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Bilingualism and Language Pedagogy

Edited by
Janina Brutt-Griffler and Manka Varghese
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Introduction

Janina Brutt-Griffler
Department of English, University of Alabama, USA

Manka Varghese
College of Education, University of Washington, USA

Bilingualism has generally been conceptualised as a subfield of the various disciplines (linguistics, cognitive psychology, applied linguistics, education) in which it falls (Baker, 1996). In all of them, bilinguals have been conceived as a sort of special problem – one that Du Bois (1903) described in another context as that of twoness. For bilinguals bring with them two of something which all of these disciplines have assumed that persons should be furnished with only one of – language. This special condition has occasioned considerable concern, much debate, and even surprising rancour, but it has never caused custodians of their fields to alter their essential notions of the boundaries of their respective branches of enquiry. They have expected bilinguals and those who study them to make the necessary adjustments. And yet, bilinguals are the majority of the world’s population – their existence and their numbers an implicit challenge to the disciplines mentioned above.

Approached in this way, the world’s bilingual majority has proven an elusive subject of study. Bilinguals simply do not obey the rules set out for them, either scientifically, or, as we shall see, politically. Far from being monolinguals in two languages, as it were, they carve out their own space as bilinguals (cf. Grosjean, 1989). An increasing body of evidence shows that they do not use language the way monolinguals do. They refuse to hold their two (or more) languages as distinct, disconnected systems (cf. Cook, 1992, 2002; Grosjean, 1989; Kecskes & Papp, 2000). More radically still, they transform the languages they speak in unexpected ways, with still less anticipated results (cf. Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Weinreich, 1974). They often refuse to submit to attempts to regulate their behaviour according to the accepted norms of monolingualism, no matter how strident the attempts to do so.

And those efforts are manifold and nearly universal. The language usage of bilinguals is perhaps the most politicised issue in linguistics. In few other domains do governments, non-governmental institutions, policy makers, and educators intrude quite so blatantly into so deeply personal a domain. It sometimes seems that the bilingual cannot so much as utter a sentence without invoking a reaction from one side or another – not for what s/he says, but rather as a result of the language s/he selects to say it in, or the ways s/he uses language (see Toribio, this volume). At the same time, bilingualism has become enmeshed in political imperatives that have saddled it with a political vocabulary of questionable linguistic merit – mother tongues, additional languages, and so forth. After all, position politics, as Valdés reminds us in
this volume, has little patience for the complexities of the societies it makes policy for. In a world in which politics remains tragically rooted in essentialist notions of nation, ethnicity, and culture (for all of which language serves as a fundamental basis), bilinguals represent something of an excluded middle between the allegedly mutually exclusive opposites since they violate the essentiality of one or more of these categories.

In the same way bilinguals disrupt the boundaries between cultures, ethnicities, and nations, they destabilise received categories of linguistic inquiry. Scholars of bilingualism encounter a deeply embedded mental structure in positivist (‘scientific’) thought and culture that the quantitative substantiation of *twoness* instantiates a qualitative relation of opposition and antagonism. Confronted with speakers of two (or more) languages, linguistics has traditionally conceived them in what Hornberger (this volume) calls the ‘binary oppositions so characteristic of bilingualism’ – their languages were ordered (first and second), characterised (native and nonnative), and scrutinised for evidence of interference, malformation, and deviance (cf. Toribio, this volume) from the purported ‘monolingual norm’ (cf. Valdés, this volume). To be sure, the investigation of every natural phenomenon has begun thus. It was nothing less than an article of faith in physics that mass and energy constituted distinct, immutable categories – until Einstein theorised, and the march of technology confirmed, that they were different forms of the same underlying mass-energy continuum. In other sciences as well, the seemingly fixed and immutable categories have experienced the same destabilisation with the advance of knowledge. The study of bilingualism is undergoing and has been undergoing a similar transformation under the pressure of what Hornberger calls a ‘postmodern and increasingly multicultural and globalised world’ in which ‘tensions between essentialist and postmodern formulations of culture and identity; traditional holistic notions of bounded, isolated entities are being challenged and replaced by an emphasis on multiple, fragmented, overlapping, contradictory, multivocal, and situationally contingent identities and cultures’. As a result, the field finds itself more and more tethered by a discourse of language binaries, first and second, native and non-native.

Bilingualism is the study of bidirectional transitioning, or the mediation of a linguistic space traditionally conceived as composed as discrete atoms – particular languages. Bilinguals remind us that linguistic space is rather a continuum of Language (which is far more extensive than is contemplated by the notion of Universal Grammar). Within bilinguals, it is not only languages that cohabit in the same linguistic space, but an accompanying process of, in the words of Toribio, ‘mixing of cultures and world views’ that is impenetrable to some, troubling to others. This process is but one of many at work in the world today that merge together phenomena (such as culture, ethnicity, nation) that are, according to some, supposed to remain separate and distinct.

Research on bilingualism has been handicapped with a terminology that does not suit its study, because it is one based, paradoxically, on monolingualist assumptions (Grosjean, 1999). As a result, bilingualism continually encroaches on the categories in which it has typically been expressed. For example, there is currently much discussion among political theorists of language about the importance of mother-tongue education. The problem is that,
as with so many other aspects of the bilingual’s competence, the terminology used fails to capture the linguistic reality. Modern linguistics claims only that children acquire languages natively, but not that there is any linguistic imperative for any particular child to acquire any particular language, including that of their parent(s). This makes statements like ‘children should be grounded in mother-tongue literacy’ problematic. For example, take a child who does not speak the language of its parents. The child’s ‘mother tongue’, that is, the only language s/he speaks would not then be a mother tongue in the political sense.

The point is not to engage in semantic debates, but to demonstrate that the categories of bilingualism are not at all fixed and immutable, but subject to change. If a child, for example, acquires two languages ‘natively’, then there is no linguistic basis on which to determine which of the two is the child’s mother tongue. Take the Puerto-Rican American children in East Harlem cited in Toribio’s contribution who ‘could be observed to speak English with each other, while shifting to Spanish in deference to their elders…. For these children, Spanish and English together constitute their linguistic competence in a singular sense, and their linguistic performance will draw primarily upon English or Spanish, as required by the “observables” of the speech situation, e.g. pragmatic norms, specific setting, and participants’. As this example illustrates, ‘mother tongue’ is a political ascription, the usefulness of which has begun to erode for hundreds of millions of persons around the globe. Linguistically, there is no reason that a child must speak the same language as its parents – or learn only that language natively. A ‘first language’ or ‘mother tongue’ can be acquired under all kinds of different circumstances – and in fact there can be more than one. And if there can be more than one native language there is also no linguistic reason why anyone should be monolingual. For instance, Ridge (2002) in his AILA plenary address noted, ‘As a child I lived in a farm environment rich with English and Zulu and learned both quite naturally’. No doubt other children in similar environments did so, do so, and will continue to do so. Applying notions of the ‘mother tongue’ as the universal medium of education would, nevertheless, prescribe one language for those whose parents spoke Zulu and another for those whose parents spoke English, quite apart from their actual proficiency in either of the languages, and, as such, this would be done entirely for political, rather than actual linguistic reasons.

Valdés’s contribution to this special issue shows that such decisions are fraught with significant consequences that will follow the children for the rest of their lives. It will affect their ability to master the academic language of higher education and profoundly affect the quality of education available to them. To refuse to recognise this kind of process, which Valdés refers to as linguistic ghettoisation, on the basis that it allegedly does not involve a fundamental ‘human right’ (as Skutnabb-Kangas, in press, does in a recent exchange with Brutt-Griffler, in press) – and thereby to insist on the upholding of political hierarchies that attach to language – does not satisfy the realities of many countries. Moreover, Ridge points out

Ironically, putting the choice in binary form generally favours English as an option – in a way which is to the advantage neither of English nor
of the language it is placed against. As Rama Kant Agnihotri (1995) and Nkonko Kamwangamalu (1997) have claimed with some cogency, denying people proper access to the language they perceive as offering them major advantages leaves them little room to discover the value and uses of their mother tongue.

Benson, in her study of bilingual education and bilingual teachers in developing countries, taking Bolivia and Mozambique as case studies, echoes Stroud (2002) in noting that ‘parents and indeed most sectors of society look to school to provide children with “linguistic capital”, meaning competence in the dominant language’.

It is in this respect that Valdés’s contribution intervenes in the ongoing debates to point attention to a vital and largely ignored aspect of the question. She demonstrates the important condition that the question of the education of minority children does not end with that of the language in which that education takes place, as would appear from much of the literature, in addition to highlighting the urgency of looking beyond the primary educational level. Language in education, including medium of instruction, is only part of the full education of the bilingual child, including her ability to progress through secondary to higher education. Bilingual educationalists must be as concerned with what bilingual students learn, particularly as it affects their chances for post-secondary achievement, as they are with in what language they learn it. And this involves issues of socioeconomic status that have been largely absent from the language rights debates. At the same time, Valdés’s concern must be addressed: bilinguals are not simply users of language, and their lives should not be subject to greater regulation because one or more of the languages they speak are important to others in this world (cf. Mufwene, 2002).

From the linguistic standpoint, mother-tongue education is a political doctrine that has been advocated by colonial administrators and language rights advocates, in both cases to serve political rather than linguistic ends. As Brutt-Griffler (2002) demonstrates, British colonial administrators in Africa and Asia never argued that a knowledge of English interfered with mother-tongue literacy. They argued that it interfered with imperial economic policy. Similarly, language rights activists began by claiming that English and other ‘dominant’ languages threaten to deprive minority languages of their speakers. When they now, as in the case of Skutnabb-Kangas’s (in press) recent work, claim that there are linguistic reasons why mother tongue should be the medium of education, they are not only shifting the ground, but engaging in vast generalisations. As Valdés argues, broad political agendas (whether ‘English Only’ or ‘Mother Tongue Education’) seldom fit every situation – the world has become too linguistically complex for such sweeping agenda. Each situation must be identified for what it is, and those pushing a particular political agenda seldom take the time to do so. They reduce bilingualism to the sorts of binaries that Hornberger criticises in her contribution.

Pedagogy must be transformed to reflect new understandings of bilinguals. For this reason, Widdowson, in his important new work, Defining Issues in English Language Teaching (2003), calls for a paradigm shift aimed at filling ‘the
need to reconceptualise the subject as essentially concerned with the process of bilingualisation’. He adds, ‘guiding the development of bilinguals has to be attuned to the bilingualisation process, and not by the imposition of an exclusively monolingual pedagogy’ (2003: 162). The literature on bilingualism shows how profound a reconceptualisation that would represent.

All the papers in this issue attempt to broaden the conceptualisation of bilingualism that we argue for here. Valdés’s work in this volume reminds us of the inextricable link between bilingualism, specifically the development of academic language, and the participation and access of immigrant students in academic life. As Valdés concludes ‘what we are saying about academic language is the product of what we see in schools today and of our knowledge of the barriers facing minority students’. Hornberger’s contribution presents a way of framing the knowledge base of bilingual educators by using her model of the continua of biliteracy (1989), which she developed in her earlier work, and suggesting its usefulness as a way for bilingual educators to understand the issues and dilemmas confronting them. What is significant about her contribution is that she frames the work of bilingual educators as a series of dilemmas where choices and decisions need to be made according to contradictory pressures rather than a stable knowledge base with universal and static facts to draw upon. Moreover, Hornberger makes a strong connection between the responses and choices teachers make and their own identities as language teachers; for example, when a teacher must evaluate language and content, the identity of the teacher extends itself beyond that of a sole teacher of language. These dilemmas include that of context, or local/global where bilingual educators must respond to ‘both global and local pressures on our students’; that of media, or standard/nonstandard, where decisions have to be made about the variety of languages and types of media that should be taught and included in the classroom; that of development, or the language/content dilemma where educators face the difficult task of teaching and assessing language and content; and last, the dilemma of content, the language/culture/identity dilemma, where bilingual educators need to simultaneously respond to their students’ linguistic and cultural repertoires that they bring. Following this theme, Toribio’s article shows how the linguistic choices and performance of bilinguals are constituted by a constellation of factors that need to be considered simultaneously and contextually.

**Teacher Identities and the Roles of Bilingual Teachers**

The inter-relationship of bilingual teachers’ identities with the way they access and operate their knowledge base is an important one because, as we argue, the knowledge base must take into account the process as much or even more than the product, and as these teacher identities are ‘constituted’ or created while they are being performed (Morgan, this issue). As Johnston et al. (in preparation) argue

the more researchers have examined the role of teachers in the processes of language teaching and learning, the clearer it has become that a deeper understanding of teachers and their work requires a consideration of
who teachers are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them.

Johnston (2003) in his other work argues that the language teaching profession is essentially a postmodern one and one where the teacher is engaged (more than any other teaching profession) in moral dilemmas and choices. The language/content dilemma is one that is coming increasingly to the forefront for students who need to access higher levels of education, and opens up what had traditionally been considered an identity which had focused exclusively on language teaching. In much of the work on immigrant students in American (DeStigter, 2001; Olsen, 1997; Toohey, 2000; Valdés, 1998, 2000, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) and UK public schools (Rampton, 1995), these scholars take us into a world where students must negotiate their multiple lives and where they mostly ultimately pay a price in the career choices that are open to them. Valdés (1998, 2000) questions how many immigrant students can access academic content that would give them a greater chance of escaping their socioeconomic status when they are segregated linguistically and placed in low level ESL classes. One of the arguments that is being made currently in the United States is to provide mainstream or content area teachers with techniques in language support (what is being referred to as sheltered instruction, Echevarria et al., 2000) in order to address and partially avoid this ghettoisation. Creese’s examination of language support teachers in the United Kingdom, specifically Turkish language teachers, provides us possibly a futuristic look into what happens when such a policy takes effect because in the UK, as she explains, the policy is that of inclusion. However, as Benson’s comparison of bilingual teachers in Mozambique and Bolivia makes clear, this practice of bilingual teaching has been the dominant one in many developing countries – ‘primary bilingual teachers in developing countries are normally expected to teach all subjects and to be bilingual’. Creese explains that although most of the language support in UK classrooms is conducted by non-bilingual EAL (English as an additional language) teachers, there are also a significant number of bilingual language support teachers. Creese’s work demonstrates the dilemma of the work and identity of language support teachers, who through providing translation and interpretation of content areas for their students, are in many ways simultaneously engaged with endorsing ‘dominant educational discourses’. An important question that she leaves us with is ‘what constituted teacher professional knowledge in co-taught classrooms’? The identities of bilingual teachers can, therefore, be created and enacted in different forms – as content area teachers who are either bilingual or know how to provide language support to their students, as teachers who can speak, teach in and through the two languages (and may have content area expertise) or as teachers who transition students to the majority language (as ESL or EAL teachers). These different roles and contexts also call for formulating the knowledge base of bilingual teaching in different ways. As Benson also proposes, this may require breaking ‘the mould for the one teacher-one classroom model, which may be just as outdated as the one-nation-one language concept’.
The final theme of this special issue that spans several of these papers is how the professional development for bilingual teachers must be conceptualised across various settings. Much of the professional development literature on bilingual teachers has been propositional and somewhat static. In the context of the United States, the prescriptive nature of this has been mainly because of Title VII, federal legislation for bilingual teacher professional development which has led policy makers and professional development providers to outline competencies for bilingual teachers. Among these frameworks are one proposed by what was formerly known as the National Association for Bilingual Education (1992) and one by Canales and Ruiz-Escalante (1993) who also provide an excellent review on past approaches to bilingual teacher competencies.

What has been missing in much of the conceptualisation of bilingual and second language teacher professional development seems to focus on two main issues. First, is the decontextualised way much of the knowledge has been presented and taught as well as the discrete units this knowledge has been presented as (Johnston & Goettsch, 2000), as shown by the different competencies outlined above. Morgan (this volume) explains it as ‘the ways that language teacher education programmes teach, and the ways that teachers teach (and learn) are in many ways incompatible pedagogies’.

The second issue is that this knowledge base has failed to include many of the roles which bilingual teachers are involved in. Benson’s paper is helpfully organised around some of the major roles that she identifies for bilingual teachers in developing countries – bilingual teacher as pedagogue (either/both of languages and content), as linguist (of language and literacy), intercultural communicator (interpreter and teacher of cultures), community members (insiders of the students’ cultural groups), and finally advocates (of bilingual programmes). She also includes a vision of how the professional development of bilingual teachers may look like under this expanded view of their roles. Varghese’s ethnographic exploration of a professional development session for bilingual teachers in the United States situates the knowledge base of bilingual educators in the broader sociopolitical context of how bilingual education is played out in the country. Like Morgan’s and Benson’s papers, she shows how the pedagogical roles of second language teachers extend beyond the linguistic domain, and include concerns of advocacy for their marginalised profession and students. Furthermore and differently from the other papers, this paper delineates how the bilingual educator’s knowledge base must be negotiated within their professional development setting. It makes clear that there is no single and unified knowledge base for the bilingual teaching profession, and that this base must be discussed by both professional development providers and teachers in relation to the local contexts of the teachers.

The papers in this issue complicate the processes of bilingualism and most significantly, demonstrate the local and contextual nature of how bilingualism is performed or created, which an international perspective helps us with. The argument made above rests on the understanding that bilingualism occurs in
varying settings where one cannot make assumptions of sequential bilingualism or of a mother tongue, of a universal distinction between a dialect and a language, or presume that many language minority groups across the world will not find value in a dominant language and creatively make it their own; furthermore, the sociohistorical and identity development of bilinguals and bilingualism cannot be separated from the linguistic selves of these individuals and communities.

Correspondence

Correspondence should be directed to Janina Brutt-Griffler, The University of Alabama, Department of English, PO Box 870244, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0244, USA (janina.brutt-griffler@ua.edu).

References


Introduction