Applications of Language Policy and Planning to Deaf Education

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Introduction

Language policy and planning center on how multilingualism is managed in society. Language-in-education planning is a specific type of language policy and planning that focuses on how decisions are made with respect to which language(s) and modalities are used for teaching and learning within education. Special attention is paid to understanding how decisions are made about the language abilities students need (in various languages) in order to participate in society and, in turn, how they can achieve those abilities (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997).

All planning in deaf education is, in essence, related to language planning since issues of modality in instruction are of central concern (Reagan, 2010). In this way, principles of language planning and policy can inform the work of all professionals involved in various aspects of deaf education.

Core Concepts

It is useful to begin by considering three major types of language planning and how they relate to decisions made about educational issues.

Status Planning

Decisions are made by individuals within institutions of government in relation to the functions of language(s) in specific contexts. In education, this would include decisions made by individuals (e.g., policy makers, administrators, teachers) about which language(s) are used for teaching, which language(s) are allocated spaces in curricula as subjects, and which language(s) are used in texts and teaching materials, among others (Reagan, 2010, pp. 50-52).

Acquisition Planning

Decisions are also made in relation to language users and how they develop language skills. In education, this would include how students are supported (or not) in enhancing their current linguistic abilities for academic purposes as well as what opportunities they have for learning additional languages (Reagan, 2010, p. 53).

Corpus Planning

Moreover, decisions are made with respect to the linguistic form of a language. In education, this would include decisions about the development and standardization of specific linguistic forms such as orthography and lexical expansion, among others (Reagan, 2010, pp. 52-53).

Key Questions to Consider

Principles of language policy and planning bring to light several useful questions that educators can ask with respect to planning teaching and learning for students who are deaf or hard of hearing (and hearing individuals with family members who are deaf).

Status Planning

- What language(s) and modalities (signed, video-recorded, oral, written) are used for content instruction?

- What language(s) and modalities are used for assessment purposes?

- What language(s) and modalities are used for other communication purposes (e.g., classroom management, administration, communication with parents)?

- What roles, if any, do minority language(s) and modalities used at home by deaf and hard of hearing students and their families play at school?

Acquisition Planning

- What opportunities for students' language development in sign language(s) and spoken/written language(s) are presented in policy documents and curricula?

- How much time, if any, is allocated to learning additional languages?

- Which modalities are included in teaching and learning additional languages?

- What professional development opportunities are available for teachers to build language skills and pedagogical techniques for multimodal–multilingual instruction?

Corpus Planning

- How is a given sign language developed to be used as a medium of instruction?

- Which linguistic forms of a particular language are selected for use in teaching and learning?

- What language standardization efforts are taken up (e.g., creation of dictionaries or expanding vocabulary in a particular language)?

- What efforts are being made to develop orthographic systems for representing sign languages?

Major Findings

Research on language policy and planning, including a growing body of work focused on sign languages, offers insight about practical points to consider when creating or implementing policies and curricula for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

De Jure vs. De Facto Policies

De jure policies are written in legal codes and official curricular documents while *de facto* policies develop over time through practices that become normalized and accepted, even though they may not be written in a text (Schiffman, 1996, pp. 13-15). Hult and Compton (2012) and Ramsey (1997) found that *de jure* education policy in countries like the United States function as *de facto* language policy for deaf and hard of hearing students because of the ways in which the policy frames educational placement options. Students' access to sign and spoken languages at school is strongly influenced by the educational contexts in which they are placed.

Implementational Space

Because policies are interpreted by various actors in different contexts, there is room in education policies for educators to develop programs and lessons to support the learning needs of multilingual students (Hornberger, 2005, p.606). Compton (2010) illuminates the implementational spaces in U.S. national law governing deaf education for supporting multimodal–multilingual development. Further, Compton's study demonstrates how policy makers at the state, school district, and campus levels open up or close down these spaces in the policy texts. Moreover, the study demonstrates how educators at the campus level, along with parents, are the individuals with the most influence in determining the educational contexts into which students are placed.

Medium of Instruction

Students gain access to content knowledge *through* the language(s) and modalities used during teaching and learning (Svartholm, 2010, pp. 164-166); this can be contrasted with learning *about* a language in a foreign language class, for example (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 14-18). Hult and Compton (2012) found that educational policies provide for sign languages as mediums of instruction with varying degrees of explicitness. Ramsey (1997) and Siegel (2008) raise questions about the degree to which deaf and hard of hearing children gain access to instruction when delivered in a spoken language or through a sign language interpreter. Questions about the languages in which assessments are conducted are also important to consider (Wright, 2010, pp. 263-264).

Family–School–Community Connections

Sign languages are present not only at school but also in the homes and communities of students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing. Baynton (1996) provides a historical overview of how families and deaf communities have maintained American Sign Language despite language planning efforts to ban sign language in education. Compton (2014) draws attention to the frequent conflation of sign languages and deafness. In planning for sign languages, opportunities for hearing siblings and parents of deaf and hard of hearing children to learn

sign languages should also be considered. Likewise, the spoken and sign languages used at home and in students' communities should be addressed in education plans.

Manual Sign Codes

Artificial systems have been created by educators to represent dominant spoken languages in visual modalities (i.e., a signed system). Corpus and acquisition planning become intertwined since these coded systems borrow signs from natural sign languages in an attempt to teach deaf and hard of hearing children literacy skills in the target spoken language. The development and use of these systems has been highly controversial because of their artificial nature as well as the difficulty of teaching writing through a (signed) modality that is used in face-to-face interactions (Ramsey, 1989, pp. 131-137; Reagan, 2010, pp. 130-135).

Where Do Policies Stand?

The grid below (adapted from Hult & Compton, 2012, p. 614) provides a tool for reflecting on language policies within deaf education. Consider the guiding documents (national policies, curricula, school action plans, and any other documents that influence practice) in your educational context. Where would you plot each one in the quadrants?

- Horizontal axis (acquisition planning): Does it tend more toward fostering multimodal–multilingual development or monolingual development?

- Vertical axis (status planning): What setting(s) for deaf education are favored?
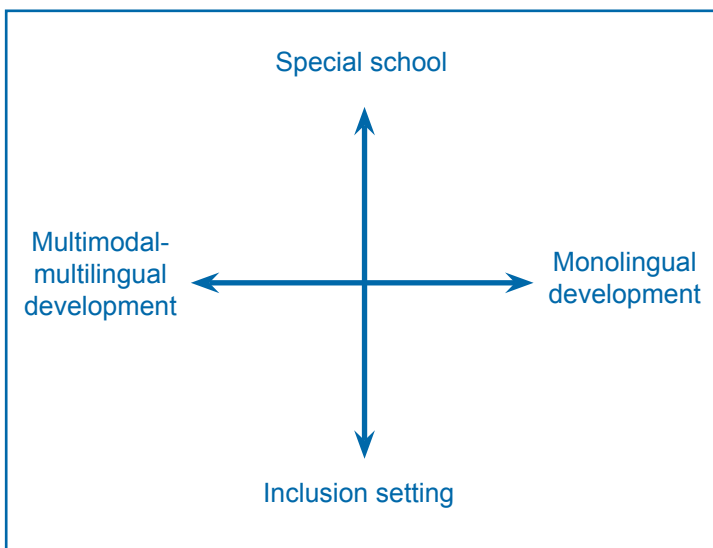
Grid for mapping the interaction between status and acquisition planning for deaf education.

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