Bilingual teachers’ language strategies: The case of an Arabic-Hebrew kindergarten in Israel

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The goal of this study was to investigate the teaching strategies used in a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew kindergarten in Israel and their transformation due to changes in teachers’ professional trajectories and multilingual repertoires. We used an ethnographic approach by applying a mixed methods design including observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers in the Wadi Ara Arabic-Hebrew kindergarten. This was a qualitative study, which also examined the frequency of usage of different bilingual teaching strategies. The results were analyzed on two levels: on the micro level, teachers’ language strategies that were applied in the bilingual kindergarten, and on the macro level, the educational, cultural and sociolinguistic context of Arabic-Hebrew bilingual education in Israel. The results demonstrate that the strategy most frequently used by teachers was flexible bilingualism, through translanguaging that involved code-switching, in contrast to traditional instruction using language separation. In their interviews, the teachers explained that the aim of translanguaging was to enhance Arabic acquisition among the Jewish children and to increase their motivation to be actively involved in learning the language. The observations revealed that the teachers’ orientation was to avoid translation because rather than encouraging the children to learn a second language, this strategy tended to turn them into passive learners. The study highlights the need for educators to rethink traditional bilingual language strategies and pedagogies of “two solitudes” and to implement innovative bilingual pedagogies, which have an impact on children’s motivation and bilingual development. With regard to teachers’ professional development, the study highlights a necessity for bilingual teachers’ regular reflecting on their bilingual pedagogy. Within a broader international context of bilingual teaching, the findings have important implications for bilingual teachers and power makers and for bilingual education by showing its empowerment pedagogy through enhancing minority language.

Keywords: bilingual teaching, bilingual Arabic-Hebrew kindergarten, language strategies.