

Language Policy for the Multilingual Classroom

BILINGUAL EDUCATION & BILINGUALISM

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Language Policy for the Multilingual Classroom

Pedagogy of the Possible

Edited by

Christine Hélot and Muiris Ó Laoire

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of our beloved Australian colleague
Professor Michael Clyne of the University of Melbourne/Monash whose
contribution to the field of sociolinguistics has been and will ever be immense.
We are honoured to publish his contribution in the present volume.*

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Introduction: From Language Education Policy to a Pedagogy of the Possible

C. HÉLOT and M. Ó LAOIRE

While the multilingual classroom presents ample and creative openings for effective language learning and intercultural understanding, these opportunities are frequently lost. On the one hand, teachers can easily underestimate the complexities of the multilingual classroom, and on the other hand, even if they are aware of such complexities, they might not always know how to best exploit the potential of plurilingual students. There is still a lingering tendency in most classrooms to approach the teaching and learning of languages as if monolingualism were the norm, that is, education partners including teachers tend to overlook the fact that bilingual or plurilingual learners of any target language are not the same as monolingual learners. Confronted with the daily contingencies and challenges of administration, assessment and curriculum, educators may lose sight of what Creese and Martin refer to as ‘... a range of complex inter-relating issues around the promotion of multilingualism in educational settings’ (Creese & Martin, 2003: 6). Results from research on metalinguistic awareness (e.g. Jessner, 2006; Kemp, 2007) underline the qualitative differences between bi/plurilingual and monolingual learners. Yet, teachers in the multilingual classroom may continue to underestimate the competence of plurilingual students and to silence their voices, rather than using cross-linguistic learning strategies and learners’ metalinguistic awareness as learning resources across languages and even across school disciplines.

While there have been pioneering initiatives to validate learners’ plurilingualism in our classrooms (Candelier, 2003; Creese & Martin, 2003; García *et al.*, 2006; Hélot, 2007; Kenner & Hickey, 2008; O’Laoire, 2006), the reality for many multilingual learners is that their languages are all too

often silenced, unheard in the classroom or worse still envisaged as impeding the development of the language of schooling and of learning in general. One cannot underestimate the lingering influence of a century of history during which most schools in Europe were the main agents for the implementation of the one language/one nation ideology. Educators may still continue to see the teaching of the school language as the central mission of schools, and other languages as separate school subjects rather than potential media of learning. In other words, the 'imagined' creative potential of the multilingual classroom collides with 'reality' where educators tend to see students from linguistically diverse backgrounds bringing their home language to school as an extra burden rather than as a learning resource.

However, changing perspectives on learners' home languages from 'problem' to resource means that students' plurilingual repertoire must be acknowledged and their plurilingual competence supported in school. In other words, students from diverse language backgrounds are setting a new challenge for our traditionally monolingual school systems; they are forcing educationalists to question entrenched ideologies of language and confronting teachers in their everyday classrooms to rethink their relationships to language learning and the issue of diversity (whether linguistic, cultural, ethnic or social).

When individual teachers endeavour to support and develop holistically an inclusive approach in the classroom, including their students' various languages in their pedagogical activities, they may generally be working out an individual positioning or belief set. Sometimes, teachers are not necessarily aware that such choices are a form of engagement. For example, when confronted with young learners who do not know the school language, they have no other choice but to develop new pedagogical approaches that will help plurilingual children to make sense of their learning experiences at school (Hélot, 2010). Despite all the reflection and documents published at the European level on the importance of plurilingualism for our societies, one specific domain is still lacking sufficient attention, that is, teacher education and professional development. The profound shifts in our societies in relation to mobility and migration, to new forms of and access to knowledge, and the growing inequalities affecting poor and wealthy countries, demand that schools rethink their approach to learning, rather than *forcing* students to adapt to an education system based on a 19th-century world view.

The main actors at the heart of this change of perspective are teachers. Teacher educators, thus, have a special responsibility to make prospective teachers aware of what is at stake in any educational endeavour, of

the traditional tendency of education systems to reproduce social inequalities as well as of the potential spaces for innovation for reversing traditional power relationships. We know the role language may play in the reproduction of inequalities, so that nowadays, when plurilingual students are silenced in a classroom, ignoring their language competence becomes a form of discrimination. Yet, making teachers aware of this requires that teacher education curricula take societal multilingualism seriously and put it at the centre of their professional development agenda. If more third-level institutions across the world are indeed addressing teacher education in the light of perceived new needs for the 21st century, the issue of multilingualism in education remains constrained by a monolingual habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that is proving extremely difficult to shift.

Despite the important body of research on bilingual education and more recently on multilingual education, many models are still characterised as monoglossic (García, 2009), and intended only for the elite and dominant languages. The reality in many classrooms today is that the linguistic needs of bi/plurilingual children are not met. This is the case because education systems throughout the world have been slow to question the very essence of language education, and in Europe, for example, the main agenda of European institutions remains the acquisition of the language of schooling, the teaching of 'foreign' languages and the development of a European identity. In other words, educational language policies reflect the reluctance to acknowledge a central concern in our societies today, that is, the question of migration. After all, language contact in school, as in society, is the result of migration rather than foreign language teaching. In other words, if we acknowledge that multilingualism is already present in our schools through and in the students who speak several languages, we need to question the way we conceive of 'foreign' language learning. We need to broaden our vision of what language learning really is, and to also envision learning through the means of languages other than *the* language of schooling. In a sense, such a vision takes away from the centrality of the school language, and challenges its hegemonic role in education. This may explain the hesitation at national level to implement educational policies that would be truly multilingual. Thus, one can understand how the initiatives of individual teachers are restrained by top-down policies that pay lip service to multilingualism and also by the lack of support for bottom-up language policies at the school level. However, the interactions, interrelationships and pedagogies of multilingual classrooms are beginning to receive more attention from researchers, and emergent research in language policy is opening new perspectives.

Rethinking Language Policies for Multilingual Schools

All schools and educational institutions, whether they realise it or not, operate from and within a certain policy. While certain languages are selected to be taught, only certain standard varieties are accepted; while other languages are introduced at earlier or later points in learners' education, some remain in the margins or are expected to be taught outside of the school system. And one should not forget that curricula are mediated and examined in a predetermined and prearranged manner usually through 'the' school language only (Shohamy, 2006). Even when no explicit unequivocal policy exists in a school, teachers, administrators and learners may still operate within fixed structures and out of implicitly agreed policy paradigms. Indeed, it is quite often the case that in schools with plurilingual students, policies are not pre-planned or thought out, but they simply evolve as implicit policies. The occurrence of these 'implicit' policies is often explained by 'force of history' factors; that is, a certain policy is adhered to because such a policy has always been in place.

A school language policy, conceived as a response to a problem or an initiative at one point of time in the school's history, tends to be transmitted and perpetuated through school administration systems from academic year to academic year and often become part of a school's tradition. Policy content in many schools thus casts a long historical shadow: *'We teach French in this school because we have always taught French here' 'It's always worked for us' 'It is part of the school's tradition'*; it becomes difficult to distinguish between tradition and policy in school contexts. New policies tend to be called for when unprecedented situations arise which appear to shake the securities of staid tradition and new solutions are called for. This may often be the case when plurilingual students begin to constitute a critical or noticeable mass in classrooms. Somehow multilingualism in such classrooms will be problematised in a similar fashion as in society at large and might be seen as some kind of threat to social cohesion: and this might lead to stricter rules insisting on the exclusive use of the school language, without teachers or administrators being aware that they are in fact putting a language policy in place.

But new situations can also give rise to creative questioning, and divergent perspectives may begin to emerge. The question of appropriate mother tongue/bilingual support for immigrant learners is often raised, for example, and particularly by student teachers who feel overwhelmed at the beginning of their career by all the demands made on them. But often they ask how the linguistic needs of such learners should be met in the short term: in other words, how these plurilingual learners can become

just like their monolingual peers. But in cases like this and in situations not previously experienced in schools, new policies are called for, and differing responses emerge at the state and local level. What school administrators and teachers often demand are new regulations and directives from the centre as to how the curriculum should be mediated and implemented, therein providing the motivation for what is termed centralist institutionalised policy. Thus, policies in schools that have to do with language, for example, are often dictated and governed by nationally devolved benchmarks of expectation and performance. But these emerging responses from the state can either collide with the demands from the local community, or be tacitly accepted and met with no resistance.

Moving Beyond Top-Down Approaches

Placing the multilingual classroom at the very centre of a national language policy may be of little help in legitimising the heretofore ‘unheard’ voices of multilingual students in our schools. As Ricento (2006: 13) reminds us, language policies as they emerged in post-colonial sociolinguistic situations have best served the interests of the former language of colonisation rather than the languages and rights of indigenous minorities. Language policy evolving as top-down directives has been shown to bolster the powerful and dominant at the expense of the local and the indigenous. Driven by critical theory and postmodern thinking, new frameworks of language policy have been emerging in recent years (e.g. Corson, 2009; Ricento, 2006) with a shift of focus from the authoritative top-down processes to implementation at the micro-level. At the heart of these post-structuralist and more post-modern approaches to language policy, one finds three crucial concepts, which help to advance our understanding, that is agency, ideology and ecology (Hornberger, 2006).

Until recently, the roles of individuals and groups in the processes of language use, attitudes and ultimately policies have been frequently overlooked. Today, language policy is being reconceptualised as a *complexity* of human interactions, negotiations and productions mediated by interrelationships in contested sites of competing ideologies, discourses and powers. This refers to the will and aspiration of people who have policy *done to them* through the different agendas of the State polity. It includes a focus on what specific language policies mean in the daily interactions and micro-interactions of people in their everyday life and working situations. It means that one can envisage policies also from the point of view of what is possible for people to do, what spaces they can find to negotiate their own engagement with language(s) and what is impossible.