Language and Intercultural Education

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Abstract

In this paper we shall discuss and review issues around the intersectionality of language learning, intercultural education and social justice. Languages are living tools of communication, differing within and between themselves, mutating over time and constantly affected by their interaction with other languages. Clearly this interaction occurs in historic and social space. Languages per se offer a different conceptual as well as linguistic space. They also can offer political and social advantage, access to valued resources and the opportunity to participate in advanced learning. This fact alone can produce a number of contradictory elements. On the one hand there is the unique and precious heritage of each language. On the other is the social construction of inferiority for such languages in the context of conquest, colonialism or assimilation.

Often judgmental and discriminatory, language can blatantly serve as a means to alienate and degrade some social groups. Media stereotypes can reinforce this. However, the power and domination language can exercise can also be subtle, often unconscious and therefore much more insidious. Native speakers gain a particular status in relation to non-native speakers who might or might not have the 'correct' accent. Non-native speakers cannot escape evaluation, they cannot hide: exposed as soon as they utter a word. Self-perceived superiority of native speakers usually extends to their cultural understanding of the world.

Furthermore, the dominant host language may act against real multilingualism in accommodating difference. Assimilation, conquest, shame, identity have all been factors in the evolving role of Irish, for example, for 150 years. It is for this reason that the study of language/s needs to be linked to intercultural education. Intercultural education needs to be based on and pursue equality, social justice and human rights. In this space the use of Irish serves as a fascinating example of interesting practice.

Rescuing language in intercultural identity

One of the most significant achievements of the EU NELLIP project, in which the authors have been transnational partners, has been its effort to bring to language practitioners' attention the need to link language with its cultural environment. Intercultural education, we agree, must start at primary school level and needs to be part of any course in foreign languages. Culture is embedded in language and it is through language that we learn the sociocultural knowledge that enables us to understand and experience the world we live in. This important focus on intercultural education should continue and be extended. Students need to develop skills not only for travelling and participating in globalized markets but also for fostering social cohesion within borders.

At the end of 1990s and with a rapidly growing economy, Ireland passed from being a country of net emigration to being a country of net immigration. As well as a significant amount of immigrants looking for better working opportunities, Ireland witnessed, for the first time, substantial numbers of asylum seekers entering the country.

The numerous languages spoken by their new clients overwhelmed services. Service providers found it difficult to understand that while their services were "open" to everybody, were not necessarily accessible to all. Even more puzzling for them was the idea that unless they provided for the languages spoken and understood by their clients, they would be discriminating against them. After EU legislation and standards were introduced and with more experience and awareness regarding the needs of immigrants, public agencies and private employers worked out their own systems to provide services with the assistance of interpreters. While this provided a solution in many cases, many agencies realized that there were also "cultural issues" that made communication difficult. During those years, Irish services energetically sought to organize and attend training programs in intercultural information and communications that would enable them to "deal" with the newcomers. Although many agencies made a significant effort to understand and work effectively in a different environment, there were still many that thought that the intercultural effort belonged exclusively to those arriving in "their" country. If immigrants wanted to live in Ireland, it was their duty to learn the language and the Irish 'ways'.

Indeed, those immigrants that arrived and spoke English or had the capability to learn it quickly, had an advantage in navigating the Irish system, in understanding better the values and attitudes of the Irish host population. They were able to develop an intercultural identity that helped them to navigate two cultures. Clearly, immigrants have more chances to be accepted if they aspire, behave and communicate like the majority population. This acceptance, however, does not usually extend to immigrants being allowed to "belong". Collective identities are not based on tangible characteristics but rather on the feeling or sense of belonging to a group. It is almost an impossible aspiration for outsiders, regardless of how "Irish" they might become. There is always something that sets them apart: the accent, the look, the manners…How does one manage to get included in this sense of group, to a community that is imagined[1] when one is different?

There is nothing wrong encouraging the autonomy that language affords migrants. Being able to communicate effectively enhances the possibilities of integration in host countries. However, there are many reasons why some immigrants are not able to learn a foreign language. They should not be reduced to marginality because of it. The question required is how we think about collective and intercultural identities. Can we teach and learn to foster solidarity with those who are different to us?

The case of Ireland

These issues assume a particular importance in the case of Ireland. Ireland's original language is Irish (Gaelic), one of the remaining Celtic languages – and in fact one of the earliest recorded languages still spoken as a live language today. Over the centuries Irish developed a rich and complex set of literary expressions. Rich in bardic lore, poetry, academic and liturgical resources, Irish remained a vigorous majority language well into the 19th century. Centuries of invasion, colonization and population expulsions eventually destroyed autonomous Irish political and economic expression. The Irish language itself was devalued and, in fact, its use was criminalized under various repressive laws passed by the British colonial administration. The final death knell was the Great Famine (1846-49) when mass starvation and emigration (25% of the population dead or gone within 5 years) confirmed the marginal and devalued position of all things Irish, including the language. The language has steadily declined. Although the independent government in the Republic has an official policy of language revival and bilingualism, this is still a problematic issue in Northern Ireland where the right to speak and use Irish is unevenly accepted in practice.

The EU NELLIP project provided an important opportunity to bring together language practitioners and users to explore the reality of language teaching and innovative methods in Ireland. When specifically exploring dimensions around the importance of maintaining the Irish language, many participants in NELLIP Workshops emphasized the significant value that the Irish language had "as part of their cultural identity". Unpacking what that meant exactly was more difficult for participants to articulate however. Irish plays a complex part in identity, cultural competence and historic assertion of national rights in Ireland.

Only about 16% of the population today speaks Irish well and 1% use it on a regular basis. Some 42% of Irish people describe themselves as Irish speakers in the last National Census. This clearly demonstrates that language is an important symbolic aspect of cultural and social identity. In Ireland, as Watson (2011) asserts, Census figures are more the result of attitude than anything else. Indeed, language is by no means a neutral tool of communication, a series of grammatical rules put together. On the contrary, language is embedded with social values and norms. We are all socialized through language into our sociocultural environments (what we know, think and feel). Language competence is distinct from aspirational issues around identity however.

The depiction of Ireland as a homogeneous and uniform cultural polity is a recent and essentially inaccurate one. Its origins lie in the settlements achieved by the Land League, the pervasive cultural expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in the post-Famine era and the inert conservatism of the two States that emerged from the Partition settlement of 1922. The key point is that Ireland has never been a uniform or agreed sociopolitical entity. The nature of Irish society has been a fragmented, divided and polyglot one. In its very fibres, Ireland has actually been a laboratory of diversity. Its cultural mosaic has encompassed layers of identity not to be expected in a remote offshore island. Its discontinuities and divisions have however been the source of extraordinary creativity and interplay, where no one culture (Celtic, Gaelic, Danish, Norman French, English, Scottish, Flemish, Jewish or Huguenot) has had a monopoly of Irishness. In this process the Irish language served as a unifying and consolidating element.

A key starting point for the analysis of issues around policy impact and issues of identity and intercultural communication is the nature and pace of change in modern Irish society. The extent of

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[1] Benedict, Anderson (1983, 1991) Imagined Communities. London: Verso

this change is producing a social configuration unlike anything that has preceded it. The transition from rural to urban – common to all other societies globally – has occurred in a context of continuing post-colonial adjustment in a politically divided society. In the Irish experience, deep currents of violence and instability have paralleled this process of social change. The violence ranges from the more or less forced migration of hundreds of thousands from their place of birth in the Republic since independence to the more overt, cyclic violent instability in the North. Common concerns around underdevelopment and ownership of wealth have been voiced in contexts of sectarianism, discrimination and significant disparities in access to resources.

These unresolved conflicts of Irish societies and identities are the background to a deeper understanding of intercultural dialogue and contact than can be assumed from a more traditional version of social change, divorced from context and history. With conflict over resources and identity as a starting point rather than result, it is suggested we can develop a more accurate picture of the tensions and difficulties (as well as the challenges and opportunities) involved in intercultural and language policy formation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, education policy in Ireland and the operation of a standardized schooling system remained highly contested areas. Issues around religious influence, national identity, political struggle and denominational control dominated discourse. The neglect of the Irish language and of Irish culture in general was an important charge made against the national school system. With independence from Britain in 1922 for the majority of the island, education policy became central to the creation and maintenance of identity. The Department of Education was established in 1924. The Constitution of 1937 set forth fundamental rights and principles relating to education, but education and strategic policy/planning remained totally subservient to a centralized system of rules and regulations in which compulsory language teaching, denominational control and a rigid focus on memorization in an examination dominated system remained the norm. The influence of the Department of Education pervades the entire Irish educational system, especially at primary and secondary levels, where it controls regulations, standards, operational criteria, curricula and examinations. Only vocational (technical) schools had oversight from local authorities and elected public representatives.

Charting a diverse future

The derivative and imported nature of much Irish education has been a concern of note for many decades. Irish schooling has tended to model itself on and compete with external systems, largely British. This has tended to deprive Irish social discourse of authentic indigenous voices addressing local concerns, albeit from a perspective of international best practice. Particularly in community spheres like disability, gerontology, health services planning, gender studies, housing provision, spatial planning, transport and cultural diversity the first instinct has often been to reach for imported models, both of analysis and of practice. The change process in Irish society is similar to that experienced by all societies undergoing the dual processes of industrialization and integration into a world market economy. That this process commenced several centuries previously with the impact of colonization, expropriation and plantation adds originality to the Irish experience - especially in a specifically European context.

The globalization process is at the core of labor market change in all countries. This has specific implications for learning specialists and educators in terms of professional training, best practice and standards in approaching the diversity emerging within many communities. The pervasive globalizing process means no discussion on intercultural or language strategy can be undertaken without parallel international understanding and analysis of how new forms of cultural diversity impact on the learning needs of populations subjected to unprecedented levels of change.

This also speaks of the critical importance of innovation and vision in addressing the key priorities for developing learning and transnationality to combat socio-economic marginalization. It is of interest that marginalized groups can often be the springboards for new innovative learning methodologies. Developing new innovative and creative learning and application paradigms is critical for a number of reasons.

This develops the discourse by a focus on a number of connected themes.

- Intercultural communications
- Learning policy in contexts of diversity and change
- Conflict transformation initiatives
- Human rights frameworks for educational access
- Innovation in work and labour market transformation around diversity
- Hegelian conceptualizations of the Other
- Transformational learning in social change

- Permanent immigration – developing multicultural responses
- From digital divide to universal access
- Implications for policy, research and innovation
- Elephants in the room- war, violence and the cost of exclusion.

Language is certainly part of that effort to construct solidarity. It could not be any other way. After all it is through language that we understand the world, identify ourselves and relate to others. Language is much more than a means to communicate: we speak language and language speaks us. Consciously or unconsciously, language transmits and reproduces beliefs, opinions, experiences, evaluations and judgments. Language bears the characteristics and echoes of the sociocultural contexts that signify them. Language is not just a neutral tool that we use: there is nothing innocent about language. Sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly, we are all shaped by language that is flavored with negative representations, evaluations and judgments about immigrants. A language riddled with prejudices unmistakably contributes to creating a separate world of 'them' and 'us'.

However, language can also be a means to construct solidarity within difference. For that to happen, we need to show more care and responsibility about the way we teach language. We need a new perspective that is inextricably linked to concepts of intercultural education and social solidarity.

References

[1] Watson, I. (2011) 'Linguistic Elitism: the Advantage of Speaking Irish Rather than the Iris-speaker Advantage'. *The Economic and Social Review*, 42:437-454