

## Multilingual Education Policy and Practice: Lessons From Indigenous Experience<sup>1</sup>

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Although multilingualism and multilingual education have existed for centuries, our entrance into the new millennium has brought renewed interest in and contestation around this educational alternative. Ethnolinguistic diversity and inequality, intercultural communication and contact, and global political and economic interdependence are more than ever acknowledged realities of today's world, and all of them put pressures on our educational systems. It is this author's belief that now, as throughout history, multilingual education offers the best possibility for preparing coming generations to construct more just and democratic societies in our globalized and intercultural world. However, this is not unproblematically achieved.

There are many unanswered questions and doubts surrounding multilingual education in the areas of policy and implementation, program and curriculum design, classroom instruction practices, pedagogy, and teacher professional development, but there is also much that we understand and know very well based on empirical research in many corners of the world. Multilingual education is in its essence an instance of biliteracy, "in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing" (Hornberger, 1990, p. 213). I here use my continua of biliteracy framework as an implicit organizing rubric for considering some lessons about biliteracy contexts, media, development, and content in multilingual education policy and practice around the world (Hornberger, 1989, 2003; Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Each lesson is illustrated with examples from my observations of multilingual education in practice.

### Lesson 1: Multilingual education often begins with national policies

Bolivia's Education Reform Law of 1994 sought to implant multilingual education—termed *educación intercultural bilingüe* [bilingual intercultural education], or EIB—nationally, incorporating all 30 Bolivian Indigenous languages, begin-

ning with the three largest: Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani (Albó, 1995; Hornberger & López, 1998; López, 2005). The new law massively expanded the reach of EIB, from 114 experimental schools in the early 1990s to almost 3,000 schools by 2002, accounting for 22% of the primary school population, and was accompanied by dropping school desertion rates and rising graduation rates (Nucinkis, 2006).

The 1994 reform has clearly opened spaces for the practice of multilingual education, including actual physical spaces in schools and classrooms, as in the case of Berta, a teacher in Kayarani, Bolivia. She has been with her class from the start of their schooling; they are now in second to third grade. Her classroom is decorated with posters she made in Quechua, including models of a story, a poem, a song, a recipe, and a letter, and with the Quechua and Spanish alphabets and the class newspaper, *Llaqta Qhapariy* [Voice of the People]. This is not to say that multilingual spaces such as these are unproblematically accepted and adopted, however.

### Lesson 2: Multilingual education depends on the cooperation of teachers and local communities

Uptake of national reforms is by no means a foregone conclusion. Top-down policy is not enough; any policy may fail if there is no bottom-up, local support (Hornberger, 1987, 1988). For example, whereas Berta's class enjoys reading from the library collection provided by the Ministry of Education under the 1994 reform, in other rural Bolivian schools, untouched stacks of the reform's texts remain in locked cabinets in the director's office, and little effort has been made to implement EIB.

A key factor in the adoption of reform in Bolivia has been popular participation via Indigenous Peoples' Educational Councils, local bodies established under the reform to oversee education at the local level (López, 2008). In addition, local educators at primary, secondary, and tertiary

levels may themselves be opening spaces for multilingual education. One of the most interesting, promising, and potentially enduring developments in the Andes in the last few decades has been the master's program for Indigenous students known as the PROEIB Maestría, founded by PROEIB Andes, the Program for Professional Development in Bilingual Intercultural Education for the Andean Countries. Housed at the University of San Simón in Cochabamba, Bolivia, the PROEIB Maestría is a consortium effort sponsored by Indigenous organizations, universities, and ministries of education in six South American countries, with additional international funding from German Technical Assistance (GTZ), UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and others. Impelled by the vision and energy of Peruvian sociolinguist Luis Enrique López, PROEIB Andes and especially its master's program have opened up spaces for Indigenous rights and Indigenous education surpassing even those initially envisioned in the Bolivian reform.

### **Lesson 3: Models of multilingual education reflect linguistic and socio-cultural histories and goals particular to each context**

In 2002, I visited a Māori immersion school in New Zealand. During a conversation with a local Māori leader, it dawned on me that for Māori educators, bilingual education and Māori immersion are opposites, whereas for me they are located on a continuum. Māori-only ideology is of such integral and foundational importance to Māori immersion that the use of two languages, as is suggested by the term *bilingual*, is antithetical to those dedicated to Māori revitalization. Māori immersion is different from other bilingual education, such as Canadian-French immersion. In the latter, English-speaking children are immersed in French but later also take up reading and writing in English, usually beginning in third grade, in a 50%-50% proportion. In contrast, when the Māori immersion movement started in the 1980s, Māori communities opted for exclusive use of the Māori language in formal education, enforcing a total immersion model of multilingual education, in which use of the dominant language, English, is in principle prohibited within the school precincts, and the separation of languages is meant to be absolute (Hornberger, 2002; May, 1999; May & Hill, 2008).

These programmatic differences in Canadian and Māori immersion models are based in different sociocultural and linguistic histories and on different goals in each context. The history of writing in Māori goes back to 1825, before

New Zealand became a nation, yet Māori was prohibited from use in school and was on the way to extinction when revitalization efforts began in the 1980s; the immersion schools were a key component of revitalization efforts. The initiative taken in the 1980s by Māori elders and parents to establish preschool language nests to teach their children the ancestral language was a crucial step toward Māori language revitalization. That initiative gradually expanded and today encompasses Māori-medium education at all levels, as well as official status for the language since 1987 (May, 1999; May & Hill, 2008), all overseen by national-level bodies such as the Education Review Office, which takes up both status and corpus concerns.

### **Lesson 4: Language status and language corpus planning go hand in hand**

The aim of Māori-medium education has been first and foremost the revitalization of the language, at which considerable success has been achieved. Only more recently has a complementary focus on the educational effectiveness of Māori-medium education begun to emerge (May & Hill, 2008). Simultaneously, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of Māori language revitalization efforts not only in formal education but also in home and community (Hohepa, 2006).

Literacy has been acknowledged to play an integral role in Indigenous language revitalization—or *regeneration*, as Māori scholar and parent Margie Hohepa prefers to call it (Hohepa, 2006, p. 294), following her linguist father's usage (Hohepa, 2000). In her estimation, print literacy in the Indigenous language validates and gives status to the language, supports the preservation of past traditions for future generations, ensures a wider variety of functions for the language, and recreates the language within a changing culture and society (Hohepa, 2006, p. 295). Print literacy and the use of a language in teaching and learning imply a writing system, standardized grammar, and elaborated vocabulary. If these do not exist, they must be developed. Planning for a language's status as medium of education and developing its corpus for those uses go hand in hand (Fishman, 1980).

### **Lesson 5: Classroom practices can foster transfer of language and literacy across languages and modalities**

At a Maestría workshop on ethnographic research in September 2004, I asked the students to break into four groups and collaboratively describe, analyze, and interpret a two-page excerpt I gave them from an interview in

Quechua and Spanish. There turned out to be a wide range of approaches among the students, who were 42 Indigenous educators representing at least 10 different Indigenous ethnicities and language varieties, including not only different varieties of Quechua but also several other Indigenous languages. One group in particular seemed very efficient and focused, moving systematically through the steps of segmenting the transcript, choosing a segment to analyze, and applying some of the tools of discourse analysis and then Hymes' SPEAKING heuristic (1974, pp. 53-62). In contrast, two of the groups seemed to get bogged down in the task of reading and translating the transcript before they could get to work on the assigned task. To their credit, both these groups persisted, asking me many questions, and they actually learned a lot even though they didn't get "as far" as the first group. The last group also made good progress and had some excellent interpretive insights.

The workshop interaction exemplifies some of the ways the Maestría students' classroom practices regularly enabled them to draw from across their multiple languages and literacies in accomplishing academic tasks collaboratively. Three PROEIB Maestría participants have written specifically about strategies of interdialectal communication in Quechua within PROEIB (Luykx, Julca, & García, 2005), and there is a rich repertoire of strategies for multilingual communication as well.

Such flexible multilingual classroom practices, recently eloquently theorized and documented as *translanguaging practices* (Baker, 2003; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; García, 2009) or *bilingual supportive scaffolding practices* (Saxena, 2008), offer the possibility for teachers and learners to access academic content through the linguistic resources they bring to the classroom while simultaneously acquiring new ones. These biliteracy practices incorporate aspects of what have also been referred to in earlier bilingualism literature as *passive bilingualism*, *receptive bilingualism*, and *dual lingualism* (Lincoln, 1975).

Flexible practices and transfer of language and literacy skills are multimodal as well as multilingual, as exemplified in another Indigenous teacher education context—an annual summer course in the Amazonian rainforest of Brazil, sponsored by the Comissão Pró-Índio do Acre since 1983. This summer course is attended by *professores índios* [Indigenous teachers], representing different ethnic groups whose languages are in varying stages of vitality, from those with about 150 speakers to those with several thousand. Although the Indigenous teachers do not necessarily speak or understand all the other languages spoken

and written by their peers, they read, listen to, and look at each other's work. To facilitate mutual understanding, they at times use Portuguese as *lingua franca*, at times draw on the geometric designs and illustrations that are an integral part of their writing, and at times simply rely on their shared intra-/interethnic experiences. The multimodal, multilingual, mutual comprehension among the Amazonian Indigenous teachers is particularly striking given the great diversity of languages in the group and the salience of multimodal drawing and geometric design in their writing practices. Each written assignment bears the complex and colorful geometric designs and maps that are, as Monte (1996, 2003) and Menezes de Souza (2005) demonstrate, not merely illustrations to accompany the alphabetic text, but integral complements to it. These multimodal expressions contribute to the Indigenous teachers' mutual understanding across language differences, as well as to the development of their writing in those languages and in Portuguese.

## **Lesson 6: Multilingual education helps learners reclaim the local and revitalize the Indigenous**

During interviews with educators who had attended the PROEIB Andes workshop, I asked what it meant to them to be Indigenous. The first and most prominent responses were about living close to the land, speaking one's native language, and experiencing discrimination by others. These themes, about affirming one's own ways of doing, being, and speaking—that is, about activating one's voice (Hornberger, 2006)—and at the same time experiencing discrimination by others for those very practices and voices, were foremost in the collective story of these individuals' experiences of and reflections about being Indigenous. Envisioning and building an Indigenous future was another theme that resonated with the Andean educators, closely linked to reclaiming their locally rooted practices, renaming their world, and revitalizing their Indigenous identities, all themes that were consonant with the Indigenous research agenda proposed by Māori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which I shared with them in the workshop. They emphasized again and again that it was in the texts and encounters around PROEIB's multilingual education that these themes emerged and became meaningful for them. Local knowledge, identities, languages, practices, voices, literacies, standards, demands, experiences, folk wisdom, and native representations are among the things being reclaimed by Indigenous educators at PROEIB (Canagarajah, 2005).

## Conclusion

It is advocacy for the oppressed that makes multilingual education so politically controversial and at the same time why it offers so much hope for a better and more just future for all peoples. I presented an earlier version of this paper as a plenary at the Seventh Latin American Congress on Bilingual Intercultural Education, on what happened to be the anniversary of Gandhi's birth, October 2. In honor of his birthday and of his life and work devoted to building a more just society, I quoted words attributed to Gandhi in the nonviolent fight for a free and independent India: "Until we stand in the fields with the millions that toil each day under the hot sun, we will not represent India—nor will we ever be able to challenge the British as one nation." Multilingual education is, for me, all about standing in the oppressed places of the world, under the hot sun with the millions that toil each day, in the nonviolent fight for a liberating education. And it is not so much that I have strength to give them, but rather the reverse—that I am continually renewed by the unfathomable energy, vision, and forgiveness of those who toil.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Hornberger, N. H. (2009). Multilingual education policy and practice: Ten certainties (grounded in Indigenous experience). *Language Teaching*, 42(2), 197–211.

<sup>2</sup>Note that the continua of biliteracy framework accommodates both multilingualism and bilingualism, while recognizing that they are by no means synonymous.

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