



Theatre in Education and Heritage Language Development

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Abstract

The focus of the present paper is on Theatre in Education and Heritage language as explored within a Greek community school in London. This study addresses issues related to education and teaching. The research project is set in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural framework where I explore the impact of Greek national theatre performances on the students' linguistic identity. Being a heritage language learner/speaker within a multilingual host country often informs the person's bi- and/or multilingual/multicultural self-positions. The members of the Greek community often stand between two cultures and syncretise both their knowledge and identity by drawing on elements from both cultures/languages. Language is explored in a variety of ways and perspectives: language of the script/performance; language in the classroom; and the students', parents' and teachers' reported perceptions on the issue of heritage language and dialect as practised within the school's theatre performances. Initial findings suggest that participating and exploring theatre performances might often enhance and foster the development of heritage languages. The language of the theatre plays is often employed as a symbolic medium of cultural capital that helps the students to explore historical, religious, cultural and ethnic ideologies and representations. These ideologies are respectively related to a political and historical background and are legitimised and reproduced within educational settings that function as State institutions. The study indicates that these representations inform the students' self-positions and awareness while encouraging membership to the community's collective ethno-cultural identity. However, both the students' and the teachers' accounts report that they do not embrace unproblematically all aspects of heritage language and culture and the respective embedded ideologies. They question issues of language as a symbolic power that are related to political, social, gender and ethnic/national unequal distribution of power. However, they stress that there is a positive impact of theatre in education on heritage language development. Moreover, they associate this impact with aspects of ethno-cultural identity. This study informs educators on a range of issues, such as the teaching of heritage language while employing drama as a learning medium; the significance and contribution of national theatre performances on collective memory and ethnic identity; the variety of self-positions that minority communities adopt in reference to the heritage and the dominant culture; and, the role of community education as a 'safe space' where the community negotiates ethno-cultural identity positions. In summary of the above, I would argue that my research is related to a future education where art education is employed both as a learning medium and as a bridge to collective memory and identity.