

Language policy in multilingual UK

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As recent reports have confirmed, the UK is becoming more and more linguistically diverse, especially in urban areas. This article explores ways in which educational policy might respond to these changes. It begins by reporting on a small-scale research project designed to find out from a number of community language teachers in Nottingham what they consider to be the linguistic needs of their children and how these might be fulfilled in both mainstream and supplementary schools. Having identified these needs, the article then turns to a description of the Sheffield Multilingual City Project. An analysis of this project serves to identify some useful principles for the development of a coherent policy which would include the voices of the various community language speakers. The article concludes by arguing that there is a need for a national policy framework designed to promote appropriate language policies in all areas, and that this should ensure that the linguistic needs of all of our children are met, regardless of where they live.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the belief of many that use of minority languages would disappear as the various linguistic communities became more ‘integrated’ into British society and as immigration slowed down, the number of languages spoken continues to increase. A recent study showed that in London there are over 300 languages spoken by children of school age (Baker and Eversley 2000; Gundara 2000). This compares with the last Language Census conducted by the Inner London Education Authority in 1989 which revealed that there were speakers of 184 different languages in London’s schools (ILEA 1989). At that time there were over 70,000 pupils in ILEA schools who used a language other than, or in addition to, English at home, making up a quarter of the school population. In Sheffield, England’s fourth city, the linguistic makeup is less diverse, but nevertheless there were 48 different languages spoken there in 1994, the number of bilinguals having doubled to 8.1% of the primary school and 7.5% of the secondary school population over the previous eight years (SUMES 1994). By 1996, 57 languages were spoken in Sheffield, and the numbers of speakers of these languages continue to increase (SUMES, 1997).

Educational responses to such diversity in the

UK have mainly focused on the curriculum in general, both in terms of debates on the curricular implications of multicultural and anti-racist education, and in terms of broader school policy, including the hidden curriculum (see, for example, Gillborn 1995; Lamb 1999a, 1999b; Mullard 1982; Sarup 1991; Troyna 1993; Troyna and Carrington 1990). Nevertheless there has been a series of policy responses to linguistic diversity over the last 35 years, ranging from an assimilationist focus on the teaching of English as a second language to a broader more celebratory attempt to recognise and promote the many community languages. This article is not intended to plot the development of these policies, though it does begin by pointing out that such development has tended to proceed in an uncoordinated way and has been subject to the vagaries of financial cutbacks. This brief contextualisation will be enriched by a summary of the needs of community language groups as perceived by a group of community language teachers in Nottingham, a city in the East Midlands with a population of approximately 300,000 inhabitants. The article will then describe one city-wide intervention aimed at producing a coordinated response to linguistic diversity, namely the Sheffield Multilingual City project, and will conclude with a discussion of some of the emerging issues. It should be stated that the focus on the two cities of Nottingham and Sheffield is not intended to suggest that they are representative of their respective areas. Nor were they initially selected in order to demonstrate differences in policies. Their inclusion is, in fact, solely determined by the fact that I live in one and work in the other, and therefore had a personal interest in finding out what was happening in both localities.

Throughout the article the languages spoken by minority groups will be referred to as community languages, a term first used in the 1980s. I have chosen to use this term for several

reasons: firstly, it reinforces the fact that these languages are, on the whole, an integral part of local communities (though the sizes of the communities will of course vary); secondly, unlike the previously used term 'heritage languages', it does not imply that these languages belong in the past; and thirdly, I have avoided the term 'minority languages' since in some contexts they are, in fact, used by a majority of the population.

LANGUAGES AND THE UK CONTEXT

The national picture

The recent Nuffield Inquiry (2000) highlighted some worrying aspects of the state of language teaching and learning in the UK. These included falling numbers of A level candidates, fewer undergraduates, and a shortage of language teachers (see also Saunders, 1998). However, if the situation is bad with regard to the European languages traditionally taught in British schools, the situation for community languages is even worse. Despite the large number of languages spoken and the increasing global significance of many of them (Graddol, 1997, 1998), we have a list of only 19 official languages on the National Curriculum, of which eight are the official languages of the European Union. A non-European language can be offered by a school only if they are offering at least one of these European languages - a significant statement of status. In linguistically diverse cities such as Nottingham, it would appear that the number of community language teachers in the mainstream fell dramatically in the 1990s, and specialist advisors are now few and far between (and this is also increasingly the case for other subject-specific advisors). There is a very real threat to some community language examinations (for example, Arabic at GCSE and A level, and Hindi at GCSE level) simply because they are deemed to be financially unviable by examination boards. Furthermore, most of these languages are not offered in higher education, and there have been cases where some higher education institutions have failed to recognise an A level in a community language as part of their entry requirements, since a qualification in one's mother tongue is deemed to be an easy option (unless it happens to be English). In addition, there are very few courses leading to qualified teacher status in community languages, though some progress has been made recently in this area (see Pagliero and Keenan, 2000a, 2000b).

So what strategies are in place at a national level to improve this situation? Are we aiming to make positive use of the existing linguistic resources of the country at a time when there is increasing demand in the world of business not only for Western European languages but also for those from other parts of the world, in particular S.E. Asia and the Indian subcontinent (Land 2000)?

Is there a coherent plan to build on this and at the same time to develop more positive attitudes amongst our monolingual population? Or are we happy to write ourselves off as a nation which is linguistically hopeless, ignoring the linguistic proficiency already evident in a significant proportion of our population?

Unfortunately, the UK does not yet have a coherent national policy to promote language learning and teaching, though the recent Nuffield Inquiry (2000) offers some hope of this in the strength of its recommendations. It is not surprising then that the different types of language (modern foreign languages, community languages and English) are being pigeon-holed as different types of problem (and I use this word with full awareness of its implications). Thus, the 1995 version of the National Curriculum for English was more influenced by the call for a return to traditional standards, values and methods in the teaching of English than by broader language issues. The 1999 version of the MFL National Curriculum has no reference to the fact that there are many pupils with multilingual backgrounds. There are no observations on handling bilingualism in the new Primary Standards for Initial Teacher Training. Given that the recently introduced compulsory study of a language up to the age of sixteen seems to be coming into question already, there is little hope that the Common European Framework for language learning being issued by the Council of Europe and currently in its second draft form will have any meaning in the UK, since it states that all pupils must learn at least two foreign languages at school (see Council of Europe Modern Languages page: <http://culture.coe.fr/lang/index.html>). Indeed even within our National Curriculum there are inconsistencies. Bilingualism is largely ignored in most of the documentation, implying an assimilationist position, whereas in Wales the development of bilingualism is now part of the school curriculum.

The needs of linguistic minority groups

Nottingham is a large city in the East Midlands of England. In 1998 there was a reorganisation of local government, and the city of Nottingham became a unitary authority separate from the county of Nottinghamshire, for which no demographic details are available as yet. However, some indication of linguistic needs can be seen in county figures from 1991, at which time survey results showed that of 5671 pupils from the New Commonwealth 3934 "had a degree of English language proficiency which was a barrier to full curriculum access" (Nottinghamshire Education Authority 1996).

Support for bilingual children was until recently provided through Section 11 funding (from the Home Office), and is now devolved to schools. This spending on the needs of bilingual pupils

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has, however, focused mainly on English language support, with only some residual support for first language development through limited funding for supplementary language schools functioning outside mainstream education (one of the Assistant Directors of Education has supplementary schooling as part of her brief).

Carrying out the research

In an attempt to explore possible ways in which the University of Nottingham School of Education might support first language development, research was carried out with groups of community language teachers in 1997-98. These were largely teachers who work in supplementary education, i.e. Saturday or evening schools run on a voluntary basis for specific linguistic communities, with the aim of teaching those languages (and in some cases, e.g. the Urdu school, aspects of culture and religion). As the aim was to define real needs by creating an environment where the open exchange of opinions would be facilitated, it was decided to run separate group discussions, one for the supplementary school coordinators and two for the language teachers. In each of the language teacher groups there were fifteen teachers from a range of community schools. In the coordinators' meeting there were thirteen participants representing a range of languages (Gujerati, Hindi, Polish, Punjabi, Ukrainian and Urdu), and including a representative from the Muslim Education Trust.

In each of the groups, the following stimulus questions were used:

- 1 Would you like to see community languages more in mainstream schools or should they mainly be taught in supplementary schools?
- 2 Would you like children to be taught some other subjects through the community language?
- 3 Would you like more monolingual English-speaking children to learn community languages?

These questions provoked a great deal of discussion. In fact, the need on the part of the participants to discuss their needs with each other as well as with outsiders came across very strongly throughout the meetings.

Responses

In the course of the discussions the following themes emerged:

1. *Erosion of local and national support for community languages*

Coordinators in particular were keen to defend previous local education policies which had been very supportive of community languages. Strategies mentioned were:

- financial support for supplementary schools
- bilingual instructors offering mother-tongue support in the transition stage

- the existence of an advisor with responsibility for community languages, as well as a support group

The situation, however, had changed over the last ten years due to a range of national and local policy changes. In 1997 alone, financial support had been cut by 40%, threatening the survival of the community schools. The number of GCSE examinations available in community languages had been reduced (Ukrainian had been withdrawn in 1996, Arabic was under threat, Hindi had never existed). The cost for entering pupils for GCSE examinations in these languages was no longer covered if they were taught outside the mainstream school (as had become the norm apart from a few exceptions).

2. *Status of community languages*

It was felt very strongly that the status of community languages was very low, leading to a fear that children would not wish to maintain these languages and, indeed, that they may associate the low status with their own cultural heritage. In order to enhance the status it was felt that they should feature much more in mainstream education, and that opportunities needed to be found to discuss why community languages are important. Though coordinators believed that mainstreaming was not possible for all languages, nevertheless they wanted the most widely spoken languages (Urdu and Punjabi) to be taught in the mainstream, with others being supported in supplementary schools. (Teachers felt that all languages should be offered in mainstream schools, and suggested that schools should work together in clusters to facilitate this provision. They felt that supplementary schools should exist only for younger children.) Where taught in the mainstream, it was also felt that they should be on a par with European languages, and offered to all pupils, including the monolingual English speakers. They should not, however, be offered as an alternative to European languages, since all pupils must be able to learn these languages if they are to have access to the benefits of the Single Market and mobility. It was felt rather that they should be offered in addition to European languages. Peripatetic teaching should be avoided where possible, and community language teachers in the mainstream needed to be paid on the same scale as other teachers. Qualifications obtained in these languages should be accepted as valid statements of achievement rather than being perceived by employers and educational institutions as easy options and therefore not of equivalence to other qualifications.

3. *Need for coordination*

Although some mainstream secondary headteachers in Nottingham had been trying to reintroduce community languages into their schools, it was felt that there was a need to

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