

Book Reviews

Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?

J.W. Tollefson and A.B.M. Tsui (eds) Mahwah, NJ. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Pp. xii + 306. ISBN 0-8058-4278-0 (pbk): \$37.50. ISBN 0-8058-4277-2 (hbk): \$79.95.

In the post-World War scenario, education has progressively been asserting its dominance as 'a politico-economic institution' playing a crucial role in determining social hierarchies, political power and economic opportunities (Khubchandani, 1981: 70). Many educators proclaim lofty objectives of education as a viable change agent in its own right. At the same time, it is ironical that with increasing dependence on funding from the State, education tends to become more and more subservient to the vagaries of the established order.

Hitherto many studies on language and education have focused on the Mother Tongue medium as a pedagogical issue on the grounds of educational efficacy. Several educational, psychological, sociopolitical, and historical arguments have been advanced in support of the axiom that the best medium for teaching a child is his/her mother tongue. For example, UNESCO argued:

Psychologically, it [mother tongue] is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. (1953: 11)

In its latest report, UNESCO (2003) re-affirms that mother tongue medium is an essential component of inter-cultural education and linguistic diversity that ensures respect for fundamental rights (for a detailed discussion, see Khubchandani, 2003). The ideology of language in school is interwoven with the ideology of education in society. Since the emergence of critical linguistics in the 1990s there has been a greater thrust to critically examine the issues concerning Medium of Instruction (MOI) as an instrument of power dynamics. James Tollefson and Amy Tsui, the editors of this collection, deserve congratulations for collating a well-knit anthology which explores connections between MOI policies and divergent sociopolitical forces in different parts of the globe. The volume has succeeded in unravelling the complex social and political agendas that underlie decisions on MOI policies by digging further into the links between these policies and a range of politico-economic issues including globalisation, migration, labour problems, competition among the elites in distributing economic resources, and the nuances of political power.

The authors' passionate debates on determining language policies in specific situations make a significant contribution to understanding the sociopolitical compulsions which best fulfil the needs of society and help in maintaining a balance between the interests of diverse groups ensuring political stability. Case studies detailing policies and practices in different countries across the globe stand as testimony to the fact that the developments in the fields of education are guided more by extraneous sociopolitical factors than inspired by academic/

pedagogical considerations. Even cultural and linguistic justifications in favour of mother tongue medium admit of greater subjective definition of 'mother tongue' and therefore a greater possibility of political manipulation and negotiation.

Pedagogical arguments for or against mother tongue medium very often serve as an alibi, trying to push forward 'hidden agendas' of pressure groups (dominating in demographic/economic terms) and 'lip service' to nebulous ideological goals (Khubchandani, 2004; Shohamy, 2004). For example, MOI policy issues in the United States bring out the 'threat perceptions' of the dominant language group (i.e. English). Linguistic homogenisation forces in the power structure 'construct' non-English speaking children as 'deficient and under-achieving'. MOI policies are never politically neutral. These debates demonstrate that MOI policies could be a 'double-edged sword'. As Tollefson and Tsui note,

On the one hand, they are *reflections* of power structure, yet on the other hand they are also *agents for changing* the power structure. They can be instruments of cultural and linguistic imperialism, but they can also be means for promoting linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism. (p. 9) (*italics added*)

Part I of this book addresses issues confronted by minority linguistic groups in English-dominant countries such as Maori in New Zealand (S. May), Welsh in the United Kingdom (D. Jones and M. Martin-Jones), and indigenous languages in the United States (T. McCarthy). Schools in these countries were historically regarded as 'civilizing missions' and languages of the indigenous minorities were treated as obstacles to civilisation and modernisation.

The bulk of the articles belong to Part II, analysing the developments in former colonial states (namely Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Philippines, and Sub-Saharan Africa) whose education infrastructures still show the distortions of colonial legacies. Post-colonial developments in many newly independent countries are characterised by power struggles where the control is shifted from outside colonisers to the creamy layer of the society: the 'White man' is replaced by the 'Brown sahib' as is glaringly evident in the contemporary South Asian context where planners have committed themselves to education for all but have not yet been able to totally discard the framework of selective education inherited from the colonial set-up. Tollefson and Tsui rightly argue that 'colonizers used colonial languages to subjugate the colonized; they trained the elite of the society as "brokers" between them and the colonized' (p. 3). Various strategies have been at play since then to standardise and codify 'vernaculars' as a pre-condition for accepting them as MOI. Under the banner of development, MOI policies in the post-colonial phase are most of the time motivated by agendas of cultural hegemony in the form of globalisation. Singapore presents a typical case of 'careful linguistic engineering', where 'English is learned as the *first* school language and is the main medium of instruction, whereas one of the official ethnic languages (Tamil, Mandarin, or Malay) is learned as a *second* language' (Pakir: 10) (*italics added*).

Part III examines the conflicts generated by the asymmetrical power and relationship between languages and the ways in which ideological conflicts are resolved. Studies of South Africa (V. Webb), Ecuador-Bolivia (K. King and

C. Benson), and Slovenia (J. Tollefson) are presented. In the case of South Africa, a lack of serious commitment exemplifies the perpetual inequality and marginalisation of smaller groups where 'English is the home language for only 9% of the population, but that it is the medium of instruction for 80%' (p. 14). A diglossic situation retaining English as the prestigious language and the language of the Black middle class (for 'high' functions) and Afrikaans and Bantu languages (for everyday life situations) suggests that the former race-based inequality in the Apartheid era has been replaced by a class-based and even language-based inequality (p. 15).

The editors, in a brilliant introduction and in the final summing up, present a good synthesis of diverse approaches to tackling MOI issues on a global canvas. They highlight four general themes percolating through the studies in the anthology:

- (1) Situatedness of medium policies in their socio-political and historical contexts reveal the bias in favour of elitist and urban orientations.
- (2) The adoption of 'colonial' language as a 'transitory' neutral *lingua francas* by many state agencies is viewed as a kind of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). The recent upsurge of information technology has given impetus to imbalances by which expansive and 'exploitative' communication networks are regarded as attributes of powerful 'strong' languages (such as Imperial English), and 'accommodating' and complementary communication networks of minority languages are evaluated as powerless 'weak' languages.
- (3) A gap between the rhetoric favouring linguistic diversity in MOI policies and the reality of its implementation is glaring.
- (4) The impact of globalisation presents a dilemma which leads to the 'assimilation of powerless towards the powerful'. Many developing nations are caught in resolving the tensions of the local versus the global; there could be varied local responses to globalisation: 'it may produce nationals who are ambivalent about their own identity and nations stripped of their rich cultural heritage' (p. 7).

The concluding chapter examines the role of MOI policies, reflecting competing pedagogical and political agendas in mediating between, on the one hand, the centralising forces of globalisation, and state-mandated policies, and on the other hand, demands for language rights by ethnic and linguistic minorities (p. 284). These discussions reveal a growing chasm between language 'allocation', generally legitimising plurality, and language 'implementation', favouring dominant groups, as seen in many South Asian and southern African countries.

Language planning programmes in the post-colonial phase (including determining MOI policies) have largely been ideology-driven and elite-sponsored. It is mainly the custodians of language who decide loftily what is 'good' for the masses, by the virtue of their hold on the socio-political and literary scene. 'Common man, the *consumer* of LP programs, is present only by proxy – carrying the elite "cross"' (Khubchandani, 1983). With this 'trickle-down' approach, education becomes a powerful tool to maintain the status quo, and through literacy programmes they put a seal of approval to the crossing over of indigenous people to contemporary 'elitist clubs'.

The scope of mother tongue education and of imposing urban elite standards in school language, therefore, needs to be reassessed in the light of insights gained from recent studies of plural societies. The elitist system of education does not account for the complexity of speech variation across dialects in flux (and in plurilingual societies, often across languages) at the 'grassroots' level. The heterogeneity of communication patterns in many regions of the subcontinent, the unequal cultivation of different languages for use as medium of instruction, the demands of elegant versions of mother tongue for formal purposes, the switching over to another medium in the multi-tier media system, are some of the difficulties faced by learners initiated into education through the mother tongue medium.

Tussles between the established elite, explicitly or implicitly, pressurising for status quo, and assertions of the emerging elite for cultural and national resurgence through local (dominant/minority) languages bring out this dilemma eloquently. Education thus becomes an arena for achieving greater autonomy for linguistic minorities and for broader movements for social change. This 'conflict-resolution' approach among competing groups of tediously working towards resolving the conflict between MOI policies and ground realities in everyday life becomes transparent from many of the case studies presented in the volume.

The mother tongue cannot be the only language of education in multilingual settings. Standard languages backed by tradition on the one hand, and contact languages shaped by environment (such as *lingua francas* Hindustani, Swahili, Angrezi in the post-colonial context) on the other, play a complementary role adjusting as per the relevance of the communication event. In a paradigm of fair communication, rising above petty interests and narrow loyalties in a transcendental sense, the prestige and dignity (and not powerlessness) should go with the networks encouraging complementation, and not with those aspiring to promote exploitative and hegemonic networks of communication on the local, national, regional and global scenes.

In this endeavour the State can act as an honest facilitating agent for individual minority groups in selecting the medium of one's choice. Diverse approaches of transmitting literacy skills have emerged on the scene:

- (1) Conventional adherence to the *standard* language, prevailing in the region, as medium.
- (2) Liberal *bidialectal* approach of a gradual phasing from home dialect to the standard speech.
- (3) *Dichotomous* approach of accommodating diversity of dialects/speech varieties at the spoken level, but insisting on the uniformity of standard language at the written level.
- (4) *Grassroots* approach with sensitivity to speech variation and a grasp of the communication ethos (Khubchandani, 2003).

Instead of the 'conflict-resolution' approach, we need to strive for pragmatic solutions in the spirit of cultivating the plurality consciousness with the hope that in the final stage of unification many different cultural traditions may live together, and may combine different human endeavours into a new kind of balance between thought and deed, between activity and meditation. A pluralist

vigour is necessary in framing MOI policies through the flowering of cultural diversity (as environmentalists' conviction for nurturing bio-diversity). It requires a substantive shift in the concerns of social scientists to take seriously the fuzzy reality and transactive domains of language(s) as a live force in the contemporary milieu.

When dealing with plural societies, we would do well to realise the risks involved in uniform solutions. Tollefson and Tsui's volume prepares the ground for critically assessing the present scenario and for formulating a New Education Order to match the changing demands of the Information Society. To that extent, the collection has succeeded in setting up an effective discourse to deliberate over the issues of 'opportunity' to meet specific goals and of providing 'equal accessibility' to all sections of society in the context of cultural pluralism.

References

- Khubchandani, L.M. (1981) *Language, Education, Social Justice*. In Search of Tomorrow 2. Pune: Centre for Communication Studies.
- Khubchandani, L.M. (1983) *Plural Languages, Plural Cultures: Communication, Identity and Sociopolitical Change in Contemporary India*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Khubchandani, L.M. (2003) Defining mother tongue education in plurilingual contexts. *Language Policy* 2, 239–54.
- Khubchandani, L.M. (2004) Balance of the current sociolinguistic research: New trends and new paradigms. Panel report presented at the X Linguapax Congress on Linguistic Diversity, Sustainability and Peace, Barcelona, May.
- Phillipson, R. (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shohamy, E. (2004) The hidden agendas of language policy: Effects on language rights. Paper presented at the X Linguapax Congress on Linguistic Diversity, Sustainability and Peace, Barcelona, May.
- UNESCO (1953) *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. Monographs on Fundamental Education. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2003) *Education in a Multilingual World*. Paris: UNESCO.

Lachman M. Khubchandani
 Centre for Communication Studies Pune
 India
 (sindhdoc@vsnl.net)

Copyright of Language & Education is the property of Multilingual Matters and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.