Ways of becoming bilingual

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A different language is a different vision of life.   ~ Federico Fellini

Most speakers of the worlds approximately 6 000 languages are, in varying degrees, bilingual. This is largely explained because many of them are able to acquire the spoken forms of more than one language in childhood. However, such early exposure is not necessary in order for people to become functionally bilingual. For example, most European children who grow up bilingual begin formal instruction in another language well after they have acquired their native language. In fact, it appears to be necessary for children to naturally acquire at least one language in order for normal cognitive development to take place. This development is in turn necessary as a basis for formal learning of a second language and for general academic success.

Many of the conflicting views about bilingualism and how to attain it, like most other contentious issues, are clouded by lack of clear definitions. Bilingualism itself is often not clearly defined. Few people have equal proficiency in more than one language: they usually have different purposes for using the languages and may find limited proficiency in particular aspects of a second language sufficient for their purposes. Even the term 'language' is a nebulous concept. For example, some linguists refer to the distinct varieties of English as separate 'Englishes'. Also, only recently have researchers mapped some of the major differences between spoken and written English. Our understanding of these differences has led to print and online resources that make it more possible than ever before to teach and learn the various functions, registers and other aspects of language. Analogously, multimedia, Internet and telecommunication technologies are enabling us to use English and other global trading languages' in unprecedented authentic ways.

Measurable improvements in bilingualism come at the cost of intensive, high quality and well-funded educational programmes. The social and political will to support these programmes extends beyond just making money available. Vast sums of money have been spent by some governments in Southeast Asia to teach English with little to show for it. It has been argued that one reason for this is that 'linguistic distance' makes it difficult for speakers of Asian languages to learn European languages, but a less deterministic view is that we need better educational practices. Principled educational technology is one route to improved practice, but although educational technology often relies on independent, discovery-based approaches to learning that help make learning and teaching more sustainable and effective, it cannot replace teachers. To be useful, technology must enhance educational programmes and be mediated by a teacher, and teaching needs to be recognised as a central profession in society.