TEACHERS’ PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE, STANDARD LANGUAGE, AND MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS

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INTRODUCTION

This review deals with the teaching of national standard languages in multicultural contexts in Europe. It discusses ethnographic studies that describe and analyse subject English in England, German in Germany, Dutch in the Netherlands, and so forth. Its focus is on teachers’ practical knowledge as reflected in the discourses they produce in classrooms and in interviews. The early developments in this field are discussed in the context of the work of the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN), which was set up in 1981. Initially, this network developed and used ethnographic research methodologies to investigate how standard language teaching was nationally and culturally shaped. In the 1990s, its attention shifted towards the challenge of multilingualism and multiculturalism to standard language teaching. A similar focus emerged in European ethnographic research outside the network. The main thrust of the contributions discussed in this area is the attribution and legitimization of linguistic resources in standard language classrooms in contexts of immigration and multilingualism. Some new avenues for future research are also discussed.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

The story goes that the IMEN research programme on standard language teaching in Europe originated from the experience of one of its members who, as a German professor working at a Dutch university, was intrigued by cross-national differences in the teaching of ostensibly similar subject areas. ‘Grammar’, for instance, appeared on time tables of both German and Dutch schools, but classroom observations suggested that there were significant differences between the two countries in the teaching of grammar. This impression led IMEN to adopt an ethnographic and international-comparative perspective, using multiple methods of inquiry. Observations were set out to unveil classroom discourses of standard language teaching in various European countries, while interviews and document analyses were to unveil ‘rhetorics’, or discourses of standard language teaching realised outside these classrooms.

The research programme started off with a study on historical developments in the rhetoric on standard language teaching in nine European countries (Herrlitz et al., 1984). Drawing on Bernstein’s (1971) notions of classification and framing of educational
knowledge, classic educational publications, such as widely used textbooks for teacher training, were analysed. The analyses showed that across the countries, a paradigmatic shift had taken place in the 1970s from a literary-grammatical paradigm, which valued a literary canon and grammatical correctness, to a social-communicative paradigm, which focused attention to popular forms of literature and communicative adequacy. The study also indicated that this shift was shaped by the local socio-historical and geo-political contexts of the cases.

In a second study, the research focused on classroom realities of standard language teaching as experienced by teachers. The international design of this project implied that case studies were carried out in various countries and that researchers from these countries were brought together to allow for ‘international triangulation’. This technique of involving researchers external to a case in its analysis opened up new ways of making familiar rhetoric and practice of standard language teaching ‘strange’ (Erickson, 1984). In the study, teachers were asked to keep diaries of what they experienced in their classrooms (Holly, 1984). Besides, long, unstructured interviews were conducted with the teachers on their professional development (McCracken, 1988). These systematic and more spontaneous accounts resulted in a series of comparative portraits in standard language teaching. They offered illuminating insights in teachers’ developing professional practical knowledge as partly autonomous and partly shaped by their national and cultural context (Delnoy et al., 1988).

In a third study, classroom discourses were investigated. In two international-comparative case studies (Flanders-Italy-Netherlands and England-Hungary), data were collected synchronically and analysed collaboratively. Besides, a number of single case studies were carried out in which external researchers were involved for triangulation. A main finding of this study was that the organization of the field of standard language teaching in different curricular parts and the contents offered in these parts clearly showed culturally specific differences, whereas the conversational structures or communication patterns in the classroom did not differ that much (see Delnoy et al., 1992). The Hungarian case, for example, showed a curricular division between language and literature, the Dutch case a division within the subject ‘language’ between grammar and texts, of which reading was a subfield, and the French case showed a curricular structure in which spelling, texts, grammar, writing, and reading all represented clearly separated fields.

In the 1990s, it became imperative to focus on the growing linguistic and cultural diversity represented in the classrooms as this heterogeneity had the potential to challenge, in overt and covert ways, previously relatively stable discourses on national standard language teaching. Its common designation as ‘mother tongue education’, for instance, appeared to have become obsolete; its very defining feature no longer seemed to match the linguistic and cultural realities of students. In a variety of case studies, IMEN sought to investigate how these changing realities actually impacted on rhetorics and practices of standard language teaching. Using its international comparative methodology with key incident analysis as a main technique (Kroon and Sturm, 2000), projects were carried out involving case studies in Flanders, England, Germany, and the Netherlands (Gogolin and Kroon, 2000), and later also Norway (Bezemer et al. 2004). In the next section, this work will be reviewed in connection with similar European undertakings outside the network.
Ethnography seeks to understand the rules or norms that individuals within a society, community, school, or classroom have to know, produce, predict, interpret, and evaluate in order to participate in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Green and Bloome, 1997). The studies reviewed in this section are described along these lines. On the one hand, they attend to the attribution of linguistic resources to students in the national standard language and in immigrant minority languages. On the other hand, they attend to the legitimization of and valuations attached to these resources and their users. In the final part of the section, some problems and difficulties emerging from the review are explored.

**Attribution of linguistic resources**

When linguistic tasks are set up in language classes and accompanied by instructions on how to deal with these tasks, teachers’ beliefs about the linguistic resources that students have at their disposal come into play. Instructions observed to be in use in multicultural classrooms such as ‘write, as you speak’ (Neumann, 2000), ‘listen to what it sounds like when you make the word longer’ (Kroon and Sturm, 1996), or ‘listen to what it sounds like when you inverse the word order’ (Bezemer, 2003) are often rooted in traditional didactic maxims that have in common the monolingual assumption that students share particular linguistic resources in the national standard language (Gogolin, 1994). When students actually draw on wide-ranging commands in a variety of languages and conceptions of phonemes, letters, and grammatical principles, such instructions are bound to be misunderstood. In most of these reported cases students indeed requested clarification or contested the monolingual conception of language that underpinned the instruction. In everyday practice, however, such mismatches between the linguistic resources attributed to students and those to which they actually have access may not come to the surface of classroom discourse (Tuveng and Wold, 2005).

The linguistic tasks which students encounter in multicultural classrooms may also explicitly call on cultural knowledge. Sturm (2000) presents a classroom event showing how a teacher’s and student’s culturally shaped conceptions of swimming clash when completing exercises actually meant for practising past participles in Dutch. The cultural embeddedness of language is also repeatedly observed to be taken for granted in classes other than Language. De Wal Pastoor (2005) discusses excerpts showing how Christian-Western notions such as baptizing and godmother are taken as shared when teaching religious studies or during ‘circle time’ in a Norwegian classroom. Elbers and De Haan (2005) present an excerpt from a Dutch Maths lesson in which students have to count loafs of rye bread which are only identifiable on the picture in the textbook if one knows that rye bread, in the Netherlands that is, usually has a rectangular shape. Gorgorió and Planas (2001) present a Maths lesson in Catalan where the notion of a ‘will’ becomes a source of misunderstanding. Kroon (1987) discusses the confusion raised when Dutch maritime history is taken for granted when the origins of the French terms ‘babord’ and ‘tribord’ are explained.

The attribution of linguistic resources in languages other than the standard language
appears to follow a similar pattern. Kroon (2003) presents a Dutch lesson in a mainstream classroom, in which students were asked to translate ‘cauliflower’ and ‘peanut butter’ in their own language. The students, however, explain that they do not know, as their mother always uses the Dutch words for this food. Bezemer and Kroon (2006) report on special ‘language support’ lessons for seven-year-old Turkish/Dutch bilingual students. They were asked to translate words from Dutch to Turkish, but occasionally failed to do so. As in the previous case, the ‘Turkish’ students were taken to be ‘native Turkish’ and ‘non-native Dutch’ (cf. Leung et al., 1997). They were attributed linguistic resources in Turkish which they did not possess. Being born in the Netherlands, and immersed in Dutch schooling at the age of four, their proficiency in Dutch had developed in domains where they hardly ever used their ‘home’ language, and these languages in turn were used in domains where Dutch played no role.

Linguistic resources available to students can thus be misconceived in the classroom. Ongoing immigration and globalization will only reinforce the blurring boundaries between students’ ‘first language’ and ‘second language’ that create the caveats of such misattribution. The ‘Turkish’ student may not know the Turkish word, and at the same time know perfectly well what standard Dutch word order ‘sounds like’. Indeed, when she misspells words in the context of instructions such as ‘listen to what it sounds like when you inverse the word order’ the mistake may as well have been the result of factors other than a lack of certain resources in the target language.

Paradoxically, teachers may attribute differently when students’ linguistic resources are discussed in interviews. The Dutch teacher who encouraged a student to inverse the word order ‘so that it sounds better’ also articulated the belief that ‘it doesn’t sound weird to foreign children’ (Bezemer, 2003). The Turkish teacher asking students to translate from Dutch to Turkish believed that ‘there are also children who don’t even know the Turkish word’ (Bezemer and Kroon, 2006). Such mismatches between classroom practice and articulated beliefs may be indicative of the multi-faceted character of practical knowledge, with rhetoric changing at a higher pace than those beliefs informing the day-to-day classroom routines upon which teachers may have acted for many years (Anderson-Levitt, 1987).

**Legitimization of linguistic resources**

The second issue attended to in European case studies of standard language teaching in multicultural contexts is the valuation and legitimization of linguistic resources. Kroon and Sturm (1996) present a Dutch multicultural school where it was a rule generally acknowledged by all teachers not to have students speak any language other than Dutch in the classroom. When students speak languages other than Dutch, it was argued, ‘we’ are excluded and may believe negative things are being said about one of us, while at the same time, it was seen as a lost opportunity to practise Dutch. Indeed, in the classroom, students could be seen to be reprimanded for using Turkish to each other during a group discussion. Only on one occasion was Turkish used legitimately. A student had written, in Turkish, ‘happy birthday’, under a drawing for a boy whose birthday it was. When the boy, who did not speak any Turkish, attempted to pronounce and translate the Turkish congratulation, he was praised by the teacher. Those students who did speak Turkish
corrected his pronunciation and objected that the boy could easily have guessed the meaning of the message from the context. However, they were not given the floor. ‘Turkish’ was legitimate only when used by a student for whom Turkish was a ‘foreign’ language, rather than a ‘home’ language. Comparable reluctance to give room to students to display their knowledge of languages spoken at home – as opposed to knowledge of ‘modern foreign languages’ – was observed in Flemish (Ramaut, 2000), German (Neumann, 2000) and British multilingual classrooms (Bourne, 2000).

Blommaert et al. (2006) show how a Flemish teacher applies common-sense, ideological and professionally habituated, distinctions between some linguistic resources and others in the emergent literacy repertoire of her students. In her classroom, literacy was defined as Dutch-language literacy in the Latin alphabet. Other kinds of literacy were disqualified as lower-value or even value-less linguistic resources. The authors observed two types of disqualification. First, the disqualification of existing writing skills acquired in other linguistic contexts but potentially valuable as an instrument for learning, such as basic, grassroots literacy skills developed in English in Sierra-Leonese education. Second, the disqualification of ‘foreign’ accent in speaking or writing. Unlike ‘native’ non-standard accents, which the teacher sometimes used herself, the foreign accents would be corrected.

If languages other than the national standard language count as legitimate in European school contexts it appears that in most cases their use is limited to special classes, such as language support classes and reception classes, where its use is seen as instrumental to the regular curriculum. In the ‘language support class’ in a Dutch school (Bezemer and Kroon, 2006) ‘Turkish’ students and a bilingual teacher were physically separated from the regular class for one hour per week to learn Dutch through Turkish. Martin-Jones and Saxena (1996) discuss English reception classes with bilingual support teachers working alongside a class teacher, showing how the legitimate use of multiple languages in one and the same classroom is tightly controlled by the national standard language speaker. The bilingual support teachers were positioned as assistants, with the monolingual class teachers assuming the principal speaking rights, allocating turns to the bilingual assistants and shaping the patterns of code-switching across turns.

Mondana and Gajo (2001) report on reception classes for Portuguese children in French-speaking Switzerland. They discuss key excerpts illustrating uses of bilingual resources ranging from rejection or disqualification of bilingualism to the recognition of bilingualism. They conclude that languages other than French were most often given attention when a more communicative approach to language teaching was adopted. This is also the conclusion that Bezemer et al. (2004) draw from a comparison of Dutch and Norwegian instances of dealing with multilingualism. In the Dutch case, a teacher-centred approach was accompanied by a reluctance to have students display linguistic resources other than the standard language. In the Norwegian case, a more communicative approach was accompanied by occasional room for the students to use their home language.

Occasionally, students have been observed contesting the linguistic norms and valuations operating in the classroom. Jaspaert and Ramaut (2000) conclude that those students who openly questioned the linguistic norms in the classroom they studied were the most proficient students of the class. Following Bernstein (1971) and Bourdieu (1977), they argue that especially those students who do not belong to the dominant
language community will increase their chances of symbolic gain and through that improve their position in the class when they accommodate to the norms of the linguistic market (see Language Choice and Symbolic Domination, Volume 3). Frey (2000) noted that it were precisely those children whose contributions had an impact on the educational practice who understood the teacher’s linguistic norms. Jaspers (2005), however, reports how students taken to represent a minority group use their awareness of linguistic norms to what they themselves call ‘fool around’. Moroccan boys in a secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium, were observed ‘playing’ with three different varieties of Dutch, i.e., Antwerp dialect, ‘poor’ Dutch and standard Dutch. By simulating hysterical indignation, complete incompetence or extreme cooperation in the mainstream class through creative use of these language varieties, they did not directly contest but ‘sabotaged’ linguistic norms. In raising confusion and ambiguity, they entertained themselves and others, thus quite literally taking centre stage in tedious lessons. At the same time, it tacitly conveyed their misgivings about linguistic rules, attitudes, stereotypes and asymmetrical social relations inside and outside the school.

The reported practices of legitimization of the national standard language in European schools show that students speaking a variety of languages need to become acquainted with situated sets of linguistic norms to participate in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Green and Bloome, 1997). These include a sense of appropriateness of school-based uses of linguistic resources within varying constellations of location, speaker, and audience. Contestations of these norms were initiated by those students who could be expected to be acquainted with the norm, in most cases but not exclusively members of the dominant language community. Teachers were observed to allow for marginal infringements of the norm when the use of other languages was instrumental to the learning objective. In other cases, contestations were unacceptable and sanctioned.

The legitimization practices echo different socio-political discourses. The national standard language may be statutory defined as the official language of communication in classrooms. Curricular prescriptions may facilitate the (instrumental) use of languages other than the national standard language in mainstream or separate classrooms. National or local policies on ‘intercultural education’, ‘inclusive education’, or language-in-education may promote reflection on linguistic and cultural diversity. Besides, there are ongoing debates across European countries as to how to organize a multicultural society, with positions ranging from assimilation to separatism (Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship, Volume 1). These discourses form the backdrop of the classroom practices portrayed here.

**Problems and difficulties**

Two difficulties emerge from the documented practices of national standard language teaching in multicultural contexts. As regards the attribution of linguistic resources, it could be observed how misattributions in both the standard language and other languages may result in ineffective instruction. It was predicted that growing diversity and hybridity will only reinforce the difficulty of making assumptions as to precisely which linguistic resources students have at their disposal. Assumptions of what students already know are nonetheless inevitable in pedagogic contexts where the teacher is in control of sequencing
and pacing curriculum content. Weaker framing is less dependent on insight in individual students’ language backgrounds.

With respect to legitimization and valuation, it could be observed how disqualification of linguistic resources might lead to missed opportunities to learn. Existing speaking and writing skills acquired in other linguistic contexts might be potentially valuable as an instrument for learning to speak and write in the national standard language (Blommaert et al., 2006). Recognition of such resources as valuable in their own right might also promote self-awareness and identity formation. At the same time, incorporating knowledge and practices which evolve outside school into the curriculum probably always involves some form of overt or covert transformation (Moss, 2001). It is this transformed, schooled knowledge that offers pathways to educational qualifications which teachers and students are pressured to create and pursue.

From a methodological perspective, a number of difficulties emerge from the review. Most of the reviewed case studies are, indeed, about one class, and one teacher. And most of the analyses appear critical towards the practices they describe. The episodes presented in the studies were usually selected as they struck the researcher, thus potentially leaving episodes unattended which might qualify more convincingly as ‘good practice’. However, the strength of the accounts offered lies in their power to unveil socially and culturally shaped processes of attribution, legitimization and valuation of linguistic resources that have implications for equal opportunities to learn. Some of these mechanisms might be reshaped through growing awareness of multilingualism, others might erode as new generations of teachers embark on their career.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The review has shown some of the ways in which immigration and internationalisation have challenged and occasionally destabilised traditional conceptions of national standard language operating in European classrooms. These challenges will continue to develop. National standard language teaching has played a key role in recent national debates on what citizens should know and do in order to count as a member of the national culture. In 2005, various European governments initiated such debates themselves. In Germany, it was proposed to make German the compulsory language of communication not only in classrooms but also on schoolyards in Berlin (Presseerklärung, 2006). In the Netherlands, the minister of immigration and integration suggested to formulate a civil code of conduct in which speaking Dutch in public is declared the norm. The minister of education appointed a committee that is to propose a cultural-historical and socio-cultural canon (Opdrachtbrief, 2005). Future research should account not only for the provenance of such reaffirmations of monolingualism and monoculturalism but also for its ramifications in multicultural classrooms.

This future research would benefit from further integration of the foci on teacher and student. In trying to understand what goes on in language classrooms both the teacher’s and the student’s ‘emic’ perspectives are indispensable. Much of the work reviewed here centred on teachers’ practical knowledge. The understanding of this perspective might be reinforced when teachers are involved again as researchers in classroom research, as suggested already two decades ago in English and American publications (see e.g.
Through participation in classroom research teachers would also gain a deeper understanding of their own behaviours, which could lead to (more) apt ways of dealing with heterogeneity and diversity in their day-to-day practice. At the same time, students’ perspectives should be an integrated part of future studies on standard language teaching. In view of popular discourses that problematise multilingual students’ competence of the national standard language it is paramount to describe and understand the creative ways in which these students use their repertoire of linguistic resources inside and outside classrooms.

Achieving understandings of the attribution, legitimisation and valuation of these resources also bears on the construction of teacher and student identities (Classroom Discourse and the Construction of Learner and Teacher Identities, Volume 3). Where students may be defined as ‘foreign’, ‘different’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘second-language learner’, ‘Muslim’, ‘non-native’ and so on in discourses inside and outside the classroom students often have much more complex self-ascribed identities. These intricate relations between language and identity in school deserve further research (Spotti, 2006).

Sociolinguistic and school ethnography remains a fruitful approach to these matters (Jaspers, 2005; Green and Bloome, 1997). It provides detailed accounts of language-in-use in specific settings, taking educational practice as an ensemble of interrelated texts. The methodological challenge that lies ahead is to account for the multimodal construction of these texts. Recent classroom studies show that discourses on standard language teaching are indeed realised not only through speech and writing, but also, and often primarily, through image, gesture, wall displays and other modes of representation and communication that have remained largely unattended in the research reviewed here (Multimodal Discourse across the Curriculum, Volume 3). A multimodal lens also opens up new ways of understanding the communicative resources that novice students have to acquaint themselves with, which range from, e.g., ‘Dutch word order’ in the mainstream classroom to ‘Turkish gaze’ in the ‘language support’ classroom.

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CROSS-REFERENCES
Language Education, Pluralism and Citizenship, Volume 1
Multimodal Discourse across the Curriculum (Volume 3)
Classroom Discourse and the Construction of Learner and Teacher Identities (Volume 3)
INDEX

Author index

Anderson-Levitt, K.
Bernstein, B.
Bezemer, J.
Blommaert, J.
Bloome, D.
Bourdieu, P.
 Bourne, J.
 Creve, L.
 De Haan, M.
 De Wal Pastoor, L.
 Delnoy, R.
 Elbers, E.
 Erickson, F.
 Frey, S.
 Gajo, L.
 Gogolin, I.
 Gorgorió, N.
 Green, J.
 Harris, R.
 Haueis, E.
 Herrlitz, W.
 Holly, M.L.
 Hopkins, D.
 Jaspaert, K.
 Jaspers, J.
 Kamer, A.
 Kroon, S.
 Leung, C.
 Martin-Jones, M.
 McCracken, G.
 Mondana, L.
 Moss, G.
 Neumann, U.
 Peterse, H.
 Planas, N.
 Ramaut, G.
 Rampton, B.
 Ryen, E.
 Saxena, M.
Spotti, M.
Sturm, J.
Tuveng, E.
Willaert, E.
Wold, A.H.

Subject index

multicultural classroom
multilingual classroom
standard language teaching
mother tongue teaching
immigrant minority language teaching
intercultural education
language support
national identity
key incident analysis
international triangulation
international-comparative studies
sociolinguistic ethnography
teachers’ practical knowledge
legitimate language
disqualification

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