

Language education policy in late modernity: insights from situated approaches—commentary

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Introduction

The articles in this thematic issue of *Language Policy* examine the impact of the global processes of neoliberalization in education, associated changes in the valuation of language (from its traditional identity functions to instrumental values linked with higher education and employment), and the destabilization of teachers' and students' identities through new forms of social relations in classrooms and schools. The conflicts and tensions associated with these processes have led to what many participants in policy debates call a 'crisis in education,' manifest in many popular and scholarly books (e.g., Blumenstyk 2014; Dawson 2010; Farber 1991). At the policy level, this 'crisis' offers a justification for popular movements for educational reform (e.g., Taylor 2010) that are intensely debated among traditional stakeholders in education, including parents and educators, as well as politicians and commentators in newspapers, magazines, radio and television talk shows, and other mass media. Since the 1980s, public concern about education and the associated demands for educational reform have embroiled educational policymaking throughout Europe, Asia, and North America (Berliner and Biddle 1995).

This passionate debate about the 'crisis of education' reflects broad public concern about the role of education in society, and is an example of a social problem that "may emerge, transmute, descend, disappear, or reappear, independent of any change in actual conditions" (Conrad 1997, p. 139). Whereas educational policies, as demonstrated in these articles, are impacted by real conditions in the global political economy, it is also crucial to understand how policy debates are discursively and ideologically constructed. As Berliner and Biddle (1995) have

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shown in the case of the United States, for example, public discourse about education, including language policies, may be disconnected from objective measures of educational quality, equity, and access, and instead may be “manufactured” as part of political agendas such as neoliberal privatization and the weakening of teachers’ professional organizations. Indeed, it is important to recognize that critiques of language policies are often embedded within political discourses that discursively construct teachers, students and other educational participants as part of efforts to promote a range of economic and political agendas. Thus public concern with language in education emerges from a variety of social, cultural, and political factors. In exploring language policies in education, therefore, ethnographic and historical-discursive analysis (McCarty 2011; Wodak and Meyer 2009) are particularly appropriate methodologies, because they provide a way to discover the links between ‘problems’ in education at the classroom/school level and broader social and political agendas. These approaches are evident in the articles in this edition.

Understanding the situated logic of language policy in schools

As this special issue shows, discourse about language in education is a mechanism by which participants in policy debates can shape political agendas and the policies that are adopted in support of them. The discursive construction of ‘bilingualism’ in Madrid schools, ‘internationalism’ and ‘social cohesion’ in the Mandarin Chinese program in a working-class school in London, and innovative social relations among teachers and students in a Dutch-medium school in Brussels is linked with national and transnational policies and discourses, as well as with the everyday linguistic interactions among students and teachers. Therefore to fully understand the connections among institutional and individual ideologies, discourses, and practices, research must examine the broader neoliberal project and the language policies that promote its implementation in education. For example, led by several conservative foundations, including the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (1999) and the Heritage Foundation, the movement in the United States to deregulate teacher education by restricting the authority of state licensing agencies and dismantling teacher-education program in universities is rationalized with a discourse of ‘accountability’ (Figlio and Loeb 2011; Hout and Elliott 2011); this movement is linked with the political agenda of privatizing public education, constraining the political influence of Spanish speakers, and undermining the authority of teachers’ unions (Cochran-Smith and Fries 2001). That is, the discourse of accountability is called into service of the explicit political agenda of the neoliberal project. As these examples suggest, educational discourse may be a mechanism for supporting agendas that extend far beyond educational issues and institutions, and ultimately is linked to claims to political power. Thus one focus of research must be to discover how educational discourse ensures “routine forms of power reproduction” in the broader society (van Dijk 1996, p. 84). Jaspers’ article about a Dutch-MOI school in Brussels is a particularly good example of this kind of analysis.

Although much of the critical analysis of language policy since the 1960s has focused on ethnic, linguistic, and minority groups in schools, this special issue emphasizes instead the analysis of what Pérez-Milans in his introduction calls the “situated descriptions of language education practices,” which means understanding language education practices within local and global social, political, and economic conditions. Within this perspective, languages, language groups, and language policies are understood not as fixed realities, but rather as changing discursive and ideological constructs—as ‘representations’ (van Dijk 1996). Relaño-Pastor, for example, investigates the representation of ‘bilingualism’ in Madrid (who counts as ‘bilingual’?), while Pérez-Milans looks at the representation of ‘international’ languages in a school in London. Jaspers, whose work does not explicitly examine issues of representation, nevertheless is interested in how ‘language learner’ identity is discursively constructed and strategically employed by one classroom teacher in order to more effectively engage his students in language learning activities they might otherwise resist.

Participants in discourse about language policies articulate representations about teachers, students, languages, and language policies in order to mobilize public support for specific policies. Specifically, representations are part of efforts to ‘legitimize’ or ‘delegitimize’ individuals or groups. ‘Legitimization’ refers to positive representations that position actors or their supporters in relation to opponents. For example, one function of the Mandarin program in the working class school in London is that it legitimizes the school as a ‘good’ school offering students access to language as a valuable commodity. In the school in Madrid that Relaño-Pastor examines, the only legitimate form of bilingualism is Spanish–English. Elsewhere, in New Zealand, opponents of Māori-medium education often represent themselves as the true voice of Māori parents; it is this representation, in part, that legitimizes their opposition to Māori-medium schools. Similarly, in Hong Kong, supporters of English-medium schools, who oppose Cantonese-medium education, argue that their main concern is the educational and employment opportunities for Cantonese-speaking children.

‘Delegitimization’ involves negative representations of opponents through notions of difference and social boundaries, as well as speech acts such as accusing and blaming (Chilton 2004). Relaño-Pastor shows how Arabic in the Madrid school is delegitimized as a component of bilingualism, and indeed is largely invisible in the school’s ideological support for ‘bilingualism’. Elsewhere, in Australia during the late 1980s and early 1990s, John Dawkins, the minister of the Department of Employment, Education, and Training, was able to successfully shift language policy from the effort to support bilingualism in English and other languages to a new policy solely promoting English language and literacy; this policy change was made feasible politically by his successful representation of advocates of the old policy as a ‘faction’ committed to its own self interest (Moore 2002). The delegitimization of advocates of bilingualism and other pluralist language policies is central to the political strategy of supporters of monolingual policies in many contexts, such as the United States (Tollefson 2014; Yamagami 2012).

These processes of representation and (de)legitimization are especially important in political discourse about language policies in schools. Political discourse about

language has rich potential for narratives of identity that articulate differences between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ delineate racial, national, and other group boundaries, and mobilize the public through fears about current ‘crises’ (e.g., immigration). Systems of representation *frame* language policy debates by constructing the essential narrative, moral evaluation, or preferred solution to a social problem (Scheufele and Iyengar 2011). For example, if a newspaper editorial about low achievement in second language learning in local schools focuses on the practice of preparing students for the national university entrance examination, readers may interpret the editorial as evidence that standardized testing practices should be revised. If an editorial instead describes a classroom in which the teacher seems uninspiring and the students unengaged in the lesson, readers may conclude that the poor quality of teaching is the reason for low levels of language learning, and therefore that greater pressure for teachers’ ‘accountability’ is justified. In other words, the representation of the teacher in the second editorial is a component in the framing of the educational problem as one involving teachers rather than tests. In addition, although the specific editorial on the surface may seem to be about language learning in the schools, holding the teacher responsible for the problem may be linked with a political agenda that is not explicitly articulated in the editorial, such as the effort to weaken teachers’ groups and professional teacher-preparation programs. Thus frames construct the central themes by which participants in discourse make judgments not only about actors such as teachers, but also about preferred solutions to educational problems and the policy alternatives that are available to address them.

Such discursive processes operate within national and transnational organizations and institutions such as the EU as well as within the local context of specific schools and classrooms. The challenge for research is to understand how these processes function within the full range of organizations and institutions. Jaspers’ article, for example, explores the options available for teachers to reposition themselves in their interactional relationships with students. Rather than acting as a representative of the state education system, the teacher, Mr. S, discursively positions himself as a language learner and his students as language experts/teachers. Combined with his deliberate use of provocative and humorous language, these practices make him the most popular teacher in the school. Nevertheless, his acknowledgement of the students’ expertise in their home languages, in contrast to their struggle with Dutch, the official language of the school, does not mean that he undermines the official Dutch-MOI policy at the school. In fact, he enthusiastically supports it.

The constraints that shape Mr. S’s implicit language ideology and his support for the school’s official language policy are typical in multilingual spaces, which always exist within structures that exert powerful yet implicit forces on teachers’ and students’ agency. Thus, although there is collusion between Mr. S and his students in their critique of the hierarchy of language within the school and the broader social system, that collusion does not articulate an alternative to school policy, and in fact reinforces it by indexing languages other than Dutch as acceptable only within the marginal positions and contexts permitted by the broader sociopolitical system that adopts and enforces the school’s language policy.

Similarly, Relaño-Pastor's analysis of bilingual education in Madrid reveals the constraints on teachers' and students' capacity to undermine the implicit hierarchy of language. In the school Relaño-Pastor examines, the meaning of 'bilingual' is limited to classes using Spanish and English. In contrast, Arabic-Spanish bilingualism is marginal, even invisible; that is, for students whose linguistic repertoire includes Arabic and Spanish, the school offers no recognition or advantage vis-à-vis students who are monolingual in Spanish. Indeed, Arabic-Spanish bilingualism arguably places students in a worse social condition compared to Spanish monolinguals. Moreover, the system for placing students in particular programs ensures that English language learning is only available to students who are already among the most proficient in English; these students are usually Spanish-English bilinguals. In this sense, as Relaño-Pastor argues, the bilingual policy does not favor bilingualism at all, but rather it supports the ideological illusion of Madrid as a monolingual Spanish-speaking city and the discourse of English language learning for economic advancement.

The consequences for classrooms are significant. Inside classrooms, 'bilingual' teachers (i.e., speakers of Spanish and English) are able to construct themselves as Spanish speakers with high English ability; it is this ability in English that provides teachers with a major source of classroom authority. Moreover, teachers with such authority have the added advantage of being able to better control students' classroom behavior. Specifically, the use of Spanish and English bilingual practices (code-switching) increases the amount and complexity of student interaction focused on language learning. Also, this control of behavior extends to students' concrete language production, as the authority of 'bilingual' teachers enables them to be more effective in encouraging students' practice and use of English. Overall, therefore, the ideology of bilingualism does not promote the use of languages other than Spanish and English, but in fact constrains students' use of other languages (in this case, Arabic).

Pérez-Milans expands the analytical lens to include EU discourses of language and the teaching/learning of Mandarin in London supported by China's institutional networks through the Confucius Institutes and the Hanban, China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. At the working-class secondary school Pérez-Milans investigates, the Mandarin language program offers the school an opportunity to construct a discourse of mobility and employability linked with the learning of a 'global' language; in this sense, Mandarin and English share discourses. Yet within the school, Mandarin must compete for students with the French-language program. To do so, the Mandarin program is represented as a fun, unique opportunity to experience an exotic culture through language. At the same time, however, the influence of China's institutional networks leads to particular teaching practices such as memorization, which are neither unique nor fun. Student learning, therefore, is limited, so that the school is now considering a non-academic Mandarin-language track. At the individual level, students articulate official discourses as their own personal reasons for taking Mandarin, including 'opportunity', 'employability', and cultural exoticism. Thus Pérez-Milans' analysis integrates macro, meso and micro perspectives: Transnational and institutional mandates about teaching, school-level issues within competing (Mandarin and French) language programs, and individual

motivations for language study are linked precisely, through an ethnographic analysis that uncovers the “situated logic” of language practices in the school (McCarty 2011, p. 3; also see Stritikus and Garcia 2003).

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue exemplify one of the most important developments in language policy research: the expanding use of situated approaches such as ethnography. The use of situated approaches to understand language policy accords with new conceptualizations of language policy itself. Language policy research has often focused on official policy statements, such as constitutions, language laws, and rules for school- and classroom-level language practices. Such a focus makes sense historically and methodologically, as policy statements and implicit practices have enormous impact on language behavior. Nevertheless, recognizing that language policies need not be explicit (Spolsky 2008), scholars since the 1990s have increasingly sought to contextualize and historicize language policy analysis. As McCarty (2011) writes: “Policy is not a disembodied thing, but rather a situated sociocultural process—the complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people’s language choices in profound and pervasive everyday ways” (p. xii). Thus although ‘policy’ entails overt declarations such as official-languages laws, the term also must include covert (see Tollefson 1988) and implicit social processes in which language serves to construct social hierarchies.

Such social processes are the central focus of ethnography. By analyzing policies and practices at multiple levels, including nation-states and global institutions, communities of practice, and individual interaction, ethnographic research seeks to uncover the cultural logic of language policies. Thus ethnography offers a way to overcome the long-standing division between macro and micro analysis in language policy research (Johnson 2011). This achievement offers a deeper understanding of how individuals’ language behavior in everyday life is linked with larger historical, ideological, social and institutional systems. In particular, understanding how neoliberalism influences life in schools requires this sort of multi-level integration. As the articles in this edition show, macro-level policy discourses circulate at the micro level among individuals who often have no direct access or exposure to official policy documents, official curricula, or explicit institutional mandates. Situated approaches such as ethnographic analysis in language policy offer a way to understand such phenomena and thus to bridge the gap between macro institutions and forces on the one hand and individuals’ daily linguistic practices on the other.

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