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**Section A**



## OPTIMIZING EFL INSTRUCTION FOR BILINGUAL LEARNERS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

*More and more children nowadays are exposed to content in English from an early age. They acquire English alongside their native Macedonian and, as a result, speak the foreign language fluently before they even begin attending school. Thus, EFL teachers in North Macedonia regularly encounter students with exceptional English proficiency who use the language as a native tongue rather than a foreign language. The number of such children is high and ever-growing. Understanding this, this study addresses the perceived lack of a suitable curriculum for these advanced learners. We aim to bridge the gap between their language abilities and standard English instruction by developing a program for fourth-grade bilingual students. To understand students' needs, benefits, and challenges comprehensively, we incorporated teacher feedback via a survey into the process. Our findings indicated that many bilingual students seem to be under-challenged in traditional English classes. Despite administrative hurdles and potential motivational issues, our findings suggest that tailored instruction would yield many advantages for bilingual students in North Macedonia.*

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, English Language Teaching, Primary Education, EFL, Curriculum Development.

### INTRODUCTION

Although bilingualism is a centuries-old phenomenon, modern bilingualism, supported by technology, is now gaining momentum. As a result, more and more children are fluent in

another, foreign languages from an early age. The abundance of foreign-language-speaking videos aimed at children, along with video games that increasingly play a role in the daily lives of the younger generation, provide a great foundation for learning a foreign language implicitly alongside children's native tongue.

According to the latest data from Statista, in November 2022 alone, three of the six most-watched YouTube channels globally were children's channels, with videos collectively viewed nearly 9.5 billion times. There's no doubt that children today are growing up with Cocomelon, Wow Kids, and the new short reels on TikTok. All in English. It's no surprise, then, that teachers witness a daily increase in the number of bilingual children in their classrooms.

Despite the growing number of bilingual children, however, the English language curriculum for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in primary education does not account for these children's unusually high language competencies. These students, who speak English at the level of their native Macedonian, spend years learning basic vocabulary about colors, body parts, food, and animals—vocabulary they've long since mastered and can use proficiently in complex sentences and longer discourse.

The so-called, additional instruction, which could be the solution to this issue, primarily focuses on the standards and criteria set out in the annual, Ministry-approved curriculum—a program that fails to sufficiently challenge this group of students. Furthermore, additional instruction is typically offered to students who excel at the level *expected* for their age. These students are not always bilingual, who are particularly talented and use the language at a level comparable to children of the same age in countries where English is spoken as a native language.

This mismatch between the EFL curriculum and the needs of bilingual students is the starting point for this paper. By introducing a new, annual program/curriculum for fourth-grade bilingual students and conducting a survey with the potential teachers involved, this study attempts to show that bilingual students in the EFL classroom can indeed thrive—but only if the curriculum is adapted to their unique educational needs.

## **BROADER CONTEXT**

### **Bilingualism: Basic Notions**

The need to know and communicate proficiently in multiple languages is centuries old. Hoffman (1991) notes that since ancient times, people have had to learn the languages of their neighbors to communicate with them and trade. Bilingualism, therefore, is a concept with a long-standing history.

With over 5,000 languages and only 195 countries (Crystal 2000), the world's linguistic diversity, combined with the multicultural nature of today's societies, has resulted in a growing number of individuals who can smoothly communicate in multiple languages. Hoffman adds that a number of countries are even statutorily bilingual. In Europe, for instance, Belgium, Finland, Switzerland, and Ireland are either bilingual or multilingual. Similarly, the former Yugoslavia was, as Hoffman notes, officially a state of bilingual and multilingual Yugoslavs.

According to Hoffman, while there are countries where bilingualism is statutory, many bilinguals are from the minority groups within a society and learn the languages they speak

implicitly, at the same time, but in different social contexts. For instance, one language is used at home, and another in school.

Bilingualism is now the global norm. Even countries that were once predominantly monolingual are now home to many bilinguals. The European Commission's 2006 survey revealed that 56% of EU citizens are at least bilingual, with 28% speaking three languages. Even the United Kingdom—traditionally perceived as monolingual—reported 38% of its population as bilingual. Bilingualism, of course, extends beyond Europe—in countries like Canada, South Africa, and the Philippines, it is a fundamental part of the national identity (Grosjean 2012). In fact, monolinguals are now a minority worldwide (Ortega 2009).

Hamers and Blanc (1989) define bilingualism as the result of contact between multiple languages within a society at an individual level. They state that bilingualism is inherently linked to human experience, particularly in our increasingly interconnected world shaped by globalization, tourism, and language learning.

While the definition of bilingualism varies, for the purposes of this paper we, the authors, have formulated the following working definition: *“bilinguals are individuals with a high degree of proficiency in two languages, demonstrated by their capacity to use both languages fluently in communication”*.

## **Types of Bilingualism**

According to D'Acierno (1990), there are three basic types of bilingualism: compound, coordinate, and sub-coordinate. Compound bilingualism develops when both languages are learned simultaneously in the same environment from an early age. In this case, a child growing up with two languages implicitly understands that there are two lexical units for the same concept a.k.a. two words for one thing. Coordinative bilingualism, however, develops in distinct contexts. For example, one language might be learned and used at home, while the other is acquired and used at school. In the so-called sub-coordinate bilingualism, one language is dominant, meaning the speaker is more proficient in one language and uses it to interpret the other. All these types, according to D'Acierno, refer to spontaneous, implicit language acquisition early in life.

Li (2000), on the other hand, proposes a different classification. He distinguishes between:

- Simultaneous bilingualism, where both languages are learned at the same time;
- Early bilingualism, where both languages are learned in childhood;
- Late bilingualism, where the second language is acquired later in life; and,
- Passive bilingualism, where a person understands the language in written or spoken form but cannot speak or write it independently.

Yet, according to many theorists, the only "true" bilinguals are the children who, as early bilinguals, grow up exposed to both languages and use them at home, from a young age. These children develop their linguistic competences in both languages and can switch between them effortlessly when communicating with others (Baker, 2014).

Whichever way they are classified, one thing is for sure: the number of bilingual children is steadily increasing. However, Garcia and Li (2014) argue that although the number of bilingual children and students is on the rise, education systems still fail to adapt to their needs,

often prioritizing monolingualism. A similar thing happens in North Macedonia, where bilingual students who speak both English and Macedonian fluently, are taught and assessed using the same curriculum and educational standards as students learning English as a foreign language, who naturally have lower language proficiency. Their advanced linguistic abilities are thus disregarded.

The only attempt at a bilingual Macedonian-English curriculum within the educational system of North Macedonia is currently implemented through the so-called bilingual classes/programs offered in a few state and private high schools across the country. One such school is the high school of "Taki Daskalot" in Bitola, where a Macedonian-English bilingual program has been running successfully for a few years.

In addition to Macedonian-English programs, some high schools also offer Macedonian-French programs, which, naturally, follow a separate curriculum. No bilingual Macedonian-Education curriculum is available for primary schools in North Macedonia, as of yet.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research addresses the issue of a growing number of bilingual students in English classes in North Macedonia – students who lack motivation and are underchallenged in the traditional EFL instruction. It focuses on students in primary schools who speak both English and Macedonian at near-native levels and it examines the misalignment of the current curriculum with their needs.

The research aims to modernize the teaching process to better serve bilingual students by proposing a new program/curriculum tailored to their language level. It also seeks to determine whether teachers find this program applicable. The study combines qualitative and quantitative methods (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Nunan, 1992).

The research focuses on primary school students and teachers. To gain insights into EFL teachers' attitudes, a purposive sample of six EFL teachers teaching fourth grade was selected. The research procedure, following the procedure steps proposed by Pandey (2015,13), involved:

- Analyzing the current EFL curriculum for fourth grade;
- Developing a new curriculum for bilingual students;
- Distributing it to teachers for feedback;
- Surveying teachers;
- Analyzing the survey results;
- Reporting the results.

The research hypothesizes that *"Many bilingual students in primary education find regular classes insufficiently challenging"* and suggests the need for a separate English program for these students, which teachers recognize as necessary.

### Limitations

The study is limited to fourth-grade students and a small sample of teachers from Bitola, North Macedonia. Despite these limitations, however, we believe the insights it provides are valuable.

### Ethics

This research adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participants were informed of the researchers' identity and the study's purpose. Anonymity was ensured through the use of anonymous questionnaires, and all personal data were protected. In addition, proper citation practices were followed to maintain academic integrity.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest that could obstruct the objectivity of this study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Basic information about the proposed curriculum**

**Subject:** English Language

**Student Group Size:** Group sizes will be determined based on testing results, with a maximum of 30 students per group. Smaller groups may be formed to improve teaching effectiveness.

**Time Frame:**

- **September:** Students will be tested using the official Cambridge English test for young learners, then, an analysis will be conducted and students will be organized into groups..
- **October to December and February to May:** Weekly one-class meetings will be held.
- **June:** A student survey will be administered to gather feedback on the curriculum and the implemented activities.

### **Goals**

This program aims to improve bilingual students' language skills and motivation by offering activities tailored to their proficiency.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Expected outcomes include:

- Improved vocabulary;
- Higher motivation;
- Better grammatical accuracy in speaking and writing;
- Greater engagement in discussions;
- Improved teamwork;
- Increased interest in creative writing and the cultures of the English-speaking countries.

Student progress will be tracked through checklists, portfolios, and written feedback. Attendance and participation will also be recorded.

### **Implementation**

The curriculum comprises 27 classes, each lasting 40 minutes, scheduled as extracurricular activities/classes.

### **Resources Needed**

Digital materials (e-books, presentations, videos), smart board, computer, worksheets, whiteboard, and VR glasses.

## 4.2. Curriculum Overview

Lesson Topic	Activities Planned	Time frame
Introduction to Content and Goals	Students will participate in icebreaker games like "Would you rather...?" to practice English speaking and engage in team activities designed to help them get to know each other and discuss the program's goals.	October
Book Study: "Town Mouse and Country Mouse"	The lesson will begin with an introduction to the topic, followed by a vocabulary quiz, reading session, and a discussion of the characters and plot. Students will then try to link what was covered here with the material in their Macedonian language curriculum	October
A Typical School Day Around the World	Students will discuss their daily routines, watch the video "Day in the Life: An Elementary School Student," and then work in groups to compare the school system in North Macedonia with the one shown in the video.	October
Fun Math in English: Rounding Numbers	This session will mirror content from the math curriculum, where students will review key terms in English, practice rounding exercises, and complete worksheets for additional vocabulary practice.	October
"Things I Wish My Parents Understood Better..." - Children's Month Activities	In this activity, students will create infographics in groups about issues they wish adults understood better, followed by presentations and class discussions.	November
Book Study: "Benji, The Bad Day, and Me"	Students will explore different types of disabilities through discussions, watch and listen to a story, and analyze the characters' emotions. They will also participate in a vocabulary quiz using Kahoot.	November
Kids as DJs: Learning Through Music	The class will listen to students' favorite English songs, discuss unfamiliar words, and engage in group games to identify songs by their opening tones and lyrics.	November
Listening Comprehension: Fill in the Blanks	Students will engage in a brief discussion of the text before the initial listening. During a second, repeated listening, they will complete fill-in-the-blank exercises, followed by self-assessment and a discussion of comprehension challenges.	November
Creative Writing: Sentence by Sentence	In this collaborative activity, students will write a story together, with each student contributing one sentence. Afterward, they will read the story aloud and discuss its cohesion, verb tense usage, and spelling accuracy.	December
Christmas Around the World	Students will watch a video about Christmas traditions from around the globe, then discuss the similarities and differences with their local customs. They will brainstorm ideas based on the theme, "For Christmas, we...".	December
Book Study: "That's Not My Name"	This session will focus on exploring different nationalities through the story "That's Not My Name." Students will watch and listen to the story, then engage in activities to analyze characters' emotions and reactions.	December
Creative Writing: If I Ruled the World	Students will begin by listing five changes they would make if they ruled the world. They will then pair up to agree on three priorities, followed by presentations and discussions.	February
Listening Comprehension: Valentine's Day	This lesson will start with a discussion about Valentine's Day, followed by listening exercises. Students will engage in repeated listening with fill-in-the-blank activities, self-assessment, and a discussion of comprehension challenges.	February
Science Lesson: The Water Cycle	Based on a U.S. science textbook, this lesson will cover key terms related to the water cycle. Students will compare these terms with their Macedonian equivalents and take a vocabulary quiz using Kahoot.	February

Book Study: "Clever Rabbit and the Wolves"	Students will be introduced to the topic with a vocabulary quiz, followed by reading the book and discussing the characters and plot. The session will also connect the story with the Macedonian language curriculum and the contents covered in those classes.	February
Language Games: Synonyms and Antonyms	Using a U.S. workbook as a guide, this lesson will involve discussions on synonyms and antonyms, group activities, and practical exercises.	March
Writing: Everyday Superheroes	Students will discuss superheroes and the heroic deeds of ordinary people. They will then write a short text about "An Everyday Superhero" and present their writings to the class.	March
Grammar Through Games	In this session, students will review present tense grammar structures through a series of educational games, aligned with the fourth-grade English curriculum	March
Virtual Tour of U.S. and U.K. Cities	Students will use VR to explore major cities in English-speaking countries. After the tour, they will describe the city they "visited" for their classmates to guess.	March
Easter Around the World	This lesson will involve watching a video about Easter traditions around the world, followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences with local customs. Students will brainstorm ideas based on the theme, "For Easter, we...".	April
Speaking Game: Taboo	In this group game, students will use pre-made cards to describe a key word without using "taboo" words while their teammates guess the word. Keywords will focus on advanced vocabulary.	April
Book Study: "Trapped"	Students will be introduced to the topic with a vocabulary quiz, then read the book, discuss the characters and plot, and connect the contents of the story to the Macedonian language curriculum and what they have already been taught.	April
Listening and Discussion: Peer Bullying	The session will start with a brainstorming activity on "What is peer bullying?" followed by watching a video on the topic. Students will then discuss strategies for dealing with bullying and where to seek help.	April
Story Retelling	Students will listen to a short story, discuss its characters and themes, and then retell the story using puppets for a puppet theater-style performance.	May
Creative Writing: Finish the Story	In this activity, students will read a story introduction, discuss the characters and key terms, and then work in pairs to write story continuations. They will share their endings and compare them to the original story.	May
Language Games: Homophones and Homographs	This lesson, based on a U.S. workbook, will include discussions on homophones and homographs, group work, and practical exercises.	May
Spelling Bee Competition	Students will review and practice the vocabulary they've learned through a spelling competition. The winner will receive a prize, and students will complete a survey to provide feedback.	May

This curriculum was shared with six English teachers (N=6) – teachers currently teaching or have previously taught fourth grade. The teachers were then asked to complete an electronic questionnaire regarding the curriculum.

## Survey Results

To gather insights from the English teachers directly involved in fourth-grade instruction, a brief electronic survey was distributed to six teachers from two primary schools in Bitola, North Macedonia. The survey aimed to collect quantitative data on the effectiveness of the proposed bilingual curriculum, its potential benefits and challenges, and the number of bilingual students these teachers work with daily. The questionnaire was open in January, 2024. While most questions were closed-ended, teachers had the option to add additional comments.

### ***Bilingual Student Proficiency***

Two-thirds (4 out of 6) of the surveyed teachers reported that more than 30% of their students speak English at a level comparable to their native language. The remaining teachers (2 out of 6) indicated that 20-30% of their students could be considered fully bilingual.

### ***Suitability of the Current English Curriculum***

Every respondent agreed that the existing English curriculum does not sufficiently challenge bilingual students, showing the need for a more advanced program tailored to their abilities.

### ***Evaluation of the Proposed Curriculum***

Teachers were asked to rate the proposed curriculum on a scale of 1 to 10. Four teachers awarded it the highest score of 10, while the remaining two rated it a 9, demonstrating strong approval of the curriculum.

### ***Potential Benefits***

Teachers identified several potential benefits of implementing the proposed curriculum. All six agreed that it would boost student motivation and engagement. Additionally, 83.3% (5 out of 6) believed it would enhance language skills and encourage creativity. Half of the teachers also felt it would increase students' interest in the cultures of English-speaking countries.

### **Challenges and Obstacles**

The most commonly cited challenges were a potential lack of teacher interest and the increased administrative workload that the curriculum's implementation might require. Two-thirds (4 out of 6) also mentioned a lack of technical resources as a significant barrier. Other concerns included student disinterest, limited space in schools, and the worry that students already have too many things to do.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bilingualism is increasingly becoming a part of everyday life in education, and it's only going to grow. With more and more bilingual students, driven by technology and modern media, there's a clear need for a more advanced and customized approach to teaching English in North Macedonia.

Teachers have pointed out that the current English curriculum isn't challenging enough for bilingual students, leading to stagnation instead of progress. In some classes, over 30% of the students are bilingual, making it evident that the existing curriculum falls short of meeting their needs.

This study introduces a new curriculum aimed at boosting motivation, sparking creativity, and improving all language skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Teachers who reviewed the proposed curriculum gave it high marks, noting that it would help bilingual fourth-grade students learn at a level on par with their peers in English-speaking countries. While



there might be challenges in rolling out this curriculum, the benefits for students far outweigh the effort. After all, the ultimate goal of education is to meet the needs of every student, and this curriculum is a step toward achieving that.

Further research could explore the long-term impact of such a tailored bilingual curriculum on students' language proficiency and overall performance not just in primary school (grades 1 to 5), but in middle school (grades 6 to 9) as well.

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