

The Politics of Language Education

Individuals and Institutions

Edited by

J. Charles Alderson

NEW PERSPECTIVES
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ON
LANGUAGE & EDUCATION
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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Series Editor: Professor Viv Edwards

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MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

The Politics of Language Education: Individuals and Institutions/

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New Perspectives on Language and Education

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Language and languages--Study and teaching. 2. Language policy.

3. Language and languages--Political aspects.

I. Alderson, J. Charles.

P53.6128.P65 2009

418.0071--dc22 2009001470

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-143-9 (hbk)

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-142-2 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters

UK: St Nicholas House, 31–34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.

USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

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Typeset by Techset Composition Ltd., Salisbury, UK.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Short Run Press Ltd

The Politics of Language Education



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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Two decades of research and development in language and literacy education have yielded a broad, multidisciplinary focus. Yet education systems face constant economic and technological change, with attendant issues of identity and power, community and culture. This series will feature critical and interpretive, disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives on teaching and learning, language and literacy in new times.

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Acknowledgement

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An Overview

Language learning has always been an important part of a well-rounded education, and language policy, as an academic discipline as well as a practical political activity, has an important role to play in modern societies. Policies determine which languages are to be regarded as official, and which are to be the medium of education. Policy-makers decide which second and foreign languages should be taught in schools and universities, and those responsible for policy implementation determine how the languages are to be taught, learned and assessed. In the last two decades, language education has become increasingly concerned with innovation and change. This is partly as a result of the increased interest in English language teaching as global demands for English grew and as new approaches to English language teaching developed in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Governmental agencies and textbook publishers were all instrumental in encouraging teachers and institutions to become more effective in their endeavours and as part of that to innovate in teaching methods, teaching materials, tests, in-service and preservice education for teachers, and more. Numerous Government- and NGO-funded projects were set up to encourage such innovation and to foster change. Initially, such projects concentrated on the content of their innovation: the nature of the textbook, the design of the test, the methodologies of teaching and teacher training. However, project members came to realise that the process of innovation was at least as important to the success of the project as the content of the innovation. Increasingly, project participants and managers turned to the evaluation and innovation literature in general education for guidance on the factors that might influence whether an innovation might be successful or not. Authors like Fullan (2001), Henrichsen (1989) and Rogers (1995) have been increasingly cited in the ELT literature, and their insights and precepts have been taken into account when evaluating and planning change projects. As a result a literature has developed within ELT focusing on change management (e.g. Kennedy, 1988; Markee, 1997). Such books also have recourse to the management literature for insights, and management authors are increasingly seen as relevant to ELT.

However, the image of rationality and logical processes that characterise both the educational and the management literature do not tell the whole story. Experience suggests that systematic logical analysis, careful planning and project monitoring can have an effect on the course of a programme or project, but at least as important are individual factors: the personality of the players themselves, their emotions, their ambitions, their agendas and their influence. This has been recognised for a number of years, both in the management literature (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Buchanan & Badham, 1999) and in language education even as early as 1984 Jack Richards was writing about 'The secret life of methods'. However, it was very rare for anybody to publish either accounts of such factors, or theories that might address related issues and help professionals understand better the politics of language education.

Nevertheless, a literature is developing within language education that addresses issues of what we may call the macropolitics of education: authors like Phillipson (1996) and Pennycook (1994) have argued that English language education in particular is a neo-colonialist enterprise serving the needs of capitalism and the national interests of the UK, the United States and Australia. In language testing, too, authors like Shohamy (2000) and McNamara (2001) have asserted that language testing, serving the function of gate-keeping in many contexts, is a tool to enforce or maintain the power and influence of the ruling elites.

Thus, one can argue that, as the field of language education has become more self-critical, the ethos of the times is receptive to a volume that examines in some detail aspects of the politics of language education. What makes the present volume different, however, from other volumes such as those cited above is that it looks, not at the macropolitics and the ideological agendas of nations and multinational or global organisations but rather focuses on micropolitics, the agendas and motivations of individuals within organisations, and on the agendas of those organisations.

Politics can be defined as action, or activities, to achieve power or to use power, and as beliefs about government, attitudes to power and to the use of power. But this need not only be at the macropolitical level of national or local government. National educational policy often involves innovations in language education, be that to revise the curriculum, to introduce new teaching methods, textbooks or tests, in order to improve the foreign language proficiency of citizens, to open up or restrict access to education and employment and even immigration opportunities. But politics can also operate at lower levels, and can be a very important influence on educational developments and their deployment. Politics can be seen as

methods, tactics, intrigue, manoeuvring, within institutions which are themselves not political, but commercial, financial and educational. Indeed, Alderson (1999) argues that politics with a small *p* includes not only institutional politics, but also personal politics: the motivation of the actors themselves and their agendas. And personal politics can influence language education both in day-to-day affairs, and in projects for innovation and change.

Experience shows that, in most institutions, development is a complex matter where individual and institutional motives interact and are interwoven. Yet the language education literature has virtually never addressed such matters, until very recently. The literature, when it deals with development matters at all, gives the impression that language education is basically a technical matter, concerned with the development of appropriate materials, the creation and revision of appropriate tasks, textbooks and tests, and the analysis of results from piloting of innovations. But behind that facade is a complex interplay of personalities, of institutional agendas and of intrigue. Although the macropolitical level of language education is certainly important in a globalised world (as Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1996; Shohamy, 2000; and others discuss), one also needs to understand individual agendas, prejudices and motivations. However, this is an aspect of language education which rarely sees the light of day, and which is simply part of the folklore and gossip of language education.

Exploring such issues is difficult because of the sensitivities involved, and it is difficult to publish any account of individual motivations for proposing or resisting innovations or status quo situations. However, that does not make it any the less important. Alderson (1999), for example, argues that language testers need to take account of the different perspectives of various stakeholders: not only classroom teachers, who are all too often left out of consideration in test development, but also educational policy-makers and politicians more generally. Although there are virtually no studies in this area at present, the aim of this book is to begin an open debate about such matters, to contribute to a better understanding of language education and particularly educational change and resistance to change, but also the processes of language education more generally.

After the first chapter of this volume, which attempts to set the scene by reviewing relevant theories in related disciplines like psychology, management and intercultural communication, as well as some of the references above, each chapter first addresses and discusses a key theme in politics and language education, followed by one or two case studies that illustrate important issues relating to the roles of individuals and institutions within that specific theme or context. The final chapter discusses practical,

theoretical, methodological and ethical issues in researching and publishing accounts of the politics of language education.

In the first chapter, Alderson sets the scene by describing a range of different circumstances where micropolitics can be said to have influenced language education. In order to understand micropolitical behaviour better, he then explores various literatures and theories for insights, first from the perspective of the individual, where personality types, individual needs and the role of individuals within groups and organisations are implicated. The contribution of management theory is then explored as well as the relevance of a broader understanding of society and culture. The latter is seen as of particular interest to a profession which operates at the interface between different cultures. Finally the nature of misbehaviour in organisations is examined in some depth as background to the case studies that follow in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter by Davies addresses the conflict between the professional and the political (a theme also taken up by other authors). He shows the importance of key players in language policy decisions. In his first case study, in Nepal, he shows how the role of the professional consultants involved was essentially to recognise the need for the personal opinions of the key educational and political players to prevail, and the status quo with respect to the starting age for the learning of English was maintained. In the second case study, in West Africa, on the other hand, the strongly held opinions of the external consultant prevailed, but only briefly, and, in time, policy reverted to the status quo. Davies points out that the passage of time allows him to see more clearly the important role in the formulation of language education policy of the attitudes and beliefs of individuals, and indeed to write about this more openly than would undoubtedly have been possible closer to the events described.

Hunter discusses the projectisation of English language education in the context of development aid. He describes the role of consultants to such projects, and the part that vested interests among the different stakeholders can play in a project. His account of the role of a country's elite in determining language education policy is reminiscent of Davies' interesting distinction between the 'sentimental' and the 'instrumental'. The interaction between politics and personalities is at the heart of Hunter's chapter, with a case study showing how affective factors can influence decision-making and resistance to change. Political psychology is invoked as helping us better understand the behaviour of the various stakeholders involved.

Kerr's chapter follows on from Hunter in addressing the politics of ELT projects in China at a time of change in the management of projects, and

the consequences of macropolitical decisions on the actors involved. The chapter describes how UK Government policy is translated into institutional policy, filtered through the agendas and ambitions of institutions and individuals. The resulting micropolitics of the interaction between project members, their managers and their host institution is described in detail in a case study which describes how ELT 'experts' had to learn how to play the political game.

Little and Simpson locate their case study in an Ireland which is coming to terms with a greatly increased influx of refugees and migrants. They show how language education policy is influenced by immigration policy, the impact of both these areas on the micropolitics of setting up a professional Refugee Language Support Unit and the resulting necessity to reconcile professional principles with political expediency. An initial emergency policy decision to cope with newcomers' language needs is shown to be increasingly problematic as the authorities assume that the same policy and its implementation can be extended to cover different target groups. Inertia within bureaucracies, as well as possible turf wars between government departments, and a hope that problems will eventually disappear of their own accord, appear to result in the authorities preferring the status quo and minimal investment to meeting the needs of learners as identified by the language education professionals.

Fulcher describes how the internal politics of UK universities results in the teaching of English for academic purposes (EAP) to international students being treated as a cash cow in order to cross-subsidise departments of modern foreign languages which are unable to cover their costs because of declining student enrolment. Ironically, these latter departments look down on 'mere' language teaching as being academically inferior. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, the insistence of university management that EAP activities maximise income results, firstly, in their being unable to do research as well as teach, and then, secondly, being outsourced to commercial operations which claim they can provide EAP services more cheaply while at the same time allegedly enhancing universities' recruitment of lucrative international students. Language education is clearly the victim of academic politics and snobbery, as well as of the increasing commercialisation of UK universities.

The next chapter by Crossey describes in some detail the interaction between macro- and micropolitical issues in the context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its language policies. He addresses the difficulty of developing coherent language education policies in an international setting, namely the circumstances leading up to the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the extension of NATO eastwards and the

increasing importance of the use of English for military purposes. He presents a case study of attempts to develop standardised language proficiency tests across the member states of NATO and how personal and political motives intertwined to influence such attempts, against a background of macropolitical developments.

Buck discusses the tensions between the professional standards of language test developers and theorists, and the constraints of the real world. The concerns of the former often appear to be compromised and frustrated by the demands of organisations and the different departments and individuals within those organisations. Whilst recognising this classical micropolitical situation, Buck points out that it is often hard to distinguish between individual agendas, ambitions and resistances, and the legitimate concerns of those responsible for financial probity and commercial considerations. His view is that language education (in this case in the shape of test development) is perhaps inevitably a matter of principled compromise, which 'ivory tower' theorists need to recognise.

Pižorn and Nagy's chapter is set in a rapidly changing Central Europe, where the need emerged for educational reform as part of government policy to engage much more closely with Western Europe, to join NATO and the European Union, and where macropolicies of reform, accompanied by the professionalisation of language assessment in both Slovenia and Hungary met considerable institutional and individual resistance. The micropolitical role of both individuals and institutions is examined in some detail and it is concluded that professional attempts to innovate should not only stress the importance of the technical aspects of reform, but should pay attention to hidden (and not-so-hidden) agendas, and should not underestimate the power of key players, who can frustrate even the most technically perfect schemes.

Figueras focuses on the language policies of the European Union and the Council of Europe, and argues that a lack of transparency and detailed planning for implementation of such policies has been responsible for considerable confusion and ignorance on the part of language education professionals as to the aims and nature of many programmes and activities. In order to take advantage of the considerable resources devoted to language education it is essential to be an insider, able to interpret the dense and forbidding jargon of bureaucrats. Without inside knowledge and networking, knowing who to contact and who to believe, it is difficult to find one's way around the European labyrinth. The personal careers and agendas of bureaucrats, their interest and their willingness or otherwise to cooperate make knowing who is who and where an essential part of the micropolitics of European language education.