Policy Papers

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Linguistic diversity in the classroom: the wise teacher's dilemma

by Jürgen Jaspers

- **Urban schools in Belgium have become increasingly multilingual. This invites pedagogical challenges as pupils struggle with the instruction language, but it leads to ideological anxieties in Dutch-medium schools especially.**

- **Recent studies show that Flemish teachers have negative attitudes towards the use of other languages than Dutch. These studies call for anti-bias training and for a teacher education that lives up to the current multilingual reality.**

- **There are good reasons however for expecting that teachers will waver ambivalently between linguistic uniformity and diversity, because they associate both ideas with important, albeit competing, educational purposes.**

- **Developing positive attitudes towards multilingualism is possible. But the effects of such an endeavor may be limited, and the expectations about what teachers are capable of unrealistic, if it is ignored that teachers will also attend to linguistic uniformity, at least in the present circumstances.**

- **Policy debate needs to take into account that teachers have to strike a balance between competing pedagogical purposes and societal concerns. Advocates of multilingualism at school may be more effective if they associate linguistic diversity not just with attitudes of tolerance and respect, but also with knowledge, qualification, and assessment.**

Multilingualism in Belgian schools

Belgian schools have in recent years become increasingly multilingual. Estimates are that 20% of pupils in Francophone schools do not speak French at home, and that this can go up to 50% in some French-medium schools in Brussels. Official numbers for Dutch-medium schools indicate that in Belgium's second city, Antwerp, some 44% of pupils in primary schools and 31% in secondary schools were registered in 2013-2014 as not speaking Dutch at home; and that in Brussels some 70% of pupils in nursery, primary and secondary schools speak other varieties than Dutch in the family context –in the 1990s the proportion of pupils with two Dutch-speaking parents in these schools still stood at 80%. This evolution invites daunting pedagogical challenges to schools of both of Belgium's largest linguistic communities. It also invites ideological anxieties, especially in Dutch-medium schools since these are the outcome of a political struggle in which Flemings sought to preserve Dutch in a country that long organized itself in French.

Concerns about increasing multilingualism are easy to find in the discourse of consecutive Flemish education ministers who have been maintaining that acquiring Dutch, and Standard Dutch in particular, is a prerequisite for pupils' equal opportunities – regardless of the other varieties that pupils speak with their family. Schools have been urged to develop policies that demonstrate their commitment to this, while all teachers are called upon to be language teachers, irrespective of their discipline, and to speak Standard Dutch at all times. At the same time these policymakers underline the value of multilingualism, understood as knowledge of a set of economically valuable languages (French, English, German) that are to be acquired after Dutch.

Flemish teachers are also concerned. This transpires in various studies that demonstrate their negative attitudes towards the use of other languages than Dutch (the curricular foreign languages excepted). Several ethnographic studies have shown that Flemish teachers prohibit pupils' home varieties, discount pupils' literacy skills in them, fail to recruit these varieties as a didactic resource for teaching Dutch, and exclude them from the cultural repertoire of the school. School effects research brings out a similar picture. Pulinx et al. (2017) reveal that one third of 800 teachers in nearly 50 secondary schools approves of punishing pupils if they speak other languages, that only 1 out of 8 endorses the inclusion of books in these languages in the school library, that more pupils with immigrant backgrounds correlate with teachers' greater emphasis on Dutch, and that teachers' beliefs in the benefits of a monolingual policy correlate with their lower confidence in pupils' abilities. Reporting on more than 2800 pupils and 700 teachers in 68 Flemish primary schools, Agirdag et al. reveal that teachers in minority dominant schools expect less from their pupils, that teachers in interviews link poor achievement with incorrect use of Dutch or speaking other languages, and they argue that this invites a "higher sense of futility and futility culture" among pupils (2013: 35).

These findings suggest that Flemish teachers are loyal to their government, and they concur with much other research that suggests that Western teachers pursue an ideology of linguistic uniformity. This ideology is seen to silence multilingual pupils and to be at odds with the scientific consensus that pupils' home varieties can be a didactic resource for learning, that valorizing these varieties may improve well-being and educational success, and that a higher proficiency in a home variety facilitates a transfer of skills from that variety to a school register. Teachers' pursuit of this ideology is commonly explained as the result of their 'monolingual habitus', that is, of their exteriorization, at school, of a monolingual ideology they have interiorized elsewhere. Very often then there is a call for awareness training, for an attitudinal change, or for a substantial reform of teacher education that lives up to a multilingual reality.

Dilemmas and Ambivalence

While these negative attitudes are a cause for concern, they also raise a number of questions.

1. Teacher training in Belgium and elsewhere has long been emphasizing that a positive classroom climate is essential to learning and well-being. Unless pre-service teachers have been immune to this idea or immediately forget about it once they start teaching, the question is how they reconcile a strict prohibition of other languages than Dutch with their concern for a positive atmosphere in class.

2. Sociolinguists have argued that communication in contemporary urban classrooms requires negotiation rather than authority (Harris & Lefstein 2011). This is in line with a general, Western, conviction that interaction should be pursued in a convivial spirit and that in education especially this friendly type of interaction is not merely more agreeable than an authoritarian style, but also is more successful and, hence, more sensible. If so, the question is how Flemish teachers attune a firm imposition of language policy with their pursuit of convivial interaction.

3. Many language policy scholars claim that teachers never passively implement policies but interpret them in line with their own beliefs and knowledge. Others suggest that all "policies pose problems to their subjects, problems that must be solved in context" (Ball 1997: 270), and that consequently policy implementation "should be expected to display 'ad hocery' and messiness". If policies directly clash with practice "the resort to satisficing strategies and secondary accommodations may be the only reasonable and feasible response at certain points in time" (1997: 265).

4. Education researchers claim that such satisficing strategies are endemic: they argue that teachers are 'dilemma managers' because they need to reconcile opposing pedagogical goals (child-centered vs. curriculum-based knowledge). Others claim that pedagogical concerns clash with institutional, interpersonal, and societal ones. Pachler et al. suggest for instance that teachers have to respond to "multiple ideological push-and-pull forces" (2008: 438) and that it would be difficult to see the school as a homogeneous ideological site because teachers have to orientate "towards different ideological 'centers': themselves, their colleagues, their groups of learners, the head teacher, the school as an institution with a tradition, the education system, the curriculum, the government, society-at-large, and so on. Their discourses reveal traces of such multiplicity and layering […]" (2008: 440). If this is correct, one would expect to find a muddled application of language policy in Flemish schools rather than a strict adherence to a monolingual agenda.

5. Social psychologists maintain that it may be well-nigh impossible to find a pure application of a particular ideology, because ideologies must be seen not as internally consistent but as belief systems that contain conflicting values which, consequently, produce dilemmas. Billig et al. (1988) argue that the ideology of liberalism is a case in point: pursuing individual liberty at the same time evokes the counter-value of solidarity as a limit to unbridled individualism, and this invites dilemmas over individual freedom and constraint; people's devotion to equality of opinion likewise raises concern about when it is acceptable to draw on authoritative knowledge; just as a belief in emancipation through teaching a canon of knowledge raises concern about when it is appropriate to invest in the autonomous, bottom-up, learning of the individual. In such a view ideologies cannot be mechanically applied, and this makes Billig et al. argue for a conception of people as deliberative thinkers rather than pre-programmed ideological automatons.

While Billig et al. leave language out of consideration, their view can be usefully applied to this domain. It has been a hallmark of liberal societies to encourage large-scale communication, democratic participation, and emancipation through a uniform, standard variety. But this has subsequently raised concern about the limits of this pursuit, and increased the counter-value of linguistic diversity and its protection. Western societies therefore typically value linguistic uniformity *and* diversity, albeit to a different degree. But that no policymaker totally rejects multilingualism and that no advocate of linguistic diversity is in a position to reject monolingualism entirely, shows that they share a common linguistic culture, and that they only disagree over the relative importance of linguistic uniformity and diversity, not over their intrinsic value. Teachers are in this sense not confronted with a choice between two opposing ideologies – a 'monolingual' vs. 'multilingual' one – but with a single one that values uniformity and diversity, inviting a practice that that vacillates between these values.

Ethnographic research in four Flemish secondary schools

Long-term ethnographic research in four Flemish secondary schools confirms this (Jaspers, forthcoming). Although the data at first sight corroborate Flemish teachers' negative attitudes towards other languages than Dutch – given that schools underlined the importance of Dutch, that there were repeated requests that pupils speak Dutch, and that pupils who failed to do so could be punished – the actual imposition of Dutch was in each school rarer than the occasions for doing so: pupils often spoke other languages without reprimand, some teachers reprimanded but never punished transgressions of the language policy, others limited the application of the policy to the classroom. Still other teachers had doubts about the policy, and some said they were in favour of it while they ignored it regularly. Flemish teachers' behaviour was less than pure, in other words, and they seemed to experience tensions which they also articulated, as in this example from a teacher in a secondary Dutch-medium school in Brussels:

> "*Yes, at the moment we realized that pupils were speaking more and more French – I'm talking about some 12 to 14 years ago – then we thought OK, we have to do something, and we're going to punish […] we're going to deduct marks from every pupil we hear speaking French. But of course in the long run you can't keep this up. Our pupil group has changed so much that 80% of them now speak French, and if you have to punish 80% of your pupils, what are we actually doing?*" (Interview, 2015)

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Such a statement intimates a strong preference for monolingualism, but it also demonstrates teachers' awareness that emphatically imposing this on their current pupil population will impact negatively on the rest of their endeavors. Imposing Dutch insistently was also seen to go against its ultimate goal, that is, encouraging pupils to learn and speak that language, because too much emphasis on it was seen to give it a bad name. Flemish teachers therefore even recruit research to legitimize their lesser severity as something that invites better language learning:

> "Research has in the meantime shown that it's actually not OK to not let children or young people speak their home language because the fact that they can speak that home language, and are able to create links with the instruction language, would also improve their Dutch. We really want them to speak Dutch with teachers, and as soon as class starts, obviously, but we're not prohibiting them anymore to speak their home language in the playground [...] So we'd like everyone to speak Dutch all the time but we're aware that this is hopeless. So we've relaxed [our rules] a bit without really telling pupils literally to 'speak their own language'"
> (Interview, 2015).

Pupils in the school where this interview was held were not, however, informed that they were allowed to speak their home varieties during breaks – the school staff thus ostensibly maintained its policy while practically, at least in the playground, they ignored it. Numerous other official and less official relaxations of the Dutch-only policy could be noted. Many teachers developed more implicit strategies, for example, correcting all talking rather than 'talking in French'; they hinted at the rules without making them explicit, or they turned a blind eye to policy infractions when they wished to prioritize pupils' comprehension of subject matter and active contribution to the ongoing classroom activity.

On other occasions teachers even actively invested in pupils' family varieties. This investment could be semi-official and school-wide as well as informal, ad-hoc and associated with particular teachers: one school requested that teachers and administrative staff be able to address parents in different languages 'in the interest of the child', another distributed a multilingual greeting card (including Arabic and Turkish) on the occasion of a religious holiday, and several teachers in Brussels used pupils' knowledge of French for quick translation or as a springboard for new subject matter and improving skills in Dutch.

Drawing Conclusions

These ethnographic data do not allow us to say that Flemish teachers think positively of their pupils' home varieties, and staff in neither of these schools were close to abandoning their concern with Dutch. But the data do suggest that reporting negative attitudes about other languages than Dutch does not directly translate into an equally negative approach to the pupils who speak those languages. Rather than a pre-programmed agent of monolingualism the image of the teacher that emerges then is of a deliberative, thinking, teacher. Flemish teachers were obviously inclined to reduce the linguistic complexity at school, but this did not destroy their interest in, nor their need to attend to, the reality and value of linguistic diversity. To the extent that teachers in other urban school settings are facing the same dilemma between linguistic uniformity and diversity, the resulting ambivalence may have to be seen as a chronic feature of Western school life (see, e.g. Heller 1995; Martínez et al. 2015).

This does not imply that teachers have nothing to learn about how linguistic diversity can be integrated into (language) pedagogy. It is undeniable too that the relegation of linguistic diversity to the margins of school activity, as something that is condoned more than it is promoted, implicitly teaches pupils something about the value of their linguistic repertoires. It is open to question, however, whether an emphasis on the 'right' attitude to linguistic diversity will convince Flemish teachers to behave in a way that scholars find more desirable. Such advice reduces the issue to a matter of individual will or mindset, and it focuses on one concern while teachers have to reconcile

several, contradictory ones. Scholarly suggestions that teachers simply have to adapt to the 'reality' of linguistic diversity may not leave much room either for the teacher as an agentive professional.

Opposed to the image of the teacher as a compliant facilitator of scholarly desires, is the image of the good or wise teacher (Biesta 2015). This is someone who prioritizes particular courses of action depending on her judgement about what is desirable for certain students at a specific moment in their educational trajectory, and such judgements always depend on the purposes of education. Biesta argues that the purposes of education are multidimensional: they involve the domains of knowledge/qualification, socialization (explicit, or hidden), and subjectification (a concern with pupils' autonomy and emancipation). Wise teachers will strike a balance between these domains, since they know that an exclusive concern with one domain will have a negative effect on the others.

Policy debate on how linguistic diversity can be valued at school thus needs to focus on the purposes of education, that is, on which *type* of purpose one wishes to associate linguistic diversity with since this has an impact on learning materials, time investment, and didactic approach. If linguistic diversity is mainly seen as a socialization issue (a matter of tolerance), we can expect wise teachers gradually to reduce their concern with this in anticipation of assessments that focus on pupils' capacity for linguistic uniformity. Advocates of multilingualism at school may thus be more effective if they associate linguistic diversity not just with attitudes, but also with knowledge, skills, and assessment. Clearly, this requires determining standards of competence and knowledge goals that teachers can use to evaluate and test pupils, leading to the possible exclusion of some types of language use. New challenges will likewise emerge as teachers have to reconcile these new knowledge goals and skills with a world where linguistic uniformity is still an important value, and may be seen as an appropriate candidate for pupils' emancipation or socialization. Policy debate may thus be viable to the extent it deliberates how both linguistic diversity and uniformity can be associated with different, sometimes competing, educational purposes and to the extent it takes into account that good, wise teachers will seek to balance those purposes.

Further reading

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