

the bilingual family newsletter

news and views for intercultural people

editors: sami grover and marjukka grover

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2007
Volume 24
Number 2

editorial

“Even when culture is tackled, it is often only on a superficial level. This reminds us of Fishman’s criticism of bilingual education programmes in the US which led to ‘the trivialisation of biculturalism’”

Anne-Marie de Mejia's article, which focuses on bilingual education in Colombia, is of relevance to anyone interested in truly multicultural education. All too often, language programs are focused on solely prestigious languages, and they often neglect cultural aspects completely. Even when cultural issues are tackled, this is often only in a most superficial manner, as if a cursory knowledge of a nation's cuisine, or music, is equivalent to “knowing” its culture.

Christine Kinoshita also addresses issues of interculturality, describing how her multicultural upbringing sometimes leaves her feeling like “a foreigner everywhere”, as she tries to find which culture she fits into.

It seems that all of us need to take a broad-minded, flexible approach to cultures. By accepting that culture is, by its very nature, fluid and flexible, we can come to accept that it's OK to belong to more than one culture, and equally, that it's OK to be an outsider. We can learn much from either position. Only by broadening our focus beyond the obvious, and by really opening ourselves up to intercultural learning, can we ever hope to reap the full benefits of our intercultural, multilingual world.

Sami Grover

Naturally Bilingual

Christine Kinoshita



Why Japanese? By chance. Call it ‘destiny’, if it exists.

This story began without me. My Spanish aunt was in Paris, attending a French course. While she was there she made Japanese friends, Mr. and Mrs. Y. They could have been just classmates, but by chance they became close friends. My aunt then learned Japanese during a two year stay in Tokyo, at Mr. Y’s parents’ home. Then Mr. Y got his first job, in Brussels. As my family lived in Brussels, my aunt gave him my father’s address. Mr. Y could have been sent to Quebec or Africa, but by chance he came to Brussels. He could have decided not to get in touch with my father, and we would not have become close friends, but that was not to be.

At this point in the story, I appear. From my point of view, as a European eight year old, these exotic looking people seemed particularly interesting, and extremely kind too. I was the kind of little girl who could not leave a present unwrapped, unless I was told what was inside. Mr. and Mrs. Y were the greatest present I could receive.

I already had the idea in my mind that I would work in translation. I was learning

English myself by watching the BBC at home. In exchange for piano lessons given by my mother, I asked whether Mrs. Y could teach me Japanese. It was my own personal request. At school, whenever I got the choice, my studies would systematically be about the same subject. Whether it was, history, art, geography, food (I could eat with chopsticks) or society, it had to be about Japan.

Three years later, Mr. Y had to leave Brussels for his job, and I asked him to find another teacher for me. And so it began. After 10 years of lessons, learning from a succession of private teachers, I was supposed to know plenty of vocabulary, all the conjugations, and have some understanding of politeness and Japanese culture. However, my competence was limited, and all I could do was to introduce myself and say “oyasuminasai”(“good night”), the very first word I had learned when I was eight.

As far as other languages were concerned, I already spoke good English and Dutch, which I had studied in secondary school. When I went to university, my teacher, also a student herself, was looking for someone to take over her student job, in a Japanese restaurant, of course! It was then that my total immersion began, four evenings a week! Within a few months, I had to put into practice all the knowledge I had accumulated during the years. I made close Japanese friends there, and because I was partying or going out with them regularly, my spoken Japanese progressed at great speed. As for writing, I had learned the syllabic alphabets quickly, but

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I always neglected the ideogrammes. I did not feel I needed them, and they seemed too difficult to memorise. I deeply regret this now as I still cannot read perfectly, in spite of all my efforts.

Later on, I won a Japanese Speech Competition and got a two way ticket to Tokyo as the prize. Sixteen years after my first lessons, I was realizing my dream: I was going to Japan! After the trip I continued studying the language at evening classes, and started translation studies (English and Spanish only), but my thesis was, of course, also about Japan.

After 4 years, the little restaurant I worked at moved, and I found a job as a cashier and secretary in a small Japanese supermarket. I finished my studies, and got a job with Toyota Europe. At the same time I met my husband, who is, you will not be surprised to read, Japanese. We now live in the south of Japan (on Kyushu Island), we have a little boy, and I am a home keeper and a freelance translator. Why Japanese? By chance. Call it 'destiny', if you believe in it!

Our son, Akira, was born in Japan in 2006. He is a year old now. My husband and I came to live in Japan in 2000. I had heard that there were very few French speaking foreigners settled in the South of Japan. Nevertheless, a few months before the baby was born, I told my husband I was going to speak to Akira in French. I invited him to be the "specialist in Japanese", with the intention of following the *OPOL* (One Person-One Language)

strategy. He wondered if French would be useful to Akira and suggested that it might be better if I spoke English. I refused because English was not my mother tongue. My first language is French (from my mother) and my second language is Spanish (from my father). I only started to learn English when I was eight. Akira will learn English anyway at primary school and, if necessary, in some English private cram school - we have plenty of those

I would prefer [my husband] to speak only standard Japanese to our son, but I appointed him "specialist in Japanese matters", so I cannot interfere!

here. I argued that French is a difficult language, which Akira could learn naturally without effort. I was determined to speak French to my child, and nobody was going to stand in my way. I think *OPOL* is natural and I saw no reason for not passing on our respective language to our son. Besides, I personally felt that I didn't have much knowledge to pass on to Akira except my language skills.

I insisted on a policy of no language mixing, when speaking to Akira, so my husband and his parents, with whom we are living, should stick strictly to Japanese. This shouldn't be too difficult as my parents-in-law cannot speak another

language anyway. In fact, they only speak the regional dialect, not even the standard Japanese that I have studied myself. My husband speaks a mixture of dialect and standard Japanese to Akira. He can understand French and speaks it quite well. I would prefer him to speak only standard Japanese to our son, but I appointed him "specialist in Japanese matters", so I cannot interfere!

I grew up bilingually in Belgium. My mother is French and my father is from Spain, they taught me both of their languages using *OPOL*. I learned to count in both the French and Belgian ways "soixante-dix" or "septante"; (Belgian French is a little different from standard French). I'll use both varieties with Akira without differentiation at first. I'll teach him the difference when he's old enough to understand. I want to read books in French with Akira and play French games as he grows up. We already listen to French songs on CDs sent by my family.

Akira will not learn Spanish from me because I consider it my second language. Although I learned Spanish from my father, all my studies took place in a French school. I never read much in Spanish, and my vocabulary is not as large as in French. Besides, I do not want Akira to be confused if I were to speak two languages to him. If my father wants to teach him some words of Spanish, I do not see a problem with it. However, I have told my father that I hope we'll speak French with Akira the few days per year we are together, as this is an important 'immersion' in his second language. But my son will call his grandfather "Abuelo"

Letters



Think Beyond London – Wales Leads the Way for the UK

As someone who spent his career in various types of bilingual schools in Wales before retiring a few years ago, I was disappointed although not surprised by Maria Gavrilova's article in a recent edition of the *BFN* [AZBUKA – *BFN* 23:3]. The author claims that there is an absence of "accurate information and advice on bilingualism in this country". She is also worried about the lack of continuity between the primary and secondary sector as far as teaching through the medium of a second language is concerned. Her conclusion is that "unfortunately schools like this are virtually unheard of in the UK".

I'm afraid that Maria Gavrilova is suffering from a common complaint which also affects officialdom and the M25 media. "This country" far too often equates England with the UK!

Here in Wales, the first Welsh-medium primary school was opened in 1939, and the first to be supported by an LEA in

1947. Bilingual and Welsh-medium secondary schools have existed since the 50s. There are now over 50 such schools. Many welcome a high percentage of pupils from English speaking homes, up to 95% in some cases. Most of those pupils have attended Welsh medium primary schools, but some of the secondary schools now provide intensive courses for 11 year olds who have less mastery of Welsh but who wish to have a bilingual, secondary education.

Further information should be available from the Welsh Assembly Government in Cardiff, and organizations such as the Welsh Language Board, Parents for Welsh Medium Education [the Welsh acronym is RhAG] or UCAC, the Welsh based teaching union. I wish Maria well with her attempts to develop AZBUKA, but please look outside the Home Counties for expertise on bilingual education.

W.Thomas
Taliesin, Machynlleth, Wales

(Spanish word for Grandfather) and his grandmother “*Mamie*”. Moreover, Spanish is one of the easiest languages to learn for Japanese people, especially as pronunciation is syllabic like Japanese and, compared to French, Spanish grammar isn’t very difficult. It will be easy for Akira to study it later on in life, if he wishes to.

As I have grown up in an “OPOL” family and learned two languages without any special effort, it is just natural for me to give the same chance to our son. I have never thought that we should prepare ourselves too much as it is just the natural order of things. I am confident and do not fear for his linguistic future. Some problems may arise later, but we will solve them at that time. I do see the fact that I am a minority speaker in the family, and in Japan, as a potential challenge to Akira becoming bilingual. He may become reluctant to speak French with me at some later stage. But I think this “special” language between us may enable the development of a great relationship based on tenderness and respect.

As far as culture is concerned, it gets more complicated, especially because these questions have never been very clear in my own heart. I feel European here in Asia, but I still feel I am a foreigner everywhere. I feel French in Belgium or Belgian in Spain. This may explain why I do not care about being called a “*gaijin*” [a term for foreigner which some people feel is derogatory - ed.] here in Japan! I must admit that I do not feel very Spanish though. I like octopus a lot - which French people usually do not eat—because we often ate it with my Spanish grandparents, and I feel moved by bagpipe music, part of the Celtic culture in Galicia, because I danced to this music when I was a girl. But I find it hard to get along with Spanish people whom I see as often overdoing things - everything is described as “*de morirse*”, meaning “to die for”. When in Spain, I am usually very tired at the end of the day - it is my second language after all.

I feel French because I love bread, cheese, Paris, and my little village in Normandy. I do not drink wine that much, but I cannot refuse Champagne or Calvados! I like French cuisine but I hate and feel ashamed of French “*cocorico*” nationalism and eurocentric attitudes. I love Belgian beer and cheese, and I even speak a little Dutch. Most of my dearest friends live in Brussels (although most of them are foreigners!), but I am ashamed of Belgian racism and the legendary linguistic quarrels.

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Notes from the OPOL Family



Battling with the Ancestors

Suzanne Barron-Hauwert

There is a wonderful stage in a child’s life when they realize that they are part of a long line of generations. They ask about their parents’, grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ lives. They want to know where they lived, what they ate, what games they played, or what language they spoke... and whose side were they on?

In Marc’s French class the teacher has been recreating the *Guerre de Cent Ans*, or ‘The Hundred Years War’, which was fought between England and France from 1337 to 1453. I am ashamed to admit I had never heard of this war, except for the bit at the end where the young Joan of Arc (or Jeanne) helped win a few battles and then got burnt at the stake by the French, which my history teacher told showed how barbarian the French were. I find Marc’s French teacher’s historical summaries arrogantly anti-British, and his pleasure in recounting the ‘murders’ of French Kings and soldiers at British hands too much. Marc is passionately with the French though, and refuses to believe that the English might have suffered too. Marc’s French blood is boiling. I fear that he will soon be donning a blue cape and taking off on his horse to fight the battle!

Meanwhile, in the American fourth grade, Marc had a project on Illinois History. We read about some of the first French explorers, Joliet and Father Marquette, meandering south down the Mississippi river, tentatively checking out Illinois, kindly naming it after the native people, selling furs and bothering no-one. The aggressive Brits wanted even more territory and ignored the locals, stole their land, and renamed every river, bay and hill they saw. Then in 1754 the Brits started the nine-year French and Indian War (it was actually a French-British war fighting over Indian territory). The British won the war and knocked the French back. Marc is horrified at the way the Brits behaved, and thinks they should have shared America with the French. Marc relives this drama by building a fort from cardboard boxes. He defends his fort against the Brits.

“Why?” I ask.

“They are the baddies and YOU are the enemy!” he says brandishing a French flag at me. Nina and Gabriel join in fighting against the English for ‘Honor and Liberty’ and I am left wondering how I can I retell the story from my side of the fence?

Nina recently completed a project on her Ancestors. The teacher asked the second graders to find out when their family first stepped foot on America soil, and trace the generations since then. Since we have only been living in America a few months Nina was asked to research her French and British roots.

We started by making two family trees, one for each family, which needed some research via the grandparents. Nina discovered that her French grandfather was brought up bilingually (French and Flemish), and both grandmothers spent summers in the countryside visiting their cousins and grandparents, like Nina does. On the English side we learnt that our ancestors moved south from Scotland to Durham and then to Nottingham, which in those days was like moving to another continent. Nina proudly told the class about her dual heritage, pointing out Scotland, England, Belgium and France on the map.

The project was linked to a class Assembly, where the children were asked to dress in the national costume of their ancestors. Did we pick English or French National Dress? What is the national dress of England or France these days? In the end we dressed Nina up in red, white and blue, the common colours of both flags. We printed off a flag from each country and pinned the French one in front and British behind and she did a few pirouettes for the audience.

As we finished off Nina’s Ancestors project my mother-in-law called to say she had remembered another important ancestor. Georges Jacques Danton was a famous politician, heavily involved in the French Revolution, and unfortunately beheaded for his political beliefs in 1794. I look him up on the Wikipedia and find out that he famously said ‘*Il nous faut de l’audace, et encore de l’audace, et toujours de l’audace*’ – “We must dare, and dare again, and forever dare.”

Marc feels proud to have such an ancestor, and we wonder whether he has inherited some of Danton’s genes. Learning about history and our ancestors does raise many questions though, especially how our opinion of ‘the enemy’ depends on where we come from and who is doing the teaching. How do we decide which side we are on when we have two nationalities, and when they are fighting each other? I have learnt that history really is relative to who is telling the story and both parents need to talk about their heritage and country’s history.

You can read more about how Suzanne and her family cope with bilingualism and bringing up their children on her blog:

<http://opol-family.blogspot.com/>

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I also drink a lot of tea (European, Japanese, Chinese...), for dinner I prepare Japanese meals and eat with chopsticks, I like to take off my shoes at home (I used to do the same in Brussels too) and I cannot sleep in a bed which is too soft, as I am used to sleeping on the floor (futon culture). I do not care about politics, economy nor religion, be it in my home countries or in Japan. So I'd say I'm a hybrid, but everywhere people find me exotic! I have suffered sometimes in the past, because I felt I wasn't really from anywhere. I'm starting to cope with it now, but it has taken me a long time.

I think our son will naturally be educated in a Japanese way because we live in Japan, and we are a Japanese family. Akira will eat my hybrid cooking, so he'll learn to like many things. I'd love him to feel like a "human being", as opposed to an improbable E.T.-type creature, but I suspect he will probably end up feeling mostly Japanese, rather than from anywhere else in the world. His name is Japanese, his environment is mostly Japanese, I feel it would be ridiculous to educate him as a "foreigner" in his own country!

While growing up he may or may not be interested in Europe, my former home, and he will, of course, be allowed to go there to study or to live there if he wishes to. But he is still only a year old now, and doesn't even talk yet, so I'd better just leave him the choice of his own future and avoid putting any pressure on him just yet!

I would like to end with these thoughts. I feel my story, and Akira's, are very common. I have known hundreds of people like me: "hybrids", "halfs", "doubles" etc. Nationalism is an out-dated concept in my eyes, especially in our globalised world. I think bilingualism, or simply being able to speak more than one language, is natural, and I see "monolinguals" as the exception nowadays. I hope one day people will stop asking me where I come from, and we'll be able to have more interesting conversations about our pastimes, jobs, philosophy, or anything else we choose. I hope my generation is the last one to be considered as "special", because I dream of a free world that wouldn't care nor fight for religion, culture, language or identity. How long shall I keep dreaming?

Queries



Bilingualism & Developmental Disorders

I am English, my husband is Italian and we live in the south of Italy. We have 3 children who are 12, 10 and 5. We have always used the *One Parent–One Language* approach and this has proved successful. Our eldest daughter Carla is perfectly bilingual and reads and writes like a native speaker in both languages. Her 10 year old brother Pietro is not as talented, but he is a competent communicator in English in spite of the odd mistake.

Claudia has raised a highly important and much misunderstood issue. Many speech and language therapists, educators and psychologists are unsure of how best to assess and support bilingual children, particularly if there is the possibility of more global developmental difficulties. As an example, we recently assessed a bilingual Samoan-English six year old who had been classified as intellectually impaired. Unfortunately he was assessed in his second language (English) which he had only learned at school over the previous 12 months. This assessment was clearly inappropriate and resulted in an inaccurate diagnosis. Further investigation of his skills in both Samoan and English, revealed that he was a normally developing bilingual.

The example given highlights the challenges bilingual children pose for professionals. Many normally developing bilingual children are referred for assessment because of concerns regarding their academic development. Conversely, many children who do have some form of learning difficulty fail to be referred to appropriate support because their difficulty is mistakenly attributed to their bilingualism. Research has shown that bilingual children have no greater chance of experiencing learning difficulties than

Their youngest brother Giovanni, however is a different case. We used the same approach with him from birth with frequent visits to the UK and the use of English books, videos etc. He was a late developer with both languages, and initially we didn't think anything of it. However, when things failed to improve, and we also noticed some behavioural problems, we decided he should see a child psychologist. Sadly, we were given a diagnosis of a pervasive developmental disorder, possibly related to, or caused by, a rare metabolic disease he has which was also diagnosed recently.

He is now having remedial therapy, both at home and at school, and speech therapy. He has the developmental age of a 3 year old. I have since felt a lot less confident about my management of English in our family life. Giovanni speaks in short phrases in both languages, perhaps more in Italian now because I have since decided to limit my use of English. I feel this is necessary even though it has upset a 13 year old balance. Is this a wise decision? I must admit, I do find it difficult speaking to 2 children in one language and to their brother in another.

C. Lacorte, Italy

their monolingual peers. Further, there is no evidence that children with learning disabilities growing up in a bilingual context are disadvantaged by exposure to two languages.

Providing advice is difficult without knowing Giovanni's full history. However, his use of short phrases in both Italian and English is encouraging as he appears to be developing the building blocks of bilingual communication. Young bilingual children are known to have many words unique to each language. After approximately three years of bilingual exposure (Giovanni's development age), children focus more on developing 'translation equivalents' so that the same concept is represented in both languages. Ensuring that Giovanni continues to be exposed to both Italian and English is therefore likely to promote development of both languages at this point in his development.

There are a number of principles of best practice for bilingual children with communication difficulties. The first involves assessment. Children must be assessed in both (or all) their languages to obtain a valid and reliable understanding of their total language capabilities. It is rare for people who are bilingual to have equal competence across languages. Consequently,

assessment in just one language will always underestimate their total language capability, and may result in misleading conclusions about the untested language. Another common mistake that assessors make is comparing bilingual children to data collected on monolingual populations. For example, it would be inappropriate to compare Giovanni's Italian skills to his monolingual Italian peers as he is not a monolingual Italian.

The languages of remedial therapy depend on the bilingual context. In Giovanni's case, where he has been exposed to both Italian and English from birth, both languages should be included in his treatment programs. Say Giovanni was learning, in Italian, to answer 'who', 'when' and 'where' questions about a book at school. At home, Claudia could then read the same book with Giovanni, drawing attention to the same concepts in English. This effectively develops cross linguistic 'bootstrapping' with each language supporting and building skills in the other. Children who have only been exposed to one language at home, and are then introduced to a second language at school are different. They may initially require therapy in their mother tongue only, as concept development and skills in this language will be stronger.

In the past there has been a misapprehension that bilingualism is somehow a burden. This perspective appears to be magnified where a child experiences learning difficulties. In most cultures however, the presence of more than one ambient language is ordinary. Everyone is expected to demonstrate some competence across languages irrespective of age or academic ability. Bilingualism is now perceived as an advantage even for children with an identified disability. For Giovanni to be a natural and effective communicator with his family and friends there is no need to restrict his language learning to Italian. All three children should receive the same pattern of communication from their parents. Claudia will provide the best models for her son in her mother tongue. Similarly Giovanni's father is best able to provide Italian language models.

**Barbara Dodd, Gayle Hemsley,
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and

**Carol Stow,
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Towards a Truly Multicultural Education in Colombia

Anne-Marie de Mejia



Colombia has had a long tradition of foreign languages in the school curriculum. It is seen as important that school graduates develop a pluralist vision of the world and come to understand different ways of thought and expression. The idea is that this recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity may also lead to tolerance and respect for the other. However, despite theoretical support for linguistic diversity, in reality, when bilingualism, or bilingual education, is referred to, the central focus is on one particular language – English. This is particularly the case in the last few years.

This reminds us of Fishman's criticism of bilingual education programmes [...] which limited their interest in cultural matters to singing and dancing.

One example of this English language bias can be seen in the Ministry of Education promotion of the National Bilingual Program. This is a project which aims to ensure that:

"Colombian citizens will be able to communicate through English with internationally comparable standards. This will contribute to the insertion of the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy and cultural openness"
(M.E.N. presentation, 2006)

Despite the reference to cultural openness, the emphasis here is very clearly stated: the only language mentioned is English, and the aim is to achieve competitiveness in international markets.

Colombia's status as a multiethnic nation is recognized in the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991. The recognition of the status of vernacular community

languages as co-official with Spanish in the areas where these are spoken, and the implementation of bilingual education in these same regions, gave rise to initial optimism regarding the spread of bilingualism. While there has been some progress for the minority indigenous communities, in reality, internationally prestigious languages, particularly English, have been prioritised. These are seen as providing access to employment in the global market-place. In contrast, bilingualism in minority languages has been generally undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness.

There have been voices raised in support of a more inclusive vision. It is vital that we in Colombia pay attention to these voices, who are warning against an exclusive concern with one language of power and prestige, however important it may be on the international stage. We need to look both outwards towards a globalised world, as well as inwards to focus on local complexities.

For many years in Colombia, there has been little real concern about the implications of contact with other cultures. Teachers, and parents whose children go to bilingual schools, have tended to assume that a vision of cultural enrichment will result effortlessly from contact with other languages and cultures. However, in many well-established bilingual schools there has been a noticeable emphasis only on the economic benefits of being bilingual in two internationally prestigious languages. Implications of cultural contact have traditionally been ignored, on the assumption that as students generally come from the dominant elite, there is no problem in this respect. Thus, the topic of culture and cultural relations, while not totally unknown, is of relatively recent interest.

Even when culture is tackled, it is often only on a superficial level. This reminds us of Joshua Fishman's criticism of bilingual education programs in the US which led to "the trivialisation of biculturalism", and which limited their interest in cultural matters to singing and dancing. In a study of 15 bilingual schools carried out by Harvey Tejada and myself in 2000, we found that the majority stated confidently that they promoted a vision of tolerance and openness towards other cultures that was consistent with an intercultural approach. However, they were less sure about the details of how to actually put these visions into practice in the school context.

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In The News

The Language of Living in a Ghetto

"We should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto,"

These were the recent words of the former US House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who is considering seeking the Republican presidential nomination in 2008.

"Citizenship requires passing a test on American history in English. If that's true, then we do not have to create ballots in any language except English,"

Gingrich's views were later attacked by Peter Zamora, co-chair of the Washington-based Hispanic Education Coalition:

"The tone of his comments were very hateful. Spanish is spoken by many individuals who do not live in the ghetto. [...] Research has shown that bilingual education is the best method of teaching English to non-English speakers. [...] There's no resistance to learning English, really, among immigrants, among native-born citizens. Everyone wants to learn English because it's what you need to thrive in this country."

Gingrich later denied that his remarks were aimed at Spanish-speakers:

"What I meant is very clear [...] frankly, ghetto, historically had referred as a Jewish reference originally. I did not mention Hispanics, and I certainly do not want anybody who speaks Spanish to think I'm in any way less than respectful of Spanish or any other language spoken by people who come to the United States."

Sources:

cnn.com
thinkprogress.org

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Multicultural Education in Colombia

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One specific area of difficulty reported by many teachers relates to the use of foreign textbooks, usually designed for native speakers of English. A student at Universidad de los Andes, Laura Fonseca, wrote a recent reflection on teaching Spanish at a prestigious bilingual school in Bogotá. She refers specifically to the theme of narratives produced by indigenous communities. Although teachers and students proclaimed that they strongly agreed with the principles of tolerance and plurality, and particularly valued the condition of Colombia as a multicultural nation, Laura gradually discovered that the reality was somewhat different. In fact, some of the students said that the stories of indigenous communities were from a different cultural background, obviously unaware of the dominance of people of mestizo background in Colombia. Laura continues:

"As I advanced in my investigations, I discovered that even the textbooks for Social Science, which were imported from the United Kingdom, presented a terrible vision of our country. They tended to emphasize [...] poverty, technological backwardness and violence."

When I asked her for more detail about the portrayal of Colombia in these textbooks, Laura said that the images that predominated were pictures of massacres and drug mules. There was only a very brief reference to the coffee industry, fashion, or tourism. No wonder that the students felt ashamed to be Colombian!

The expression "losing one's identity" is quite common in everyday speech, as if "identity" were a valuable possession which can be "lost". However, identities are not static objects, but are fluid and complex, evolving over time. In a recent article about bilingualism and identity Kanno, following Taylor, takes identity to mean "A person's understanding of whom they are". This understanding depends crucially on what others think of us. In the case of bilinguals, as they inhabit different language communities, they often receive very different self-images from various cultural mirrors, thereby developing different identities that may contradict each other. This is when the problem of anomie or cultural disorientation may set in.

We often consider the notion of identities mainly in relation to national identities, but I would like to address the idea of bilingual school identities. In 2002, Susan Spezzini carried out a study of language use in The American School of Asunción (ASA) in Paraguay. There was evidence of the creation of a special school language variety of both English and Spanish

(Spanglish), and that this language variety symbolised, for the students, a specific school identity. As one of the students says:

"When we speak English, we speak ASA English and when we speak Spanish we speak ASA Spanish. [...] ASA talk is also unique because of the Guaraní words that ASA students use. [...] I love the way students talk at ASA. [...] The accents, words and expressions we use make it possible to identify an ASA student anywhere." (Spezzini, 2002:70-71)

As Spezzini says, these ASA students demonstrated an awareness of the symbolic value of language and its importance for social/group identity.

The rise of 'New Englishes' (local varieties of English arising from the contact with vernacular languages) in different parts of the world, and the fact that increasingly fewer interactions involve native speakers of English, has contributed to the recognition of the non-native speaker who is a "fluent bilingual speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of

...the images that predominated were pictures of massacres and drug mules. [...] No wonder that the students felt ashamed to be Colombian!

accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker" (Graddol, 2006: 87). Within this context code-switching and language borrowing are seen not as failings, but as legitimate evidence of a bilingual speaker's linguistic repertoire. This also widens the debate on what constitutes acceptable usage by students in bilingual programs.

So what implications can be drawn from this discussion in relation to the development of bilingual education programs in Colombia? How can bilingual education programs actively help towards the creation of a more tolerant society? I think there are several ways forward:

Adoption of a critical perspective

At present, there is a tendency to accept, uncritically, the necessary connection between 'bilingualism' (in other words, English language proficiency) and better employment prospects. However, as Lina De Brigard observed recently, in fact, only 5% of the posts she deals with require bilingual staff. For the vast majority,

while English is desirable, it is not essential. However, she also notes that consciousness of the need for English has become “a way of thinking” for young professionals.

Development of bilingual education programs in the public or state sector

Silvia Valencia also warns that there is a real danger that the ‘discourse on bilingualism’ with English may lead to a widening of the gap between public and private education. This position was reinforced recently by Eduardo Muñoz, Vice Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, who stated that it was necessary to close the gap with respect to bilingualism, between private and state schools in the country.

Development of cultural sensitivity

As I have argued in this article, teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural implications of what they are teaching, not only in the area of Social Science but also in other content areas. They need to be able to help their students become aware of the value of different ways of seeing the world and, as Byram says, to adopt a critical and comparative methodology towards different cultural practices and beliefs.

Development of coherent intercultural institutional policies

We have seen evidence that biculturalism is perceived as a threat to cultural identity by some people. There is also evidence of the opposite scenario, where there is an almost exclusive focus on foreign language and culture, at the expense of the students’ own social and cultural roots. It is therefore important that bilingual schools develop coherent policies on intercultural relations, which would help students “reaffirm the esteem for our culture and the understanding of other cultures” (La Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana, 2005).

Revaluation of the role of Colombian bilingual teachers

Some schools (and parents) tend to think that the idea of importing native speakers (of English) as teachers adds to the prestige of the school. Thus, they spend a large part of the school budget hiring teachers from USA or UK, Australia or Canada. I would strongly advocate the importance of schools hiring highly competent Colombian bilingual teachers. They would act as bilingual role models for their students, and may also help to advise on possible conflicts of identity.

Understanding of basic principles of bilingualism and bilingual education

It is increasingly evident that it is not enough to hire teachers with a high level

of foreign language proficiency. It is equally important that both teachers and school administrators understand the principles of bilingualism and bilingual education, so that they are able to make informed choices about academic and linguistic issues in their specific bilingual contexts.

... teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural implications of what they are teaching, not only in the area of Social Science but also in other content areas.

Conclusion

This discussion has centred on the relationship between bilingual education and the construction of a more tolerant society in Colombia. I have argued that

restricting the notion of ‘bilingualism’ to Spanish/English leads to a distorted view of the complex interrelationships between languages, cultures and identities in the Colombian context. I have also suggested possible future directions for bilingual education for majority language speakers, in order to help to enhance the recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. I would like to end with a quotation from Abadio Green Stocel, a linguist from the Nasa indigenous community, who works for the National Indian Organization of Colombia (ONIC):

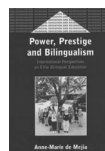
“It is not enough to recognise ‘the other’ in that dimension which interests us, or which seems correct, urgent or similar. In this case, we are looking at and projecting ourselves in the other, but we are not looking at the other as different” (Green Stocel, 1998)

An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the “Second International Symposium on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education” at Universidad El Bosque, Bogotá, October 29, 2005.

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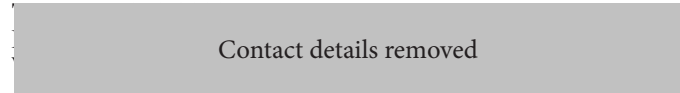
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