

## Book Review

### *Medium of Instruction Policies. Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?*

J.W. Tollefson and A.B.M. Tsui (eds). Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Pp. ix + 306. ISBN 0-8058-4277-2 (hbk): €85.65. ISBN 0-8058-4278-2 (pbk.): €42.50.

Medium of instruction policies are central components of language policies in that the success of educational programmes, or the recession or progression or even 'death' or 'revival' of languages within a state can depend on them to a considerable extent. These policies are always embedded in a complicated network of political and social causes and effects, which have to be analysed comprehensively, in their historical context and for each country individually, in order to understand, or implement, any particular policy. This is not to deny that various kinds of such policies can have a number of common general features and regularities. The details of such basic insights are displayed in the 14 chapters of the above book. There is a systematic introduction by the editors, followed by Part I 'Minority languages in English-Dominant States' (three chapters), Part II 'Language in Post-Colonial States' (six chapters), and Part III 'Managing and Exploiting Language Conflict' (four chapters, the last of which is a summary by the editors), plus an author and subject index.

The three 'English-dominant states' of Part I are New Zealand, Great Britain and the USA, in each case the function of languages other than English as the medium of instruction is examined, especially of Maori (New Zealand), Welsh (Britain) and immigrant languages other than English as well as the Native American languages (USA). All three countries have gone through a history of rigorous linguistic assimilation. The USA repeatedly experienced a state of 'national language panic', especially during WW I vis-à-vis German and recently Spanish, and has, as T.L. McCarty's analysis suggests (pp. 71- 93), a more assimilationist medium of instruction policy today compared to the other two countries. New Zealand and Britain have shown more regard for their indigenous minority languages (though not for immigrant languages) in recent years, which also shows in their employment as the medium of instruction in schools. The recent history of New Zealand's policy regarding the Maori language and culture is highlighted by S. May, with an optimistic outlook (pp. 21-41). Initial assessments of the newly institutionalised Maori elementary schools (Kura Kaupapa), with Maori medium instruction, 'suggest that the academic progress of children (. . .) is comparable to their mainstream peers, while providing the added advantage of bilingualism' (p. 35). One wonders, however, about the possibility of future problems on the more advanced school levels. Such problems are addressed in D.V. Jones' and M. Martin-Jones' report on Wales in Britain, where a high percentage (about 40%) of 'fluent speakers

of Welsh (...) are opting for predominantly English-medium schooling at secondary level (...), especially 'for subjects such as mathematics and the sciences' (p. 55). There is some information lacking – in all three contributions – as to whether all the social strata of the respective minorities equally participate in medium of instruction schooling in their own (native) language, and whether members of the community actually carry the same social burden in this endeavour, especially whether lower or working class pupils acquire the skills in the majority language necessary for professional or economic success in mainstream society.

Part II comprises countries of very different levels of socio-economic development ranging from Hong Kong and Singapore over Malaysia, the Philippines and India to – mainly black – Africa (without the South African Republic). To have a closer look at the more developed countries promises to be particularly revealing, since it could show the possibilities for the other countries in the course of their development. It seems hardly exaggerated to rank Hong Kong and Singapore among the linguistically luckiest countries in the world. They both have almost full access to the two most economically valuable languages on our globe, or at least potentially most valuable in the future, namely English and Chinese (Cantonese in Hong Kong, Putonghua in Singapore and Modern Written Chinese in both places). Communicative and representational functions of language, or economy and ethnic identity, thus happily coincide. For Hong Kong, according to A.B.M. Tsui (pp. 97–116), the retention of English together with the addition of Putonghua balances the traditional identity of the former British colony with the new, or regained, national affiliation with China; and for Singapore, according to A. Pakir (pp. 117–133), the English language fulfils the need for international communication, while the Chinese language functions as the symbol of the ethnic identity of a substantial part of the population. In both cases, however, economic or political needs seem to have outweighed identity needs. In the case of Hong Kong there has been an increase in the use of Puntonghua, which has also been introduced as a widely taught school subject, while indigenous Cantonese still serves as the medium of instruction together with English, and in Singapore the two other official languages (besides English and Chinese), namely Malay and Tamil, have been reduced to a clearly subordinate status. What is particularly interesting is the fact that the status of English, the former colonial language, has never been seriously curbed but has been defended against attempts at substituting it by Chinese in the case of Hong Kong, and been placed on top of the rank order of languages in Singapore, more for pragmatic than for symbolic reasons in both cases, it seems, in order to maintain the communities' competitive edge in times of globalisation.

Malaysia, in contrast, has restrained the status and function of English and substituted it by Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) as the sole official language of the country and the sole medium of instruction in public schools and universities (S. Kaur Gill, pp. 135–152). Interestingly however, English remained the preferred medium of instruction in private institutions of higher learning, which has recently been explicitly approved in a new education act (1969: 147) – in spite of fierce opposition from the side of linguistic nationalists.

'Unfortunately, it is the students of higher learning, educated in the Bahasa Malaysia medium of instruction, who are loosing out in this linguistic battle.' They do not acquire the necessary skills in English, which are 'central to university education' and for 'crossing the bridge between university and industry', and this is an 'obstacle' for the entire country 'in this age of global competition, where English is the common working language in much of the world.' (p. 146) Worse even, the medium of instruction division of the country finally results in a deepened ethnic divide: 'the majority of students in private universities are Chinese', while the majority of students in public universities are Malay (p. 147). The latter 'have become victims of the universities' adherence to nationalistic language policies' (p. 148), i.e. of clinging to Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction. Only lately has the Malaysian government introduced measures to change the situation. In 2002, the Prime Minister declared that science and mathematics will be taught in English (p. 150). Malaysia is a case in question, which should be carefully studied by all protagonists of a relatively small and insufficiently modernised language of instruction, especially for a not yet fully developed country or one of limited resources. Purging schools and institutions of higher learning from the previously colonial languages and introducing an indigenous language as the medium of instruction may not only hamper modernisation of education, and of the country as a whole for that matter, but in addition increase social division, because the rich and the powerful will still get their education in English or another modernised and international language, while the majority of the poorer population will educationally be left behind. The lesson that can be learned from the Malaysian experience is, however, not sufficiently stressed, in my view, by the editors, neither in their introduction nor in their summary of the book, because they seem to be too obsessed with fears of 'linguistic imperialism' and 'language death'. They even appear, at times, to be more concerned about the fate of languages than the fate of people.

This criticism of course is not meant to imply that elementary schooling, especially acquisition of literacy, should be done in a foreign language. Rather, countries should care for both: for elementary teaching in the pupils' native language, or a linguistically closely-related standard variety, and for advanced teaching in a modernised and international language. Guaranteeing a smooth and successful transition from one language to the other seems to be particularly difficult. This is one of the findings, among others, of I. Nical's, J.J. Smolicz', and M.J. Secombe's questionnaire study of rural students in the Philippines (pp. 153- 176). I am not sure, however, whether the experiences made in Spain with regional language teaching would really be a useful model for the Philippines, as the authors suggest (p. 173). E. Annamalai, in his analysis of the language situation in India (pp. 177-194), stresses the necessity of both, 'the development of literacy in the mother tongue' at the elementary level and 'improving the quality of English teaching at middle and secondary levels.' He also points out 'the positive role of mother-tongue literacy in learning another language' (p. 192). There are, however, more basic educational deficits in a country where '[o]ne third of all children in the 6 to 14 years-of-age group were out of school in 1991' (ibid.).

Similar concerns are valid in the case of the African countries scrutinised by

H. Alidou (pp. 195–214). There is a vast dearth of adequate teaching materials and teacher training in most of these countries as well as an appalling gap of power and wealth between the ruling elite, who are trained abroad in English or other modernised and international languages, and the largely illiterate majority of the population. Alidou convincingly argues that African countries 'have invested too much in European education over the last 40 years' and that basic education has been badly neglected. In his view, waiting for indigenous languages to be fully standardised, or even modernised, before employing them for literacy programmes amounts to just 'a strategy of delay' (p. 210). Rather one has to make do with only partially standardised languages, and even with teachers who do not have full command of the existing partial standard, to achieve at least some educational progress. In such a desperate situation concern for the education of people must, in my view, have absolute priority over the maintenance of small languages. Alidou does not seriously tackle the difficult, and potentially explosive, question of selection among the multitude of African languages for educational purposes, or of combining wide ranges of varieties under the single roof of a standard variety, to make 'the promotion of African languages as media of instruction', which he advocates, economically feasible.

Conflicts are the topic of the final section. V. Webb gives a comprehensive and critical view of post-apartheid language policy in South Africa (pp. 217–239). Here again the 11 official languages are far from equal in prestige and educational value. Students have a choice for their language of instruction. It is hardly astonishing that 'English is positively skewed (selected by 66% of the Gauteng learners as medium of instruction, yet the home language of only 13%) with the Bantu languages all in a negative skewed relationship between home language and choice as medium of instruction.' (p. 233) Only Afrikaans is chosen by nearly exactly the same percentage of students who use it as their home language. In other words, Black Africans, or the great majority of them, do not want to be educated in their own native languages, but in English, except those – I am afraid – who are not fully aware of the consequences, i.e. the least informed or most deprived parts of the Black population. None of the Whites would consider being educated in an indigenous African language. I am very doubtful whether Webb's suggestions of how to improve the situation really aims in the right direction, namely 'changing language attitudes (or, in another formulation, combating economic, political, and sociocultural globalisation, which leads to the continued marginalisation of minority language communities), and the development of cost-effective language-policy proposals' (p. 237). While the latter sounds reasonable, vague as it remains, the former might very well be a recipe for economic disaster for a country like South Africa.

K.A. King's and C. Benson's study of bilingual intercultural education (BIE) in Bolivia and Ecuador, in indigenous languages, mainly Quechua or Guaraní and Spanish leaves room for hope in spite of the observed shortcomings of the educational programmes. The authors believe that the new policies are at least carried by good intentions, namely to raise the educational standards of the indigenous population and to spread linguistic tolerance and pluralistic values. These policies do, however, encounter opposition from 'not only the Spanish-

speaking elites, but also indigenous people who value schooling in Spanish and see it as their escape from further discrimination' (p. 255). Are they wrong if they believe so? In my view, there would be a convincing litmus test for their being mistaken, namely if the country's elite also strove to acquire skills in the languages recommended to the indigenous people for their medium, or at least subject, of instruction. It may seem unfair to end with the observation that the editors, and the authors of this book, who so fervently recommend linguistic plurality, did – judging from their references – hardly care (with very few exceptions) to look at any publication written in languages other than English, but their language preference is in fact, in my view, related to the difficulty of employing a plurality of languages as the medium of instruction.

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