Part I

Focus on Language Teaching and Teachers
Language Awareness, Language Diversity and Migrant Languages in the Primary School

Andrea S. Young

Why Does Language Awareness Matter in the Primary School?

Eric Hawkins, in his seminal work, *Awareness of Language: An Introduction* (1987), underlined the failure of schools to help children whose family language was a non-standard dialect or language different from the language of schooling, and who consequently did not arrive at school already equipped with the appropriate tools for verbal learning required by the school process. Research indicated that this initial mismatch between home language and school language skills was being further exacerbated by difficulties engaging with literacy in the standard written language of schooling. The gap between those whose families used the standard linguistic variety favoured by the school system and those whose did not, instead of being reduced by the education process, was in fact widening as the children progressed through their schooling.

More recently, several OECD reports have highlighted issues of inequity in the education systems of a number of member countries, which are frequently linked to proficiency in the language of instruction (OECD, 2012), notably for immigrant students (OECD, 2010). They call into question the language education policies and practices of teachers and schools and their capacity to respond effectively to the challenges of an increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse school population.

A second serious failure of the school system identified by Hawkins (1987) was its inability to tackle the issue of what he referred to as “linguistic parochialism and prejudice”, a “product of insecurity and fear of the unknown” (ibid. 2). Linguistic and cultural differences are the sources of tension in many parts of the world. Tensions associated with prejudices and negative attitudes towards difference, more often than not fuelled by fear, may spill over from the wider society into schools and classrooms. As responsible educators, teaching professionals in particular have a duty to recognize and fight discrimination at school.

Since Hawkins’ initial work on Language Awareness in the 1980s, we have entered a global era of mass migration and instant communication. New technologies have facilitated rapid and frequent contact between people, languages and cultures on a scale
never before witnessed. Learning to live peacefully together and to respect and value difference, rather than fear it, is of paramount importance if we are to promote well-being, safeguard social cohesion and pursue democratic ideals (Banks, 2008).

Although not a panacea to the challenges of providing an equitable, non-discriminatory education to all children, awareness of language, Hawkins maintained, constituted an important missing element to the school curriculum, which could contribute to reducing the gap between the empowered and the disempowered. Learning to understand language itself, how we acquire language(s), how linguistic systems operate, evolve, interrelate, are coded into written form etc., has the potential to unlock children’s prior knowledge and skills, brought from the home to school. By considering all languages and dialects as valid starting points from which to develop the standardized school language norm and which may be developed alongside each other in a complementary manner, schools allow marginalized children to have a voice and in so doing favour inclusive practices. Raising language awareness within primary schools can consequently make a positive contribution to anti-discrimination education by helping members of the learning community (children, parents, teachers, teaching assistants…) to better comprehend the complexities of our multilingual worlds. Through a deeper understanding of phenomena such as bi/plurilingualism (Grosjean, 2010), cross-language transfer (Cummins, 2008), multiple identities (Hong, Zhan, Morris and Benet-Martínez, 2016) and multilingual literacies (Cummins and Early, 2011; Sneddon, 2008), both learners and educators may feel more confident and better prepared to negotiate linguistic and cultural difference, viewing it as a resource and a right rather than as a problem (Ruiz, 1984).

**Upholding Language Rights and Developing Citizenship Education in Primary Schools**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

> In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

*United Nations, 1989, Article 27 of ICCPR*

Despite the fact that this convention is “the most rapidly and widely ratified international human rights treaty in history” (UNICEF, 2016), allowing children to use their own languages within the school context is still regarded as controversial and/or undesirable by many professionals (Gkaintartzi et al., 2015; Pulinx et al., 2015; Young, 2014). In a study combining quantitative data and complementary qualitative analyses from primary schools in Flanders, Belgium, Ağirdağ et al. (2014) revealed negative teacher attitudes towards the use of Turkish both at home and at school. The practiced language policies, policies “found within practices themselves” (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012: 216) observed in these schools reflected a strict Dutch monolingual policy and included repeatedly telling pupils not to speak Turkish and punishing them if they continued to do so. Teachers enacted such policies believing the use of the Turkish language at home and at school to be detrimental to pupils’ academic achievement. The
data analysis not only revealed these beliefs to be unfounded, but also pointed to the negative school climate created due to the banishment of Turkish, an integral part of the Turkish-speaking pupils’ identities, with detrimental consequences to their sense of school belonging and self-worth.

Promoting a sense of belonging and well-being within a class, a school, a community is fundamental to building social cohesion and encouraging participation in collective projects. Many school curricula now include citizenship education, which may refer to encountering otherness with a view to promoting tolerance. Data from a study of 127 pre-school and early primary school children in Tunisia (Ben Maad, 2016) who participated in a four-month multilingual multicultural programme, suggested that the participating children’s receptivity to diversity increased quite significantly. This would point to the importance of an early encounter with linguistic and cultural difference and a potential positive impact on social cohesion and acceptance of otherness. Ben Maad refers to this approach as “an Awakening-to-Languages (ATL) approach” (2016: 320) which may guard against ethnocentrism and promote active citizenship amongst pupils through the development of “values, knowledge and skills which will enable them to participate in social and political life as responsible citizens” (Hosack, 2011: 126, in Ben Maad, 2016: 321) in conjunction with “a pedagogy that promotes the values of originality, questioning and independence” (Osborne, 1991, in Ben Maad, 2016: 323).

Teachers as Language Awareness Arbiters

Although intercultural education and interlingual education, albeit less frequently, can be linked to citizenship education, Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell (2012) remark that the broad and vague objectives to be found in top-down policy place responsibility for the implementation and approach squarely on the shoulders of the individual practitioner who needs to exercise great sensitivity when dealing with the complex issues surrounding prejudice and racism. Blanchet (2012) also warns that cultural diversity can be a source of conflict as well as dynamic, enriching encounters, and that it is how the professional chooses to orchestrate these encounters that will determine the success or failure of such endeavours.

Research into language education processes and policies has identified teachers as key agents (Menken, 2008; Menken and García, 2010). Menken (2008) has underlined the strategic position of teachers who interpret and negotiate language policies and as such act as the “final arbiters of language policy implementation” (ibid. 5). Observing, recording and analysing when, where and how teachers act as language policy arbiters is an important first step in understanding the challenges and opportunities of teaching in a linguistically and culturally diverse setting. Bonacina-Pugh (2012) has used conversation analysis as a tool to uncover bottom-up, practiced language policies enacted by the teacher of an induction primary-level class for new arrivals in France. She has also explored questions of language choice and alternation in the multilingual classroom as components of “teacher- hood” (a term she uses to refer to ‘doing being’ a teacher), and revealed how interactions between multiple languages can be legitimized (2013). Other researchers have critiqued the monolingual lens through which language education is frequently framed, advocating a multilingual turn, which recognizes and builds on the multiple competencies of bi/multilingual learners (Conteh and Meier, 2014; May, 2014).
With the onus on teachers to deliver citizenship education, to steer children away from linguistic parochialism and prejudice and to legitimize and capitalize on the linguistic and cultural resources of their pupils, the role of initial teacher education and continuing professional development programmes is called into question. Preparing and supporting teachers and other education professionals to play a positive role and to function effectively in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts is clearly of paramount importance, yet many teachers feel ill-equipped to meet this challenge (Cajkler and Hall, 2012; Thomauske, 2011; Wiley, 2008). In another OECD report (Jensen, 2010), an international survey of 90,000 teachers in 23 countries revealed that 47% of teachers reported a high or moderate need for professional development for teaching in multicultural settings. Whilst aware of the challenges, many teachers remain unsure how to meet them appropriately. Pulinx et al. (2015) found that rather than questioning their own professional competences and responsibilities, teachers in a study in Flanders placed responsibility for proficiency in the language of schooling firmly in the court of the pupils and their families.

In the absence of adequate teacher preparation programmes, we may wonder how ‘encountering otherness’ and ‘awakening to languages’ actually take place within the primary classroom. Does merely presenting children with languages and cultures different from their own and leaving them to draw their own conclusions suffice when advocating not only tolerance of difference, but developing positive attitudes towards diversity? Kirsch (2008) argues that children can be encouraged to act sensitively and culturally appropriately through promoting the practice of decentring, viewing the world from an alternative perspective (placing oneself in another person’s shoes). These observations underline the central role of the person who is doing the encouraging, his/her own sensitivity, cultural knowledge and ability to initiate and accompany the decentring process. In other words, prior to embarking on a journey to encounter and engage with linguistic and cultural difference, professionals, upon whom the responsibility of educating the citizens of tomorrow falls, need to be themselves prepared to acknowledge difference, to be open to otherness, curious and eager to learn alongside their pupils about language, languages and cultures. As underlined by Anderson (1992), language awareness begins with teacher language awareness.

In order for a pupil to value all the languages within his/her language repertoire, to be able to consider them not only as additional modes of communication but also as a resource for furthering learning, s/he needs to be authorized by his/her teachers to use these resources. For language awareness (LA) to take place at pupil level, teachers need to be language aware. Therefore, teacher trainers, as well as key decision-makers and evaluators such as the management level of teacher education institutions, the national curriculum deciding body, the inspectorate and/or headteachers, depending on the country’s organization of education, also need to be language aware. But it is the class teacher, as the representative of the school in direct contact with pupils and families, who is the lynchpin, the person who embodies attitudes and enacts practices which encourage language awareness within the learning community. As remarked by Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell (2012), “These are complicated issues and therefore much will depend on the individual teacher’s ability to raise these issues sensitively and effectively” (ibid. 338).

Some initial teacher education programmes have attempted to introduce an element of LA into the packed curricula (Pomphrey and Burley, 2009; Mary and Young, 2010), but time and space are frequently scarce in these often intensive, short
programmes. Additionally, given that beliefs and attitudes are both subject to change as a result of environmental factors and personal experiences and yet can be deep-seated and consequently resistant to challenges, it may be necessary to pursue a critical LA approach through continuous professional development and in-service training.

**Language Awareness Lost: The Untapped Potential of Home-Grown Diversity**

Being aware of the otherness on our doorstep, embodied by the presence of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in our classrooms, is the first step in raising language and cultural awareness at school. Yet, all too often this concrete, local otherness is ignored while abstract, exotic otherness from distant lands, often unknown to the children, is imported somewhat artificially into the classroom. Refusing to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural difference already present in schools not only negates the value of the additional linguistic and cultural competences of these children, but also sends out a message to all learners and their families that languages other than those with an official curriculum status are of little or no value.

Researchers also underline the importance of the choice of terminology used to describe children who speak one language at school and another at home, stressing that pupils, parents and teachers are not indifferent to these terms. Ağirdağ et al. (2014: 10) write: “While a great part of Turks in Flanders are also proficient speakers of Dutch, they are rarely referred to as ‘bilingual’, but rather as ‘linguistically different’ (In Dutch: ‘anderstaligen’)”. In the Greek context, Tsokalidou (2005) also calls into question the term ‘alloglossa pedía’ (other language-speaking children) and García (2009) in New York advocates the use of the term ‘emergent bilinguals’ as opposed to ‘ELLs’ (English language learners) or ‘LEPs’ (limited English proficient students). Young (2014) raises the same concerns in the French context, where the terminology has evolved from ‘non-francophone’ to ‘allophone’, but the prestigious term ‘bilingue’ is reserved exclusively for elite school bilingualism in mainstream European languages, not for family bilingualism in languages of immigration. These terms are adopted by ministries and education departments and endorsed by professionals who use them unquestioningly. Yet such terms colour our vision and reinforce an institutionalized language hierarchy which frequently favours hegemony and ignores diversity.

The failure of society in general and school in particular to value language skills in languages other than the mainstream one(s) taught in schools may result in dramatic consequences. Parents may feel pressurized into abandoning their home languages in favour of the more prestigious language of schooling, even though their mastery of their home language may far surpass that of the school language. Low rates of family minority language transmission leave children, stripped of their bilingual potential, to develop in impoverished linguistic environments, isolating them from their minority language-speaking relatives and communities, whilst disempowering and distancing their parents from the education process. Furthermore, thwarting this natural process of family transmission of a linguistic and cultural heritage can result in linguistic insecurity and language loss trauma (Di Meo et al., 2014).

Some researchers have termed environments impoverished by language loss “language graveyards” (Rumbaut, 2009), underlining the wasted social, cultural, cognitive and economic benefits of bilingualism for society. In addition to this lost potential, by
delegitimizing “other” languages at school, second language learners are effectively discouraged or prevented from using their full linguistic repertoires, together with the prior knowledge encoded in these languages, as cognitive tools to aid learning (Cummins and Persad, 2014). Some researchers discuss these issues in terms of language rights and view such practices as *linguicism* (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008), *glottophobie* (Blanchet, 2016) or linguistic discrimination.

**Identifying Institutionalized, Discriminatory Practices Rooted in Misconceptions About Language**

Discrimination is not always overt and there are many covert, insidious ways through which minority language-speaking children silently suffer. This is particularly the case for very young learners who are entering the school system for the first time and who may not yet have developed skills in the language of schooling. A lack of knowledge about language, language acquisition and language learning on the part of their educators and/or peers may compound their difficulties in transitioning smoothly from their home languages to that of the school. Not being allowed to use their home languages at school in order to aid their learning and understanding is one example of how these children are unintentionally disempowered by misinformed professionals.

Teachers are usually unaware of the discriminatory nature of these practices. They will justify their school language only policy as necessary in order to provide sufficient input in the school language or in order to promote the shared language and avoid alienating those who already speak the language of the school. What they fail to appreciate is the often incomprehensible nature of the input for the learners of the school language and their consequent exclusion from class activities and interaction with other pupils. Given that comprehensible input and frequent interaction on a one-on-one basis are necessary requirements for language acquisition, practised language policies which ignore or ban the learners’ first language, and which have long been identified as unproductive by research, must be called into question. In addition to questioning such practices, it is also necessary to understand the misconceptions and language ideologies upon which teachers are basing their practices in order to deconstruct representations anchored by bilingual myths (Grosjean, 2010).

In order to address these issues, some researchers focus on the language awareness of teachers (Gkaintartzi et al., 2015; Young, 2014), their attitudes towards languages, their language ideologies and/or their practised policies (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012), while others focus on the pupils (Jordens et al., 2016) and their families (Gkaintartzi et al., 2014) or a combination of these (Thomauske, 2011). A variety of complementary methods may be used to investigate these issues. Quantitative approaches involving large-scale surveys and questionnaires uncover widespread phenomena, trends and patterns of a representative nature, which help to sketch “the bigger picture” due to the large number of participants (e.g. Van Der Wildt et al., 2015). In contrast, qualitative methods such as ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews and thematic, conversation or discourse analysis of transcriptions (Juffermans and Van der Aa, 2013; Saxena and Martin-Jones, 2013), due to the limited number of participants, allow researchers to delve into the detail and to probe further through additional questions and/or multiple visits to the site of study within the context of longitudinal studies.
Tackling Linguistic Parochialism and Prejudice through LA Activities in Schools

Linguistic and cultural discrimination at school may take multiple forms. For children with no or little personal experience of other languages and cultures, negative statements heard in their immediate environment may fill the vacuum created by a lack of knowledge about languages and cultures and encourage ethnocentric attitudes. This may lead majority language-speaking children to denigrate the home languages and cultures of their minority language-speaking peers and for the latter to feel uncomfortable or even ashamed. Helping children who are ignorant about language and languages to become aware of the extent and variety of languages spoken in both their local environment and throughout the world can contribute to a better understanding of the complex, interconnected worlds in which they live.

School-based language awareness projects designed to work on primary pupils’ attitudes towards languages, through multilingual activities (Dagenais et al., 2008), multilingual literacies (Tsokalidou, 2005), on their awareness of the local linguistic landscape (Clemente et al., 2012), or to develop phonological awareness (Lorenço and Andrade, 2014) are unfortunately not commonplace. Larger projects such as the European project EVLANG (Candelier, 2003), which developed LA teaching materials and approaches in five European countries, or the follow-up projects Ja-Ling (http://jaling.ecml.at/) and CARAP/FREPA (http://carap.ecml.at/), which extended the dissemination of findings and materials to 16 European countries, are even scarcer. Like multilingual islands in a monolingual sea (Jordens et al., 2016), these projects propose safe spaces (Conteh and Brock, 2011) where emergent bilingual children can perform their identities and where all children can develop a greater awareness of language together.

The Didenheim project, named after the small village in north-eastern France where the project was developed by teachers at the local primary school, was conceived in response to a series of discriminatory incidents at school between majority and minority language-speaking pupils. Objectives included in the minutes of the first parent-teacher meeting included “to promote the acceptance of differences, to learn about others and to attempt to break down stereotypical misconceptions” (Hélot and Young, 2006: 77). Although small-scale, this whole school approach, where teachers and parents worked in tandem to raise awareness about the languages and cultures of pupils and their families, clearly shows how the learning community can work together to raise awareness and combat discrimination.

Many language awareness projects undertaken in the primary education sector approach languages through a comparative and essentially linguistic lens, inviting learners to identify similarities and differences between languages, to search for linguistic regularities which allow them to view language as a system. The Coventry Pathfinder project (Jones, Barnes and Hunt, 2005), established in over 50% of local primary schools in Coventry, and the rich resources supplied by the associated website (www.language-investigator.co.uk/), is an excellent example of such a multilingual approach. The objective for these initiatives is to awaken a curiosity about languages within young children and to encourage the development of positive attitudes towards them. Byram (1997) has highlighted curiosity and openness as important elements of what he terms “savoir-être”, a constituent part of intercultural competence, ideally suited for development in primary education. Some language awareness projects, such as the Didenheim project.
(Hélot and Young, 2006), also strive to incorporate cultural specificities associated with particular linguistic groups such as culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviour (e.g. hand-shaking, bowing, kissing when greeting), culinary specialities and artistic practices (dance, music, painting etc.).

As well as benefitting children who come to school from migrant backgrounds and who are able to showcase their additional language skills and be proud of their cultural knowledge and heritage (see the Newbury Park School Language of the Month website for an excellent digital example), LA projects are also relevant for the whole class. Children who are not exposed at home to languages other than the language of schooling, often the national language, benefit from such comparisons as they highlight the arbitrary nature of language and help them to consider language as a system and to develop their metalinguistic skills. This in turn brings benefits for a deeper understanding of how the language of schooling is constructed and the rules by which it functions. In addition, through exposure to new linguistic systems, phonemes and cultural conventions, monolingual children are prepared for language learning per se. Not only do they attune their ears to perceiving different sounds, and comprehend that syntax and morphology may vary in different languages, but they learn that being able to speak different languages opens doors to other worlds. The realization that people from different parts of the world live their lives in different languages and that language learning is principally about learning to communicate with others, opening doors to intercultural understanding, different world visions, and thus learning to decentre are objectives that are often proclaimed in national curriculum documents for FLL but are rarely realized in practice (Byram, 2000), teachers tending to concentrate on the purely linguistic aspects of FLL. Lourenço and Andrade (2014) maintain that language awareness activities are “a way to make monolingual pupils step outside their mother tongue, freeing them from ‘linguistic parochialism’ and allowing them to recognise the validity of languages other than their own” (ibid. 2).

In contexts where “home-grown” linguistically diverse resources may not be present, languages may be introduced through multilingual approaches such as the “Discovering Languages” programme (Barton, Bragg and Serratrice, 2009). Aimed at children aged 9–11, this programme sought not only to enhance intercultural awareness and understanding, but also to develop linguistic sensitivity and literacy skills in English (the language of schooling) through exposure to five other languages, as well as to increase motivation for foreign language learning.

In addition to promoting positive attitudes towards languages and cultures, all these initiatives seek to nurture the innate LA displayed by children at an early age whereby they are able to process language in a natural, “unconscious” manner through exposure to and interaction with language(s). As already mentioned, young children are sensitive to the way people around them react to different languages and cultures, especially key adult figures (parents, teachers). Their natural curiosity and ability to analyse language can be encouraged, reinforced and structured by key adults through juxtaposition, comparison and questioning to construct links between languages. By engaging in such LA activities, children are encouraged to capitalize on their linguistic skills and knowledge acquired both in and outside school, formally and informally.

Multimodal LA activities that invite children to describe and reflect on language use within multilingual families, such as I live in New York mais je suis né à Tahiti (Kervran, 2012), and/or to pictorially represent and verbalize their own linguistic repertoires through the use of resources, such as Sophie et ses langues (Hélot, 2016)
proposed by the DULALA association in Paris, allow meaning to be created through two complementary modes (visual and narrative) and reveal speakers’ interpretations of their personal linguistic repertoires. These so-called language biographies have been used to encourage pupils to map their relationships with languages in a variety of shapes and forms (flowers, body silhouettes, trees, gardens, storybooks, photographs, poetry, first-person accounts…) with learners of various ages, by researchers and practitioners in a variety of different contexts (Busch, 2010; Kadas-Pickel, 2014; Martin, 2012; Simon and Sandoz, 2008). They allow learners to become aware of the different languages they come into contact with in their lives through the drawing and/or writing of a physical representation. Often they constitute the first step a school will take in recognizing the linguistic and cultural diversity of its pupils and their families.

Promoting Inclusive Language Education Policies at School: Challenges and Opportunities

Living with and through multiple languages is a reality for many children in our primary classrooms, but it is a reality that is not always institutionally recognized within the schools they attend. Paradoxically, whilst bilingualism in dominant European languages is revered and the learning of these languages nurtured, so-called minority, often non-European languages, especially those spoken by the disempowered, are sidelined and ignored. In some schools, in spite of respect for plurilingual identities and competences, reticence to work with other languages in the classroom still prevails, as reported by research in Portugal (Faneca et al., 2016).

Why does this mismatch between pupils’ language competences and schools’ language policies persist? Why do schools drag their feet as linguistic diversity gains ground? Why do certain languages fall on deaf school ears? Why are schools still unaware of the living linguistic resources freely available in their community?

The reasons behind the reluctance on the part of schools to engage with linguistic and cultural diversity are multiple and complex. Often, they are the product of ingrained monolingual language ideologies (Shohamy, 2006), deeply rooted in the social, historical, economic and political context and closely related to identity construction and relations of power (Pavlenko, 2002).

Looking at language education policies from a critical perspective, the notion of power and its relationship with languages needs to be considered. When decision-makers are uninformed, inexperienced and/or misguided about language and languages, bound by their restricted knowledge, they may feel threatened by the unknown. Disempowering those who are seen as a threat to the status quo of a given society by delegitimizing their linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) is a strategy employed to safeguard the established balance of power.

In addition, advanced technology, mass instant communication and new international patterns of migration are both facilitating the maintenance and development of languages in the individual’s repertoire whilst challenging the monolingual bubble within which many professionals still function. The complexity of interweaving, multilingual realities may generate tension, destabilization and fear, discouraging exploration of this largely uncharted land in mainstream schooling.

Furthermore, LA programmes frequently require teachers to learn alongside their pupils and sometimes, when the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge of their pupils are recognized and valued, to accept a redistribution of power and a reversal of
roles whereby the pupil becomes the expert and the teacher the novice. Some teachers may find this a difficult role to adopt. As one headteacher put it, “it’s a very challenging and demanding thing to ask a teacher to teach because only confident practitioners are able to say ‘Oh, I don’t know about this but we’re going to learn it together…’ It’s an opportunity and a threat” (Barton et al., 2009: 157).

For those who are able to rise to the challenge, move out of their comfort zone and seize the opportunity, it can be a most rewarding, exciting and stimulating shared learning experience for both teacher and pupils. However, even well-meaning professionals may inadvertently fall into the trap of reinforcing stereotypes if they are not aware of these pitfalls. Researchers have warned against the dangers of essentializing, stereotyping and teaching “the four Fs – foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts” (Kramsch, 1991: 218) when working with cultural diversity. The notions of intercultural competence, intercultural understanding and critical cultural understanding have been discussed by Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell (2012), who warn against a shallow, superficial approach to introducing young learners to cultural specificities, which they refer to as an iceberg approach to culture whereby “the more obvious reflections of culture are visible above the surface, but below the surface, nine tenths of the culture remains hidden (e.g. values, ideals, conceptions etc.)” (ibid. 334), which may result in reinforcing rather than exposing stereotypical attitudes.

But for teachers with limited knowledge about language and/or an incapacity to decentre and view the world from another perspective, the vacuum left by a lack of research-based knowledge may be filled by bilingual myths (Grosjean, 2010) and a consequent insistence on preserving an institutional monolingual habitus (Gogolin, 1994) through discriminatory practice in language policies. Sometimes, learners’ languages may even be banned from the classroom and/or the playground under the pretext of increasing exposure to the language of schooling and forcing learners to express themselves in the dominant language (Ağirdağ et al., 2014).

Another reason for the relative scarcity of school-based language awareness projects, in addition to the scant professional development in such approaches, is both teachers’ and parents’ unfamiliarity with them. Although schools and parents are usually keen for their children to start foreign language learning at an early age, convincing them of the benefits of learning about language and languages, as opposed to learning one foreign language from the outset, is by no means a simple affair. Most teachers and parents will not have experience of such a model of language education and may fail to recognize its benefits. Headteachers interviewed during the evaluation of the Discovering Languages project (Barton et al., 2009) stressed “the importance of ‘selling’ a language awareness programme to parents who are likely to perceive the purpose of learning a language in school as instrumental, i.e. to equip pupils with in-depth knowledge of one language rather than with a range of transferable metalinguistic skills” (ibid. 156).

Resistance to LA programmes may be compounded if migration languages (often associated with low SES and consequently placed at the bottom of the languages hierarchy) are included in the range of “taster languages” offered to pupils. Education professionals need to be aware of the social and political sensibilities of families in their catchment areas and to introduce these languages in an inclusive, considered way. In the Discovering Languages project (Barton et al., 2009), although originally Punjabi (one of the languages spoken by families in the area) was also to be included in the programme, specially commissioned materials were not produced in time to be trialled, and the opportunity to include discussions relating to “home-grown” bilingualism
and intercultural competence was lost. However, in the Didenheim project in Alsace, France (Hélot and Young, 2006), children initially worked with Alsatian, an indigenous Germanic language, before moving on to other languages such as Spanish, Mandarin, Brazilian Portuguese, Finnish, and only encountering local community languages such as Turkish and Arabic once the project had become established and better understood by all members of the community of learning. The decision to work with parents and to co-construct teaching materials and language and cultural awareness sessions addressed a lot of the difficulties of identifying or designing appropriate pedagogical aids.

Yet the idea of comparing and contrasting several languages and cultures should in principle appeal to the primary sector, as it alleviates the problem of insufficient confidence to teach a foreign language, often due to limited subject knowledge, which can consequently impact on sustainability and continuity. The Discovering Languages programme described their LA approach as a “practical solution to the issue of non-specialist language teachers teaching foreign languages in primary classrooms” (Barton et al., 2009: 146), which allowed the participating schools to offer an alternative form of foreign language education to the teaching of a single foreign language, for which many non-specialist primary school teachers often lack the confidence and/or subject knowledge. Cajkler and Hall (2012: 30) underline that there is “significant untapped linguistic potential in our schools”. Not all practitioners recognize this potential and may view the presence of other languages at school as a problem rather than a resource.

So what can be done to redress the balance, to empower the disempowered, to inform the uninformed and to raise awareness about the interdependent nature of relationships between languages?

The Role of Research in Language Education: From Policy to Practice

Research in the social sciences seeks to study and more fully understand phenomena through observation, experimentation, questioning and analysis of data. Empirical research findings provide evidence-based arguments upon which language education policies can be established and support practitioners in making informed, ethical and effective pedagogical decisions. Language education policies can also be underpinned by ideological choices and viewed as instruments designed to achieve certain political goals. Whatever their basis, Shohamy (2006) regards them as powerful mechanisms for legitimizing language practices in educational institutions.

Some top-down policies, devised by governmental decision-makers, have recently attempted to take into account learners’ languages. For example, the latest French Ministry of Education pre-school curriculum documents state that children as young as four years old should discover other languages, different from those that they know, through games, songs and well-known stories in order to raise awareness that communication can take place in languages other than French (MEN, 2015). Austria, Spain and Switzerland have developed curricula that have attempted to include the plurilingual repertoires of the pupils (Daryai-Hansen et al., 2015). Finland has also recently adopted a new national core curriculum that fosters LA throughout the whole curriculum and encourages pupils to be aware of different languages and to see culture as a richness (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016).

Such official policy documents are powerful instruments, especially in centralized countries such as France where all teachers are civil servants, because they clearly endorse certain objectives and practices. They also bestow upon teachers the authority
to teach specific knowledge and skills to which they can refer when justifying their pedagogical approaches to parents and sometimes even to colleagues and inspectors. However, these top-down, declarative policies imposed on teachers are not always understood, adhesion is not automatic and they frequently fail to make the transition from paper to classroom. Osborne (1991) draws our attention to the hidden curriculum, “the expectations of the classroom, the rules and procedures, the nature and quality of interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves” (ibid. 11, in Ben Maad, 2016: 322). Both Bonacina-Pugh (2012) and Spolsky (2004) maintain that it is the enactment of policies, the bottom-up, practised language policies in education, that has the greatest impact on learning due to their repetitive and personalized nature. This view relocates the focus of power and the potential for innovation in the classroom and raises the following questions: Who wields the power in the classroom? Who decides which languages are worthy of interest and which are not, and on what grounds? Who authorizes the use of languages other than the language of schooling for learning in the classroom? Who informs students about language and languages? Who can open linguistic and cultural windows onto our world? It is of course the teachers and support staff who, through their daily actions, words and attitudes towards the languages with which the pupils are in contact, negotiate power and reinterpret top-down policy (Valdiviezo, 2009).

Tangible results provided by bottom-up policies, practised on a daily basis in the classroom, reveal that what teachers do in the classroom has a profound effect on learners. Research has shown that when learners’ identities are reinforced, their well-being and self-esteem increases and they do better at school (Cummins and Early, 2011). Language is a key component of identity. Our first language of socialization, often referred to as our mother tongue or first language, is the language through which we initially perceive the world and through which we make the key relationships with those closest to us (usually family members). The role of affect in relation to language has been documented by researchers (He, 2010) as a key component in learning and well-being.

Acknowledging and valuing the language skills of children and their families within the context of the school plays a key role in pupil well-being and in home-school relations (Dusi and Steinbach, 2016). The reporting and analysis of data (Young and Hélot, 2003) from the Didenheim project not only helped raise the profile of this primary school initiative, but also enabled its pedagogical approach, evidence-based learning outcomes and the voices of the participants to be shared with a wider audience of researchers, teacher educators and other multipliers.

Pupil voice was also predominant in the evaluation of the Discovering Languages project in the UK (Barton et al., 2009), which used a mixed method of quantitative questionnaire data collection and analysis alongside qualitative interview data. The analysis appeared to confirm other research findings, pointing to the benefits of a LA approach in terms of awakening an interest in foreign languages and cultures and promoting positive attitudes towards foreign language learning.

Another innovative initiative which attempted to “awaken language awareness” through a dialogic approach during continuing professional development whereby teachers met regularly to discuss subjects such as the language acquisition/learning process, language learning motivation and the use of the pupils’ home languages in the classroom, has been attempted in Ireland (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2015). The findings of this action-research project suggest that, although time-consuming, sharing
believes about emergent bilinguals’ learning of the language of schooling and both affirming and challenging these beliefs through guided questions and shared reading of research publications, can contribute to changing perspectives as practitioners integrate knowledge about language with their own personal experiences.

Nurturing Teacher Language Awareness and Cultivating Linguistic Ecologies in Schools

All practitioners need to know about language. Language is a key component of any teaching/learning experience. But can language awareness be taught? Awareness is a personal, individual sensibility, which develops as a result of greater understanding, empathy, experience of and knowledge about language and languages. Engaging in collaborative, participatory research where practitioners and researchers work together in a complementary manner nurtures understanding through the sharing of knowledge and experience. By observing, documenting, discussing and evaluating school-based projects and innovative language practices, researchers can support and legitimize bottom-up initiatives, which, in some contexts, may struggle to survive. Practice-orientated, collaborative approaches in research projects invested and enacted by teachers (see the CUNY-NYSIEB project website for an illuminating example) can facilitate ideological shifts, reveal the linguistic competences and academic potential of emergent bilingual pupils and support the cultivation of linguistic ecologies in schools.

Pupil language awareness does indeed start with teacher language awareness and teacher language awareness can be nurtured through research-based initial teacher education and continuing professional development and/or simple curiosity, open-mindedness and a willingness to undertake life-long learning. Linguistic parochialism and prejudice can be contested and school language policies negotiated by teachers who are language aware, supported and prepared to act against discrimination to include all the languages of the pupils.

Related Topics

Language rights; citizenship education; inclusive language education policy; teacher education

References


