

MOTHER TONGUES IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY

FOUZIA GUERROUDJ

Ecole Normale Supérieure Oran ALGERIA
E-mail: guerroudj.f@hotmail.com

Abstract- Issues related to the Language(s) used in public education are subject of much controversy and debate. Mother Tongue-based multilingual education at primary level has been particularly argued on cultural, political and empirical grounds. The present piece of research examines the potential challenges and implications of this topic in the light of the language educational policy approach in England in regards to immigrant languages within primary state schools. It intends to consider areas where there is a possibility to draw general implications of language education in a multilingual context which constitutes a key concern of educational aspirations worldwide.

Index terms- mother tongue, multilingualism, primary level, education, language policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Schools have often been identified as microcosms of society, both affecting and reflecting relations that exist in the wider community. An awareness of the potential that early education has in promoting harmony becomes important in building the social cohesion on the basis of existing diversity. Children are considered to come to school as experienced communicators whose luggage is supposed to be exploited within a consistent process. In other words, they already developed the listening/speaking skills and are meant to develop their language efficiency by becoming literate at school.

The link between early literacy and overall educational success has often been emphasized. The knowledge of a language includes basic grammatical structures and common vocabulary that a child is assumed to develop in his pre-school age. So, the knowledge that children bring to school plays a major part in their educational aptitude that can serve as a foundation of academic learning. Yet, some pupils manage to succeed at their school subjects while others do not.

II. IMPLICATIONS AN PERSPECTIVES

In spite of the necessary role that the language of instruction plays as an early determinant of future education of individuals, many children come to school with varieties that are markedly different from the language of instruction at school. And while there are widespread recommendations on exploring and developing the linguistic repertoires of children, it seems that they are easier to formulate than to implement.

What happens is that children from different linguistic backgrounds are put in classes where instruction and materials are in the Standard Language, and where a child may find it hard to balance between language skills and the content taught in that language. When this Standard

Language is spoken by majority children, even with a level of variation, such as the case of English in England, the minority language child may still find opportunities to practice and learn the language from his/ her peers and from social context.

III. ILLUSTRATION FROM THE ALGERIAN CONTEXT

When the language of instruction is not even spoken as a native language, such as in diglossic settings, the difficulty develops into a higher level of complication. Speaking from a personal point of view, it is the case for us as Algerians, having taken time and effort to adjust with the Modern Standard Arabic. The interesting feature is that the vernacular has been occasionally used by the teacher to explain some notions while the pupil may struggle in expressing his/her answers in the Standard and thus considered as not having the 'correct' answer. This aspect is taken for granted, probably because Standard Arabic is considered as an unquestioned part of the collective identity or because of other attributed values such as being the language of 'Quran' the Muslim holy book..

Yet, it can be a more frustrating setting of education for other groups like Berber (01) who have to master both varieties (dialect and standard) in order to be aware of social and educational experiences.

Algerian pupils and immigrant pupils who speak another language rather than English can be considered in the same sociolinguistic 'disadvantage'. Immigrants may at least benefit from transitional education to learn the majority language which is also being actually spoken in the wider society. The Algerian pupil, on the other hand is expected to learn much content based subjects (02) since the first grade, whereas the Primary Education Exam assesses pupils only on Standard Arabic, French and Mathematics, which means that two thirds of primary level assessment is on language skills basically.

IV. LANGUAGE AS A HUMAN RIGHT

In spite of the major importance of this aspect, the present research rather approaches mother tongue language in a social light, as a human right. Reasoning with personal belief and convictions nurtured by cultural and educational settings, language was identified with emotional values rather than such instructional functions.

This assumption is quiet popular and widely adopted too, language as a basic human right was approached by Kloss (1977) cited in May (2003) in terms of Tolerance Oriented Rights and Promotion Oriented Rights.

Tolerance Oriented Rights ensure the right to preserve one's language in the private, non-governmental areas of social life; it may include using the MTL at home and in public, freedom of assembly and associations. The key rule of such rights is that the state does not interfere with efforts on the parts of the minority to support their languages in the private domain.

On the other hand, Promotion Oriented Rights refer to the inclusion of the minority languages within the formal domain, such as legislative, administrative and public schools (op.cit). The application of minority languages in public domains is particularly controversial. Some interpretations are arranged under covert and overt forms of policy.

V. CRITICS TO LANGUAGE-IDENTITY TIE

Advocacy of introducing a minority language in the public educational system can be questioned for their social aims; especially, when language –identity tie is criticised for ignoring the interactive and dynamic aspects of identity. This link is sometimes described in terms of 'Essentialism' which refers to "the process by which particular groups come to be described in terms of fundamental, immutable characteristics – as, for example, via a particular language-identity link" (May 2003,p.93)

This view which lies at the heart language minority claims in general and which is nourished by social and political theories is criticised for ignoring the multilayered nature of identity in which a language may play a secondary role or even no role at all.

Language choice can be rather justified by economic benefits involved in using a majority language rather than a rejection of mother tongue language as a cultural aspect of the individual. Similar critics argue that language choice is mostly based on social access and status as Brutt-Griffler (2002) observes:

"If you make ethnicity, nationality, or minority status the unit of analysis, you can conclude that people would want to or have in their interest to maintain

their mother tongue. If, on the contrary, you take class as the unit of analysis, their interest might dictate emphasis on access to 'dominant languages' (Brutt-Griffler 2002,p. 225 cited in May 2003,p.98)

In this view, there is rather a focus on the individual's perception of language function in contrast with the classical conception of language as one of identity pillars, which has also prevailed in the assumptions of nationalism discussed previously.

VI. CULTURE AS THE 'FIFTH' LANGUAGE SKILL

In this research, the introduction of mother tongue language in public education is approached as a measure to acknowledge identities of their speakers and to promote social understanding and tolerance. Yet, it seems that MTLs are mainly introduced (if ever so) as an instructive method to deal with non-majority language speaking pupils. Even as such, language teaching has to be planned effectively in order to help children to develop cognitive skills they need in order to thrive at school.

While MTL may not constitute the most urgent aspect of identity, there is still a cultural luggage that needs to be addressed somehow. After all, 'proper' cultural content can play significant roles in cognitive development as well.

Cultural education with all debate and controversy about its meaning, nature and content helps to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity that are necessary in multicultural context. Tomalin (2008) who argues for culture as a 'fifth' language skill points out the importance of these skills for children in particular:

"... there is also another level of understanding of culture....This covers how you build cultural awareness, ..., and how to operate successfully with people from other cultures. This is often considered to be a business skill for adults, such as international sales managers or explorers. But if you think about it there is a set of skills also needed by refugee kids, 'third culture kids' following their parents as they are posted around the world" (Tomalin 2008).

Cognitive skills which refer to knowledge process such as thinking and judging can also be endorsed by cultural education, the issue is to identify the nature of such content. Suzuki (1984,p.316) makes an interesting distinction between 'artificial' forms of culture such as food, holidays and costumes on the one hand and the understanding of the values underlining these forms, on the other hand.

A key principle of this type of education, according to him, is context relevance which refers to issues from immediate 'reality' of pupils' life, such as racial name calling and peer relationship. Likewise if materials and texts are related to pupils' background,

they are more likely to develop better literacy skills as argued by Mc Dermott (1977 cited in Suzuki 1989, p. 314). In that sense, cultural education is even more likely to be considered as a fifth language skill. An example that can illustrate this, is a story taken from the Algerian textbook of French for fifth grade pupils in which a famous Berber folklore story is cited.

The story is about a little girl who usually visits her grandfather living alone in the woods to help him with house chores. The girl is stalked by an ogre that eventually preys her grandfather. As the girl discovers the blood coming from under the door, she tells inhabitants from her village who burn the house with the ogre inside it.

Although the principle may be to include cultural aspect of a minority culture, it is not clear how appropriate it is to be included in a school textbook in terms of story moral or lesson. Idir, a Berber singer who made a popular song out of this story, explained that it is traditionally narrated to scare children! (03)

CONCLUSION

There is a need for a selective approach in order to carefully plan and design children's educational material and for a level of coordination between different planning agents. Educational decisions could be taken within a frame work that fits more

adequately actual research in the field of sociolinguistics and a follow up action that permits to assess, to some extent, the echoes of those implemented decisions.

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Notes:

- 1- Berbers represent the indigenous population in Algeria who are divided into four main groups known as the Kabyles, the Shawiyas, the Mozabites and the Touaregs.
- 2- First grade subjects include: Civil Education, Science Education, Islamic Education, Art Education, Standard Arabic and Mathematics.
- 3- Interview with Idir on this story is viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvTLs5_MjLY (May, 2012)

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