Visual representation of multilingualism in early childhood classrooms in Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract
In urban classrooms, immigrant children’s multilingual competence is not always recognised (Chumak-Horbatsch 2012) and this is often reflected in the visual environment. To explore whether this was the case in the multilingual nation of South Africa, photos were taken in two first grade classrooms in Cape Town searching for signs that multilingualism is represented visually in the physical environment, in addition to interviewing teachers. The physical elements in the classroom reflect priorities that can send messages to families and visitors and influence how children think and what they are conscious of (Creese & Martin 2006). The findings indicate that South African teachers own multilingual identity may have enabled them to more readily recognise the multilingual resources of their young pupils.

Key words: Multilingualism, diversity, early childhood education urban education.

Background: multilingualism in Oslo, Norway

In Norway, 95% of all children between the ages of one and five participate in early childhood education (ECE), despite the fact that it is not compulsory and costs money. One of the reasons for this is that many of the mother’s work. The numbers of multilingual children in ECE in Norway have doubled over the last five years, mainly due to immigration, reaching an average of 14.5% (2014) in Norway as a whole, but more than twice that in the capital, Oslo.

This increase in children with diverse linguistic backgrounds has led to a great deal of focus on teaching immigrant children Norwegian. This could potentially have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it highlights a new urban situation that may bring new methods within school and early childhood education. On the other hand, there might be a danger that we focus on the children's lack of resources rather than their competence, by seeing only the language they do not know, and not the fact that they have a higher level of language competence than smallest Norwegian children – since they are already learning their second or third language.

Language and identity are very closely related, so there will also be a danger that we do not see the part of the child's identity that is related to the home language. By focusing only on the Norwegian language and culture, we might be sending the message that the child’s home language and cultural background has little value and should be made invisible in the early childhood and school environment.

Looking for new perspectives

In this, to us, new situation of increasing immigration, there is a need for other perspectives, and also for sharing of experiences and knowledge with researchers and teachers from other countries. Comparing your own culture with other cultures
generates knowledge, insight and new ideas and gives you a new perspective on your own situation.

South Africa is a country with eleven different official languages and thus several languages are taught and used for instruction in schools. The national anthem contains three different languages, each represented in different verses. Like many African countries, South Africa has a long tradition of multilingualism, and teachers in South African schools are used to handling this situation every day in the classroom. Thus, this seemed like a suitable country for a study that aims to provide new perspectives for teachers and teacher educators in the relatively monolingual and monoculturally oriented country of Norway.

In the Cape Town area of South Africa, three of the country’s eleven official languages are used in the schools as languages of instruction: these are English, Afrikaans (a language close to Dutch), and Xhosa (a tribal language). In higher education, only English and Afrikaans are used as languages of instruction, and the use of English is increasing throughout the education system.

**Multilingualism in early childhood education**

Research within the field of multilingualism has often focused on whether multilingualism is an asset or not to the individual, linguistically and cognitively (Hakuta 1986). Most studies, including those focusing on children, have concluded that multilingualism is an asset (Bialystok & Shapero 2005, Poulin-Dubois et. al. 2011), but that how well this asset is being utilised varies (Auer & Wei 2009). The benefits of being multilingual vary widely, particularly among children whose home language is different from the language used for instruction at school, and there are indications that the context surrounding the child is of paramount importance (Paradis 2009).

The context or language environment consists of many factors. The importance of positive visualisation of children's mother tongues is highlighted in a number of policy documents, but we do not know much about what schools and preschools are doing in response. In a 2010 Norwegian survey about multilingualism in early childhood education, preschool staff were asked to what extent they believed that children’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds were clearly reflected in the physical environment in preschools. Out of 49 respondents working in preschools that have experience with multilingual children, 10.9% answered "not at all", 47.8% "to a small extent", 23.9% "to some extent" and 17.4% "to a high extent" (Danbolt et. al. 2010). These figures may indicate that allowing linguistic diversity to be visible in the early childhood education environment in Norway is not very common.

Research in the US and Canada has also focused on the language environment around multilingual children. Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) reviewed a selection of recent Canadian, US and European publications about approaches to classroom language instruction in multilingual classrooms. Instruction and examples differed in terms of how much attention was devoted to classroom language and how much support was given to the children's mother tongue and home culture. Chumak-Horbatsch divided the approaches into "assimilative", "supportive" and "inclusive"according to the extent of support for children's multilingualism. The last category, “inclusive”, is recommended by Chumak-Horbatsch as it creates a rich language environment that takes linguistic diversity into account.
In the UK, researchers have focused on the role of parents and the evening and weekend classes offered by community schools that immigrant children attend to learn about their home language and culture. They believe that schools and preschools should draw on children's experiences in other environments and bring it into the classroom, so that children’s multilingual skills become more visible and can be used. C. Kenner (2000) has conducted research on three and four year-old multilingual children and believes that it could be a great advantage for schools to use materials written in the children's various home languages, such as magazines, calendars, books etc. R. Sneddon has studied multilingual books and their impact on children's multilingual development and affirmation of identity (2009).

**Theoretical framework**

An important theoretical basis for this study is the sociocultural perspective developed by Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin, which emphasises that all learning occurs in a social context. When it comes to multilingual children, Tabors (2008) has formulated a useful distinction between two perspectives on learning: subtractive and additive. The subtractive perspective postulates that the learning of two languages at the same time is too difficult for a young child; using the mother tongue would make it more challenging for the child to learn a second language. To make it easier for the child, the second (new) language is given priority and the child is disencouraged from using its mother tongue. The result of this might be that the child loses its first language, which could affect the ability to communicate with close and distant family members. The additive perspective, on the other hand, suggests that the child is able to learn two languages at a time and that both of them should be supported in the language learning process. In a multilingual context, this perspective is called additive multilingualism. According to Tabors, this is a positive process that will add another language to the child’s competence without damaging the first.

In recent years, research has demonstrated a new theoretical perspective. Garcia (2009) launched the concept of dynamic bilingualism, a theory that focuses on languages that people use rather than on separate language skills they have. In Garcia’s view, language is a fluid form of social behaviour that cannot be studied without reference to its speakers, their language practices, and the many contexts in which they use language. She argues in favour of the term “languaging” to describe language in action. She contends that multilinguals “language” in a different way from monolinguals because they adjust their language practices in multiple and mixed contexts and move naturally between their languages, a process she terms “translanguaging”.

Dynamic bilingualism represents a language ecology perspective – a multilingual orientation that takes into consideration all language circumstances, contexts, and speakers. Creese and Martin (2006) suggest that understanding language ecology is important and useful for educators. By thinking of their classrooms as linguistically complex ecosystems, teachers will better understand the changing language lives of the children.

This ecological perspective is closely related to the concept of linguistic landscapes (Shohamy 2001), which refers to how different languages are visually represented in the public space. Within this perspective, the physical set-up of a classroom is important. All the physical elements – pictures, signs, displays, colours, patterns, the arrangement of objects, books, furniture, lighting, and sound – reflect the school’s curriculum and
priorities, send messages to families and visitors, and influence children's thinking and sense of self.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the way different languages and multilingualism were represented in early childhood classrooms in Cape Town, South Africa in order to get some new perspectives on early childhood education in urban settings. The study also sought to explore teachers’ opinions regarding the use of different languages in their classroom.

The study took place in the two grade R classrooms of a school in Cape Town. Grade R is the first compulsory year in primary school, focusing on readiness (thereof the term grade R) before pupils start first grade. The children in the class were five years old. Children in the same age group in Norway are still in non-compulsory institutions and have not yet started school.

The two different methods of this study have been discourse analysis of the classrooms and interviews with the teachers. As mentioned above, the school had two grade R rooms. The discourse analysis was focused on examining the rooms to see how linguistic diversity in the community and among the children was reflected in the physical space of the classroom. The framework of the methodology is taken from Fairclough's line of study within the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), also called textually oriented discourse analysis or TODA, to distinguish it from philosophical enquires not involving the use of linguistic methodology. The main thrust of his analysis is that, if practices are discursively shaped and enacted, the properties of discourse, which are linguistically analysable, are to constitute a key element of their interpretation (Fairclough 1989).

Each classroom was examined after the children had gone home for the day, but the teacher was present. The objects of the study were all linguistic representations and material in the room, such as signs, drawings, books, posters and bulletin boards. In addition, the teacher was encouraged to show the researcher any language material she used in her teaching. Photographs were taken of the different linguistic presentations and used as material for the analysis. The perspective of the analysis should be that all the physical elements in the classroom reflect priorities that could send messages to families and visitors and influence how children think and what they become aware of (Creese & Martin 2006).

Each of the two teachers were interviewed separately for about 20 minutes in their classrooms right after the photos of the classroom had been taken. No specific guiding questions prepared before the interviews were used and the interviews were instead structured around the findings of linguistic expressions in the classroom. The teachers were asked about the function and use of the different representations and their reasons for making the specific material visible in the room, or using it in their teaching. The interviews were recorded.

The school chosen was one with which our institution (Oslo and Akershus University CollegeHiOA) already had a close working relationship. Norwegian students had been spending weeks on placement there as exchange students, and teachers there had cooperated on research and development with staff from HiOA. The purpose of choosing a school with which we already had connections was to eliminate the perception that the researcher was some kind of inspector with authority trying to
control or judge the school and its methods. In the Cape Town schools, teachers were quite used to inspections by school authorities. The collaboration and friendship that had been already established between these teachers and HiOA teaching staff from made it easier for the researcher to play the role of a curious, interested person wanting to learn from a school with more experience with multilingualism than was usual in Norway and not an inspector.

The children's home languages at this particular school were English (about 40%), Afrikaans (about 40%) and Xhosa (about 10%), and the languages of instruction were English and Afrikaans, the old colonial languages.

This study was conducted on the researchers’ very first trip to Africa, and on the very first visit to an African school. So the researcher was seeing it all with the eyes of a newcomer, almost like a tourist. A researcher in the tourist-role might be more open to new perspectives on the situation, since seeing and hearing new and different things is what he or she is expecting to do. The researcher might also ask more questions, probably more open and curious questions, because he or she does not know much about the school, culture or the community. A disadvantage of this role is that the researcher could miss some of the underlying connotations, values and priorities in the culture.

Qualitative methods have clear limitations. In a qualitative study, generalisations cannot be made, but the study can show some of the complexity and the variations that exist and, where possible, highlight examples of good practice.

**Visual representations of language found in the classrooms**

The photos of the written representations in the classroom were analysed and interpreted based on these questions: What seems to be the function of the written text? What languages are used, and do the different languages seem to serve different purposes? To what extent is multilingualism among the children reflected in the representations of written language? What kind of signals might the different materials send to teachers, parents and children about the value and prestige of the different languages? When interpreting my findings, the teacher’s comments were also taken into consideration.

One of the main functions of the written texts in R-grade classrooms seemed to be labelling. Notes were hung on objects in the classrooms labelling them: for example, there would be a note saying “door” taped up on the classroom door. This note would sometimes be written in the language of instruction used in the classroom, but in more than 50% of the cases there was another note naming the same object in another language. Most commonly, this double labelling would be in English and Afrikaans. In some cases, objects were labelled in three languages, English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

The books around the room were in all three languages. The text books used for learning to read and write, where each child had their own, were in three languages, depending on the child’s home language or the wishes of their parents. Children’s picture books that were borrowed from the library also included books in all three languages. In some cases, the same book would be on the shelf in three languages.

All three languages were also represented on signs and posters in the classroom, such as the words for each of the letters in the alphabet, or the lists of days and months. Older signs were mostly in Afrikaans, such as an old plaque with the ten commandments from the Bible. Newer signs were mostly in English, such as the list of the school rules. This, I was told, was due to the changing language situation in the area, where English was
slowly taking over from Afrikaans in children’s homes, in the public space and as a language of instruction in school.

In both rooms, the text of the national anthem was hanging on the wall, framed, with verses in each of the three languages. Teachers said that the children were used to singing all the verses, speaking/singing all three languages in one song, regardless of what their home language was.

Xhosa was the least represented language in the different rooms. However, considering only 10% of the children in the school spoke this language, it was represented proportionally as I would estimate that the Xhosa language representations added up to more than 10% of the representations.

Findings from teacher interviews

The teachers were asked about the home and school language used by their children, their own language use in the classroom, the language situation in general and in the school, and about the representations of language that they had shown me. I listened to the interviews and took notes of what they said about the use and visibility of the languages, and about the relationship between language use in and outside the classroom.

According to both teachers, during a normal day, all three languages were used and heard in the classroom. The teachers had no rules stipulating which languages the children should use; the children used what they knew and what was best in the situation.

When instructing the children, for instance when teaching them numbers, or the names of geometrical shapes, the teacher used the language of instruction that had been decided for the class, i.e. English in one of the classes and Afrikaans in the other. But the teachers knew both languages and switched to the other if the children appeared to need explanations or translation to understand and learn better.

As mentioned earlier, the teachers said that the language situation in the area was changing. More and more parents wanted their children to be instructed in English, even those who had Afrikaans as their home language. The parents made this choice mainly because of the educational opportunities, as most of the higher education institutions now use English as the language of instruction. So the parents wanted the children to learn English early, and learn it well, to give them a better chance at getting through higher education and get a degree. The grade R teachers did not necessarily approve of these decisions, as they found it difficult to instruct the children in a language they did not know so well, especially when they knew Afrikaans and could have just as easily used that as the classroom language. This was especially underlined by the teacher in the English-speaking classroom.

Even though none of the teachers knew Xhosa, they still all had visual representations of the language in their classrooms. When asked why they had books in the room in a language they did not know themselves, they had to think before answering. One answered after a while: «I guess it is because of the community I grew up in. I am so used to hearing and seeing all three languages, it is just normal». Generally, when interviewed, the teachers did not seem to have strong opinions about making the different languages visible. They did not use words or expressions like language awareness or making linguistically diversity visible, nor did they talk much about their
reasons for using different languages in the classroom. They just expressed it as a natural or normal thing to do.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The impression from the grade R classrooms in Cape Town was that the multilingualism among the children in the classroom, linguistic diversity, was made visible in many ways and had many different expressions. The children were learning in an environment that made their languages, and as a result their backgrounds and identities, visible. It seemed the teachers wanted all the children to find a sign, a note, or a book in their first language in the room.

Rather than seeing this as something the teachers had to work to do, the teachers suggested it was the more normal, natural situation. The fact that the teachers themselves had a multilingual identity, allowed them to alternate between the two school languages effortlessly and depending on what seemed best in the specific situation. Without having heard the term “translaguaging“, they would “naturally move between their languages” (Chomak-Horbatsch 2012:55). When asked why they did it in the classroom, they just answered that they wanted to help the children learn and understand the best way possible.

In Oslo, as I mentioned earlier, some institutions are very good at seeing multilingualism as a resource and making it visible, others have a long way to go to get there. Many researchers have also seen the value of translanguaging, even with small children, but many teachers would think that alternating between languages might create a confusing language environment for the children. In several preschools in Oslo, there are rules saying the employees should only speak Norwegian with the children: even if they know the home languages of some of the children, they should not use it. Other preschools put up welcome signs in all the languages represented, and label things around the room in many languages, in a similar way to the to the school in Cape Town. There seems to be an insecurity in Norway about whether translanguaging is confusing for children or not that we do not find in a society where you can hear translanguaging in all situations. We need to work on awareness, i.e. help the teachers to see the children's language resources in an “additive” way (Tabor 2006) and help them take care of their learning of several languages at the time in the best way possible.

The South African teachers were not worried about confusing the children by alternating between languages. The reason for this might be the language situation in that the three languages in the classroom were official languages of South Africa, and there were also many more languages used in other areas of the country. Thus the people who spoke other languages were not foreigners or strangers in any way. The multilingual situation was part of the identity of South Africa and of being South African. In that sense, the gap between the home culture and the school culture is quite small. One of the teachers grew up in the same neighbourhood as the children in the school. This makes the multilingual situation easier, and closing the gap between the home culture and the school culture should also be a goal for teachers in schools where multilingualism is mainly due to immigration. In these cases, the gap between the school culture and the home culture is often larger, and children’s home language and home culture easily becomes invisible, which could cause them to hide an important part of their identity. Kenner (2000) has demonstrated how bringing literacy materials and experiences from the home into the classroom stimulate children’s writing. Teachers learn to build on the children’s knowledge and to support them in developing a wide range of writing genres.
Through the student exchange programme between Oslo and Cape Town, our students learn and experience how different the language situation can be in other countries and cultures. They see how multilingualism is the normal situation in other communities and how people can function together as a community, a school, or a classroom without having the same home language. Seeing multilingualism as the norm in a school or community that is multilingual, and has been for many years, is seeing multilingualism in action. Many of the theoretical concepts of “dynamic lingualism” and “translanguaging” are being practised in these classrooms in a way we have not seen in more monolingual societies. This multilingual situation is very common in African countries, and many students from the North would greatly benefit from experiencing this first-hand through student exchange. This will probably give them a competence that is valuable for the situation of multilingualism in their own country.

References


