

Book Review

Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?

James W. Tollefson and Amy B. M. Tsui (eds). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Pp. xi + 306. ISBN 0-8058-4277-2 (hbk): \$89.95. ISBN 0-8058-4278-0 (pbk): \$37.50.

According to Tollefson (2004), the field of language planning and policy remains undertheorised. As a result, language policy research is often disregarded in the policymaking process. In order to inform sound public policy, he urges scholars in the field to develop 'intellectually compelling frameworks for public understanding of language in society' (p. 154). He argues that researchers should actively provide theoretically sophisticated analyses of language policy initiatives as 'emotional and irrational policy debate' devoid of this analysis serves the interests of dominant groups who have the power (through access to media) to manipulate public opinion.

Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda? is a timely contribution that illuminates how sound theoretical analyses of a language policy issue, medium of instruction policy, can contribute to a critical understanding of language policy as a *sociopolitical* process. While studies on medium of instruction policy have typically highlighted the *educational* effects of the choices of medium of instruction at the micro-level, the 12 chapters in this volume as well as the editors' introduction and conclusion effectively illustrate how choices about which language to use in classrooms are actually complicated by broader social, economic, and political issues (see Chapter 1 of this volume). All three chapters in Part One present excellent accounts of movements regarding maintaining minority languages in English-dominant states: the Māori language in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Stephen May), the Welsh language in Wales (Dylan V. Jones & Marilyn Martin-Jones), and Native American languages in the United States (Teresa L. McCarty). Part Two includes discussions of medium of instruction policies in six postcolonial contexts: Hong Kong (Amy B.M. Tsui), Singapore (Anne Pakir), Malaysia (Saran Kaur Gill), the Philippines (Iluminado Nical, Jerzy J. Smolicz & Margaret J. Secombe), India (E. Annamalai), and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Hassana Alidou). Part Three combines three interesting cases of language conflict from areas we encounter relatively less frequently in published materials on medium of instruction policies: Post-Apartheid South Africa (Vic Webb), indigenous language education in Bolivia and Ecuador (Kendall A. King & Carol Benson), and Slovenia (James W. Tollefson).

The rich accounts from different multi-ethnic and multilingual contexts around the world present current issues in medium of instruction policies in the particular context. At the same time, however, as Tollefson and Tsui argue, they also represent some striking parallels across the contexts: choices of medium of instruction are shaped by political, social, and economic forces and must be understood in relation to their sociopolitical and historical contexts; there is often a discrepancy between the beautiful rhetoric of the policy which

advocates linguistic diversity and the lack of commitment to mother-tongue education or multilingualism in the actual implementation of the policy; larger social processes such as globalisation have a significant impact on medium of instruction policies at the national level with respect to the dominant role of English in the international market and the nation-state's desire to be competitive and active in the market (see Chapter 1).

Most of the chapters illustrate that policymakers or elites often employ educational, economic, and linguistic agendas to disguise the actual political agenda behind the medium of instruction policy so that it appears neutral. For example, it is often the pedagogical rationale of improving students' school performance that is employed to legitimate the choice of a dominant language as medium of instruction for linguistic minority groups despite research evidence of the positive relationship between students' performance and schooling in their mother tongue (e.g. Cummins, 2001; see also Nical *et al.*, this volume). Similarly, English-medium instruction in India is justified based on the belief that English is linked to educational and economic opportunities for students; but only less than 6% of the entire population have access to postsecondary education in India (Annamalai, this volume, p. 188). Furthermore, the lack of implementation of mother-tongue education is often justified on the grounds of the need for codification and standardisation of indigenous languages. However, as Annamalai convincingly argues, 'the development of language takes place through use, not prior to use' (p. 189).

Because of the gap between the rhetoric of the policy and the actual political agenda of the dominant group, there is often a lack of consistency in language policy debates and the same rationale is sometimes adopted to justify conflicting policies. According to Gill (this volume), in Malaysia, for example, the replacement of English by Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction originally occurred both at public and private institutions after the independence from British rule. However, later on, English was reinstated as a language of instruction in private institutions of higher education. Interestingly, both of the policies were legitimated on the grounds that they serve the best interest of Malaysia (see also Chapter 1, this volume). The consequence of such language policy is that the middle class Chinese students at private schools (whose mastery of English would be secured) are privileged over working class Malay students at public educational institutions (who could not obtain English proficiency levels adequate for university education). Language policy issues should thus be situated within the larger sociopolitical contexts in which they are formulated and implemented. Therefore, to critically examine debates over language policy, we should ask: Whose interest does it serve? For whom? And with what consequences?

Although Tollefson and Tsui successfully link the debates over medium of instruction policy to their larger sociopolitical contexts, the majority of the chapters in the volume would have benefited more from a serious engagement with theories in their analyses of the *social* phenomenon of medium of instruction policies. For example, some chapters in Part Two do not adequately situate their analyses within the framework of postcolonialism. In particular, Pakir's analysis of the case in Singapore raises a question of what is meant by 'postcolonial' in this context; that is, I argue that colonialism often continues even after the end of

political colonialism, and, as such, the analysis should thus be read with much caution. As the editors state, sociopolitical contexts are often inseparable from historical contexts (p. 3). Historical analysis, however, does not simply mean to describe the development of the language policy in a chronological order but should include sound, critical analyses of historical contexts which inform the current issues (for excellent examples, see Jones & Martin-Jones; McCarty and May, all in this volume). Tsui's argument regarding the tension between English education and cultural heritage as well as the editors' remarks on the conflict between the homogenising forces of globalisation and state-mandated policies and minority language rights movements may have been further informed by the increasing literature on the dialectical relationship between the global and the local in globalisation studies.

Nonetheless, I welcome this comprehensive and accessible volume as a valuable initiative to further refine language planning and policy research frameworks. May's account of successful Māori-medium education in New Zealand as well as Jones and Martin-Jones' story of Welsh-medium instruction in Wales are particularly encouraging for advocates of minority languages as medium of instruction in English-dominant states. Furthermore, Jones and Martin-Jones' chapter beautifully demonstrates the strength of the sociolinguistic analysis of interaction data to understand how the policy actually unfolds in classrooms and how that interacts with larger social contexts. In light of this, their call for more ethnographic studies in language policy research is noteworthy. The book will serve as great guidance for researchers, policymakers, teachers and graduate students and advanced undergraduate students in language education, second language studies, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics who are interested in exploring how language policy research may contribute to the actual policy-making process.

doi: 10.2167/la111b.0

Hyunjung Shin

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
(hshin@oise.utoronto.ca)

References

- Cummins, J. (2001) *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (2nd edn). Los Angeles, CA: California Association For Bilingual Education.
- Tollefson, J. (2004) The Forum, Commentary: Theory and action in language policy and planning. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 3 (2), 150–55.