments in linguistically diverse classrooms.



Looking ahead

The landscape of assessment is rapidly evolving, even more so with the integration of Artificial Intelligence, signalling a potential departure from some of the more conventional methods of assessment. As we know from the [Future of English study](#), **becoming proficient in multiple languages will be recognised as crucial** for achieving personal, societal, and national economic success.

It is imperative that we gather sufficient data to inform our decisions effectively. The adoption of **evidence-based practices** will be instrumental in refining assessment strategies that truly reflect students' linguistic proficiency and subject comprehension in bilingual programmes. With Spain participating in the PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment, data will soon be available which may better inform us of the progress students in Spain are making with regards to their education in English.



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