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Languages Teaching in Tasmania: a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective

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Abstract

Language teaching and learning have received great attention from researchers, teachers, and the public around the world. However, the rationale for teaching languages and the associated curriculum vary a great deal depending on the discourses in which languages teaching is situated. Traditionally, languages teaching is seen as a subject which promotes intellectual development in learners. As language, society and culture are deeply linked, the traditional view does not reflect this intricate connection. Languages teaching and learning can be powerfully examined from the CDA perspective as CDA does not pay attention only to surface manifestations and explicit rationales for understanding languages teaching discourse, but more importantly it critically examines powerful messages implicitly and explicitly embedded in the discourse. This paper examines the historical discourse of language teaching in Tasmania. It initially focuses on the historical development of languages teaching and moves to the emerging discourses in Tasmania.

1. Introduction

Language cannot be divorced from its cultural context. Learning a language is learning its culture and society. English has emerged as an international language, not because there are more people using it, but merely because it is widely used by people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds all over the world. While the rapid growth of English has spread widely as an unstoppable superhighway which permeates big cities and small global villages, the teaching of a second language, other than English, is progressing at a much slower rate. This paper examines the destiny of Languages with its different discourses, particularly in the Tasmania context.

2. Languages, power and ideology

Languages teaching and learning has a long history. It is not confined to a pedagogical domain due to its emergence in sociolinguistic discourse, in which power, politics and various social issues are involved. A language is not just a linguistic system. It is deeply embedded in a sociocultural discourse and its role in education should be viewed beyond the school discourse. This is clearly manifested in the way in which terminologies and perceptions have changed to accommodate different ideologies. Thus we have witnessed the introductions of terms in the educational discourse such as native language, English-speaking background (ESB), non-English-speaking background (NESB), foreign language, second language, community language, priority language, Aboriginal language, Indigenous language,

LOTE and Languages. The choice of the use of those terms depends on the discourse of the user.

Issues of linguistic discrimination and linguistic imperialism, which have recently emerged strongly in applied linguistics, have shifted the attention of languages teaching from its linguistic paradigm to the critical discourse paradigm, which places languages and languages teaching in a discourse of competing discourses.

It is interesting to examine the powerful role of English in the international context and any possible conflict with languages other than English. For those who see English as imperialistic, it is important to keep an eye on its powerful influences on other societies and cultures. An important theme emerging is that of “linguicism” (Phillipson, 1992), whereby endangered or local languages become extinct or lose their local importance as a direct result of the rising and competing prominence of English.

The power of English over other languages is based on the following rationale:

- English is well-established world-wide;
- English is a gateway to the world;
- It stands for modernity;
- It is a symbol for material advance and efficiency.(Wikipedia)

Arguments often support the notion of what English is and other languages are not.

Robert Phillipson’s book *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992) has attracted great interest among languages researchers as well as languages educators. The powerful growth of English is perceived as a threat to the survival of other languages. Learning English is not just learning another language. English brings along its ideologies, financial power and influences. The linguistic imperialism view has been challenged on the ground that the promotion of English does not necessarily imply the demotion of local languages. This may or may not be true. However if one looks at the foreign language teaching in Vietnam, for example, one can see the power and dominance of English over other more historically traditional foreign languages of Russian and French. These languages occupied a powerful position prior to the strong emergence of English during the past 30 years.

The introduction of community languages and community language schools in Australia reflects the nature of the Australian society with its cultural diversity. The change of the cultural components of the population leads to its influence in the educational discourse. The statistics table below quoted by Michael Clyne and Sandra Kipp illustrates this dynamic ethnolinguistic change in Australia, as evidenced by the change in top 10 entries and the support of the community languages program by the many communities. Overall the period between 1991 and 1996 saw a marked increase in Australia’s linguistic diversity, with 240 language groups identified and 14.6% of the total population speaking a language other than English at home.

Table 2: Top ten languages, Australia, 1991 and 1996				
Language	1991	Language	1996	Percentage change 1991-96
Italian	418,804	Italian	375,752	- 10.3
Greek	285,700	Greek	269,770	- 5.6
Cantonese	162,899	Cantonese	202,270	+ 24.2
Arabic	162,857	Arabic	177,599	+ 9.0
German	113,336	Vietnamese	146,265	+ 32.7
Vietnamese	110,187	German	98,808	- 12.8
Spanish	90,479	Mandarin	91,911	+ 68.4
Polish	66,932	Spanish	91,254	+ 0.9
Macedonian	64,429	Macedonian	71,347	+ 10.7
Croatian	63,084	Tagalog	70,444	+ 19.2

Languages in Tasmania: an historical discourse

In 1996, the introduction and support of the NALSAS funding to Australian States and territories saw a resurgence of languages teaching in primary schools around the country. The funding, in Tasmania, allowed for the development of teaching and learning programs for identified languages, professional development for teachers, support for resources and the capacity for schools to begin the journey of integrating this recognised learning area in to the curriculum.

The word resurgence is used here because languages had been taught in some schools previously to this, but there was not an organised curriculum nor was there a coherent plan for the sustainability of languages education. Languages' teaching was the domain of high schools and, in primary school, only occurred if there was a person within the school or in the neighbouring high school who facilitated and supported the program. Resources were limited and I suspect often inappropriate for the younger learner. In April 1966, it was noted that, "the problems of teaching a language at this level (Grade 5 and 6) are certainly different from those encountered in High School classes and if we have not always found solutions to these problems we are slowly coming to the recognition of what the problems are" (Brooker 1966, p.12). The article supported the notion of languages teaching in primary schools as the trial assisted in the "acceleration on the average of at least one year's achievement by the first class to enter high school from the experimental groups and still more acceleration is expected from succeeding classes."(Brooker 1966, p.12). The issue of problems associated with younger learners was reported in November 1966. It was discovered that the Nuffield Foundation in England was trialling a special language course developed for primary aged children. The course eliminated "all the painful aspects of language learning – grammatical rules, in particular – were eliminated in the early stages:

textbooks and blackboard work were replaced by games, acting, cartoons, flannel graphs and tape recordings of songs, and conversations made in French schools.” (UNESCO 1966, p.173). The course involved daily lessons of half hour duration, involved speaking and reading and the learning of customs and institutions. The course was of five years duration and the results of pilot studies indicated that the language acquisition was “encouraging as they learnt 500 words a year, and by the end were able to speak and write French without difficulty” (UNESCO 1966, p.173.).

Teaching theories, for high school learners, were based on the notion of language being a “set of firmly fixed habits, of three main kinds, that are involved all the time and simultaneously in language behaviour:-

- Pronunciation habits (the sound, rhythms and melodies);
- Grammatical habits (phrase forming and sentence forming)
- Vocabulary habits (understanding and using particular words and phrases that go with particular meanings). (New French Seminars, 1965, p 188)

Linked to this were five principles involved in the successful teaching of languages – “recognition, imitation, repetition, variation, and selection.” (New French Seminars 1965, p.188).

Teachers were expected to utilise the textbooks, tapes and the newly developed language laboratories to assist in the student’s learning. It is obvious that language acquisition by learning vocabulary, grammar structures and practising oral/aural structures played an important role in language acquisition. The Nuffield work, while supporting similar notions, provided a much more appropriate interpretation of requirements for younger learners.

Development in Primary languages did not progress significantly for the next 30 years. This trend was evident nationally as a national survey in 1987 indicated only 10% of primary schools taught a language other than English (Lo Bianco 1987, p. 26). The Tasmanian draft languages policy of 1987 referred only to secondary schools and those primary schools that ran a languages program in most cases failed because “the program failed to live up to the high expectations held, due mainly to the lack of adequate consultation with principals involved before the scheme was introduced, to the fact that it was necessary to use itinerant teachers and to the poor liaison between the primary and receiving high schools.” (Lo Bianco 1987, p. 244).

In 1994 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed a report it commissioned in 1992 entitled Asian Languages and Australia’s Economic Future. The report, often referred to as the Rudd report, clearly articulated the need to expand the teaching of Asian languages in schools. It promoted a 15 year plan that would allow us to “produce an Asia- literate generation fluent and familiar with ‘export’ Asian languages and cultures.”(Henderson, 2002.)

Languages was one of the eight learning areas recognised by the Adelaide Declaration (MCEETYA, 1999) and adopted by all Australian States and Territories and supported by the development of national statements and profiles. The Federally funded NALSAS project provided the impetus for Australian schools to include languages as part of the primary curriculum. In Tasmanian government schools, this was reflected by the establishment of a policy statement that provided “the

opportunity to learn French, German, Indonesian or Japanese between Years 3 and 10. There will be a guaranteed pathway from primary to secondary and senior secondary level, within a cluster of schools, for learning one of these languages. Languages pertinent to small groups such as community languages, Aboriginal Languages and Auslan will also receive system support where appropriate.” (LOTE Directions, n.d.).

In the policy, Language learning was seen to be an integral part of the curriculum and an important aspect of a balanced curriculum. There was to be access to a pathway of language learning with children being ensured continuous language learning from Year 3 to 12. This was a major mind shift for our schools, but support through teacher training in Languages, professional development for class teachers, curriculum and materials development, advice and support for schools and communities, extra staffing and a technology package enabled schools to have the capacity to incorporate a Languages program that could be ongoing, sustainable and, hopefully, embedded within the school culture.

Thus, in Tasmania, Languages learning is not an unfamiliar domain and the teaching of a second language has been undertaken for a considerable time, in various forms and with various levels of success. However, the rationale for including Languages in the curriculum is based on a different rationale than historically perceived. Languages learners are expected to make comparisons, recognise patterns, and view their first language from a different viewpoint. Languages learners have an opportunity to develop metalinguistics awareness, which is also useful for cognitive development and literacy enhancement.

Intercultural Language Learning, strongly supported by the Department of Education (2005), “is an emerging pedagogy that has strong connections to inquiry thinking, requiring the learners to adopt an inquiring state of mind, to notice and question assumptions and to reorient themselves in relation to others. A critical dimension of understanding of language in use, is that language cannot be separated from its social and cultural context.”

The National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005 -2008 (p.3), provides a clear insight into the way in which intercultural language learning can develop competencies. They include:

- Communicating, interacting, and negotiating within and across languages and cultures
- Understanding their own and other’s languages, thus extending their range of literacy skills, including skills in English literacy
- Understanding themselves and others, and understanding and using diverse ways on knowing, being and doing
- Developing their cognitive skills through thinking critically and analytically, solving problems, and making connections in their learning.

Languages and the Essential Learnings

The Essential Learnings have provided the Tasmanian State School system, as well as the Catholic and Independent Schools, with a blueprint for the future of education

within the state. This blueprint will provide learners with the capacity to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to participate in a world that is changing and evolving. It provides educators with a greater capacity to focus on what is important, relevant and central to the curriculum as well as highlighting what is required when formulating teaching and learning sequences that will offer maximum learning opportunities. It provides a vehicle through which interactions can occur and for curriculum to be devised.

Changes to curriculum occur as a result of developing theories and practices and the changing patterns of a society. The changes that have occurred within Tasmania, within Australia and internationally, are as a result of this changing environment and the growing need for communities to “assist members to achieve high quality lifelong learning... that contributes to personal development, sustainable economic growth and social cohesion”(OECD, 2005).

As Kell (n.d.) indicates “the internationalisation of education has become one of the key themes of educational policy and planning.” As educators, the challenges of the global perspective can be confronting, but to meet the range of opportunities offered by internationalisation, our education needs to provide access and opportunities for our students to be players on the world wide stage.

Within the context of the State, there were two particular events which led to the development of the Essential Learnings.

In 2000, the Tasmanian Government released a vision for education in *Learning Together: Draft proposals for education, training and information into the 21st century*. This document was then referred to a Community Leaders’ Group who were responsible for overseeing the implementation of another state government incentive - the *Tasmania Together* document – a document outlining a 20 year vision for Tasmania - which consisted of 24 goals providing a vision for Tasmania’s future community, cultural, democratic, economic and environmental development and sustainability.

Tasmania Together had a strong community support base as the government provided an opportunity for all Tasmanians to have input through contact with community organisations, public meetings and the capacity to provide individual/group submissions. The body was managed by the Community Leaders’ Group. Within the 24 identified goals and 212 benchmarks, there were many implications for education and training. Consequently, *Learning Together* had a supported platform where change was on the agenda and where support from both community and government was evident.

Within the *Learning Together* document, goals and principles were stated for education. These were supported by a series of key principles which served to underline the Government’s commitment to change. At the time of launch, the Minister for Education offered the following challenge to the Department of Education “ with the release of this document I am inviting you to join with me in determining what practical actions we need to take.....I believe the size and quality of Tasmania’s education system means we are ideally placed to make changes that are

necessary to ensure a world class education, training and information systems” (Learning Together 2000, p.iii).

As a result of and in response to the publication of *Learning Together* and Tasmania *Together* documents, the Essential Learnings evolved in a climate dominated with the notion of the importance of life long learning, the need for Tasmania to have a world class educational system, recognition of the rapid communication of information and the importance of education in the creation of a “more equitable, cohesive and inclusive society.” (Learning Together 2000, p.3)

The Tasmanian Department of Education established a Curriculum Consultation team. Their brief was to determine, in light of Learning Together, what our educational system should look like in the 21st century. There was wide consultation and collaboration between teachers, school leaders, and the community having the opportunity to have input into the Curriculum Consultation team’s construction. Sessions were held for parents, children’s services professionals and members of the wider community to canvas their views and expectations. In December 2000, the Minister for Education launched the Values and Purposes Statement. The values of connectedness, resilience, achievement, creativity, integrity, responsibility and equity were supported by six purposes which were to form the basis of curriculum review and future planning needs. The development of these Values and Purposes were the first step in selecting “essential” elements and would later form the basis of formulating the learning, teaching and assessment principles. The Values and Purposes statement provided a platform for the development of the new frameworks. The five curriculum organisers - Thinking, Communicating, Personal Futures, Social Responsibility and World Futures were developed to provide the framework for the teaching and learning and as a means of selecting content. Each Essential contains a set of Key Questions which guide educators in designing and delivering programs. Outcomes and Standards have been trialled and developed and are in the process of being implemented.

In 2001, 20 schools were involved in the development and trial of the new curriculum. Rigorous monitoring occurred and another 22 schools were involved in 2002. *Essential Learnings Framework 1* was launched in 2002. 2003 saw another 60 schools begin their journey. 2005 saw the involvement of all schools with assessment and reporting being phased in over a 4 year period.

Thus the implementation of the new curriculum has been a three phase process. Initially the frameworks were investigated and established. Secondly, project schools were invited to trial the guidelines and develop models of good practice incorporating the document and thirdly, curriculum implementation in all schools. It is mandated now that all state schools incorporate the Essential Learnings into their core business.

Within the Tasmanian community, debate continues regarding the merits of the new framework. There are a wide range of views and all stakeholders’ perspectives are being voiced and reported to the wider community. Opinions range from strong support to worried scepticism. Comments in the Examiner (10 – 14 October 2005) vary from “vague and lacking academic rigour” to “... a richer curriculum and is the best system to equip our children for the 21st century....it means that Tasmania now has a world class education system.” Skilbeck (2005) suggests that the ELs are “an

attempt to aim for the very highest standards of performance in learning, while ensuring that the needs of every student are met in a fair and inclusive way. It provides the foundations for a broad, inclusive education from birth to 16.” This ongoing debate is clarifying and providing understandings from different perspectives and highlighting the community’s interest. This will ensure that the transformation of our education system is supported in the long term and, therefore, maximising the learning needs of our students.

Government leaders, teachers, parents and interested community members have entered the debate and all have provided their views on the implementation process. The issue of the translation of the theory into practice is at the heart of the debate and, as with all change, tensions are high as all the stakeholders jostle to deliver their points of view. The different perspectives presented through the media reflect a strong interest but the discourse must reflect and ultimately meet the intellectual and emotional needs of the learners and the economic and social needs of the community if the change is going to be relevant and successful in the teaching and learning program.

It is within this landscape, that Languages now needs to find a place and a way in which it can support and promote the philosophy behind the Essential Learnings. The 1989 National Goals for Schooling recognised languages learning was an investment in our future and a valuable resource for our children. This notion was affirmed in the 1999 National Goals where Languages learning was identified as one of the eight key learning areas. There is the expectation that learners will achieve standards that reflect high understandings, skills and knowledge. The National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian schools 2005 - 2008 provides a strong blue print for future development..

Thus the scene was set for schools to implement this recognised Learning Area. The Essential Learnings, supported by research and findings world wide, provide a strong framework in which Languages can operate and flourish “in a globally connected world, the skills of communicating in languages other than our own, and learning to understand intercultural exchanges lead to an appreciation of language and of cultural diversity and enrich the life experiences of individuals and their community” (Essential Learning Framework 1, p.20). In Tasmania, languages’ learning empowers our community and lessens the cultural and linguistic isolation that we experience as a state with a small population.

The Essential Learnings’ values and purposes underpin Languages programs and will “support learners to become aware of the power of language as a means of gaining access to other individuals, ideas and ways of thinking. It will inspire an interest in and respect for other peoples and cultures. Learners will be supported to embrace diversity and value personal identity”(The ELs and the LOTE Learning Area n.d.). The Communicating Essential Learning is a fundamental component in developing learner’s understandings and learners will be supported by the Thinking Essential Learning in their quest for “challenging tasks that go beyond description, identification and the use of formulaic language.”(The ELs and the LOTE Learning Area, n.d.). Social Responsibility and Personal Futures provide a strong vehicle through which intercultural competence, development of cross cultural perspectives and understandings can be explored and a sense of cultural identity can be advanced.

Conclusion

It is a fact that Australia is a country of huge linguistic diversity. There are many languages other than English spoken at home and in different ethnic communities in Australia. It is also a fact that language and identity are closely related. Language is not just an instrument of communication. It can be stated that what we speak makes us who we are. Languages should be valued as an educational key which can open many doors to the outside world as well as the inward journey to one's cultural heritage. Language learning has the potential to give students a good chance to obtain this precious key. But, as Demo (2001) states, the harsh reality of second language teaching is, "the second language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learners' communicative competence in the target language. This is due to the restricted number of contact hours with the language; minimal opportunities for interacting with native speakers; and limited exposure to the variety of functions, genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur outside the classroom". The challenge is for us to consider ways of embedding language learning in the curriculum and, in the Tasmanian context, the Essential Learning framework provides the vehicle and the means of supporting strong, viable programs. Emerging discourses surrounding language teaching need to be discussed and incorporated to ensure maximum benefit can be obtained by our learners.

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