

Chapter 3

Imagining Multilingual Education in France: A Language and Cultural Awareness Project at Primary Level

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Introduction

Imagining multilingual schools in France is both a challenging question and one that should not be considered as utopian. Nowadays, a growing number of children in French schools are indeed multilingual, but this does not mean our classrooms have become multilingual. We would define a multilingual school as a place where linguistic and cultural diversity is acknowledged and valued, where children can feel safe to use their home language alongside the school language (French in this case) to learn and to communicate, where teachers are not afraid and do not feel threatened to hear languages they do not know, and where multilingualism and multilingual literacies are supported. In other words, a multilingual school is not just a place where pupils can learn one or two foreign languages or be taught through two or more languages. It is also a place where the plurilingual repertoire of bilingual/multilingual pupils is recognised and viewed as a resource to be shared and built upon, rather than as a problem.

Is it possible to envisage such schools in the French educational context? Elsewhere, we have shown how language education policy in France is another example of the way language is used to maintain unequal power relationships (Hélot, forthcoming). We have described the ideology at work behind bilingual education (Hélot, 2003) and we have explained why the bilingualism of minority-language-speaking children remains ignored or is seen as a handicap for the acquisition of the French language (Hélot & Young, 2002).

In this chapter, we focus on the obstacles that still make it difficult for our schools to move away from their traditional monolingual *habitus* and to point to the tensions within an education system based on top-down policies designed to make our pupils efficient multilingual European citizens, while at the same time neglecting or simply ignoring the linguistic and cultural diversity of many of its bilingual/multilingual pupils.

With this in mind, we will describe how a *language awareness project* that involved the participation of parents made it possible for three teachers in a primary school in Alsace to adopt an inclusive approach to all the languages spoken by their pupils, to transform the linguistic and cultural diversity of their pupils into a learning resource, and to change their attitudes towards multilingualism. We will insist on the political dimension of the project that has helped this particular school deal with problems of racism by laying the foundations for a form of multilingual education aimed at very young learners, minority- and majority-language speakers together, bilinguals and monolinguals alike. As an example of good practice, the project also illustrates how parents and teachers can support one another to develop multilingual resources for today's classrooms and new pedagogical approaches to intercultural understanding. It also shows how, in the process, minority languages and cultures can be legitimised and minority language speakers empowered.

Language Education in France

To allow readers to grasp the full import of the language awareness project that we describe in this chapter, we need to mention some features of the French sociolinguistic context. As in many other countries in the world, the linguistic landscape of France is undeniably becoming more diversified, and this is proving to be a challenge not only for politicians, policy-makers and researchers, but for teachers as well. Indeed, it is not easy for teachers to deal with the increasing complexity of the linguistic situations of their pupils, particularly when they have to implement a top-down curriculum which, as far as languages are concerned, focuses on improving provision for the learning of dominant European languages at the expense of the great variety of languages spoken by many children at home which remain virtually ignored.

Fighting the hegemony of English

In the face of increasing globalisation and mobility of populations, the French education system has developed its own answers: by trying on the one hand to resist the overwhelming hegemony of the English language, and on the other, by looking for more efficient approaches to foreign language teaching (FLT). In order to fight the dominance of English, policy-makers have used the concept of diversification – i.e. making sure a wide choice of languages is available in the curriculum at all levels. For instance, at primary level, children can theoretically choose between the following eight languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Portuguese (BO n°4, 2002). But, in fact, most schools offer only English and sometimes a second language. On the whole, this policy has

not prevented the English language from being the favourite choice of most pupils, and this is also the case in secondary schools, universities and teacher teaching colleges.

The wide gap between policies that insist on diversification and the reality of provision at grass roots level, where the choice of languages is restricted, means that English dominates language education in France and leaves little space for other languages. But diversification was defended again recently (*Le Monde*, 2004) by the President against the plans of the Minister of Education to make English the only language available at primary school. The political tensions of the national context that underlie the choice of languages available in schools are mirrored at the local level with most parents wanting their children to learn English and policy-makers trying under governmental pressure to combat its hegemony.

Republican values and cultural diversity in France

This battle should also be understood within a political context where the protection of French in France, in Europe, and in the world is a priority and more of an issue than the protection of minority languages. This is not surprising. Bourdieu's analysis (1991) of the process of language domination, in which he traces the emergence of French as the 'national' language of post- Revolutionary France, is most useful to understand the specificity of the French sociolinguistic context. Bourdieu explains how the dominance of French was based on the vitiation of minority languages and how the French state education system has been one of the main agents for the spreading of the ideals of the French Revolution: uniformity and the extinction of particularism. This has meant that linguistic diversity not only had to be fought, but that the French language should be the single national language upon which the Republic was founded.

These Republican principles are still very central to the French State and to its education system. Most teachers are attached to these principles. Many of them believe that integration can take place only through the acquisition of the national language and that speaking minority languages at home slows down this process, thus hindering social cohesion.

It is only very recently that France has taken stock of the multiplicity of languages being spoken within its borders. In 1999 a national census (INED, 1999) revealed that one person in four had heard their parents speak a language other than French at home. In 2001, the 'General Delegation for the French Language', one of several organisations set up to protect the French language was renamed the 'General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France'.¹ In 2003 a report entitled *The Languages of France* (Cerquiglini, 2003) was published which conceded that French was no longer the only recognised language of the Republic. Another example of the breach into the myth of monolingualism in France

is the declaration by former Minister of Education Jack Lang (2001) that 'Contrary to widespread belief, France is not a monolingual country.' Fifteen years earlier, several studies by French sociolinguists (Vermees & Boutet, 1987) provided descriptions of multilingualism in France, but until now they have had little impact on educational policies..

Readers should also be reminded that the French education system is very centralised and hierarchical. Decisions are taken at ministerial level in Paris and circulated down to teachers through a monthly official bulletin. General and regional inspectors are responsible for the implementation of new policies. While teachers do have pedagogical freedom in their classrooms, the very ambitious curriculum leaves little room for innovation. Pedagogical innovations at grass roots level tend to remain confidential, and state-funded innovative programmes are often bogged down by bureaucracy. Most teachers are used to implementing top-down policies since they work under the authority of inspectors whose job it is to make sure such policies are put into practice.

This explains to a certain extent why French schools are still so entrenched in their monolingual and monocultural *habitus*. It has only very recently been recognised that the French model of integration has failed and that discrimination is widespread, including in schools. But teachers should not be blamed for their attitudes towards multilingualism: official texts and reports insist on the priority of the French language in every educational reform, and on the notion of integration, when in fact it is assimilation that has been taking place. Moreover, linguistic policies dealing with minority languages are rather ambiguous (Hélot, 2003).

As late as 1990, many primary teachers were very ambivalent towards the introduction of European foreign languages in the curriculum. Most of them felt that, in the case of minority language speakers, more time should be given to the acquisition of French rather than to a foreign language (FL). Telling them that France is no longer a monolingual country today is saying something that is self-evident; but asking them to change attitudes towards minority languages is going to take time, particularly when no extra measures or funding are provided to help them support the multilingual pupils in their classroom.

Even if more and more young student teachers are expressing a need for classes in French as a second language to support pupils whose home language is not French, we would argue that this is not enough to address the problems of intolerance and racism at the classroom level. It also means envisaging an approach aimed at supporting minority language pupils within the compensatory model, whereas what is needed is for teachers to acknowledge the special strengths of young bilingual learners (Bourne, 2003). In France, the latest curriculum for primary schools (MEN, 2003) hardly mentions the issue of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, not

even in the section entitled 'Living Together' which is about socialisation through schooling. Furthermore, even if one page (MEN, 2003: 90) deals for the first time with 'the case of pupils for whom French is not a mother tongue', the content of the directives are so ambiguous and confusing that it can only reinforce negative attitudes towards bilingualism (Hélot, 2003).

The ambiguity of the curriculum regarding bilingual pupils is an illustration of the hesitancy of policy-makers to envisage multilingualism as an asset rather than a handicap, especially when minority language speakers are concerned. In our opinion, it is also a refusal to take stock of the very real problems of discrimination and racism towards certain sectors of the population. For instance, third-generation immigrant children are still often referred to as 'children of foreign origin', when in fact many of them were born in France and hold French nationality. Varro (2003) is right when she questions the persistent and discriminatory use of this terminology and shows how it keeps these children outside of the mainstream and separate from their peers. Varro's analysis of the ambiguous terminology used in official educational documents and in the discourse of teachers, and of the way this points to the almost automatic association between learning difficulties and foreign origins makes a very strong point. Immigrant languages are still seen as a handicap for the acquisition of the school language, and therefore as a source of learning difficulties.

Extensive Language Learning

Table 3.1 gives a summary of the provisions for extensive language teaching, that is, the teaching of languages other than French in the curriculum. A distinction is made between modern foreign languages (MFL), regional minority languages (RML) and immigrant minority languages (IML). It is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss the denominations used in French, but it is clear that they reflect ideological choices and reinforce a hierarchy that weighs in favour of dominant European languages.

Despite what looks like a wide choice of languages in theory, most pupils take one MFL at primary level and a second one at secondary. Very few of them choose a RML or an IML – for instance, recent figures show that only 0.9% of primary pupils take a regional language (RERS, 2003) so that the strong rhetoric of diversification in language learning translates very weakly on the ground.

Some effort has been made recently (MEN, 2003) to give better status to some minority languages by including them in the primary curriculum alongside European languages. However, this has had a counter-productive effect: these languages are now in competition with dominant European languages, since only very committed parents will choose Breton or Arabic before English. While these measures do have some symbolic value

Table 3.1 Extensive language teaching in France (public sector)

| <i>Type of language</i> | <i>MFL</i> | <i>RML</i> | <i>IML</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Provision for extensive model | Primary: 1 MFL compulsory Secondary: 2nd MFL compulsory 3rd MFL optional | Primary: 1 RML optional (pupils must take either an MFL or an RML) Secondary: 1 RML optional | Primary: 1 IML optional Secondary: 1 IML optional (often outside regular timetable) |
| Target pupils | All pupils | All pupils | IML speakers only |
| Name of languages | <i>Langues vivantes:</i> LV1, LV2, LV3 | <i>Langues et cultures régionales</i> | <i>Langues et cultures d'origine</i> |
| Examples of languages | English, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese,*Arabic** | Basque, Breton, Corsican, Catalan*** | Arabic, Turkish, Polish, Serbo-Croat *** |

* These five are the most common MFLs, but there are many others.

** Arabic was included in the MFL provision at the primary level in 1995, but has not been implemented. Only classical Arabic is offered at secondary level.

*** These are examples of the most common RML/IML languages, but there are others.

for minority languages, the recommended methodological approach shows a strong monolingual bias: for example, Arabic is supposed to be taught at beginners' level to all learners, which means the knowledge of children who speak this language at home is negated. Why should the model for the teaching of MFLs be the dominant model applied to RMLs and IMLs? If the notion of equality is behind such choices, it illustrates even more strongly that policy-makers envisage all learners as monolingual and that they are reluctant to acknowledge the multilingual repertoire of many of our pupils.

Furthermore, in the case of Arabic, implementation at the ground level has been so limited that one doubts the impact of the curriculum change on attitudes of teachers and parents. Hardly any classes of Arabic as a foreign language have been established in primary and secondary schools.

The status of IMLs and the provision for their teaching can be understood only in the light of our colonial past and the reluctance to deal with it. The Algerian war of independence in particular has left many wounds which are only slowly being healed today, half a century later (Stora, 2004). The very wide controversy around the recent law forbidding obvious religious signs in public schools is part of the same phenomenon. It reflects the failure to integrate people belonging to minorities from former French colonies (Dewitte, 1999). And one could also argue that collective amnesia is one of the reasons for the failure to come up with new policies concerning IMLs.

It is striking that, in the midst of so many proposals to improve the teaching of MFLs over the past 14 years, so little progress has been achieved concretely for IML speakers in our schools. While new curricula for MFLs have been drawn up at primary and secondary level, and the importance of supporting RMLs has finally been recognised, IMLs have been left in limbo. The Senate report on FL teaching (Legendre, 2004) is another example of the way IMLs are marginalised: the report is 115 pages long and only 5 pages deal with IMLs, and only 3 languages are mentioned – Portuguese, Arabic and Berber.² The report states in bold type that knowledge of these languages is important for integration and to fight ‘the humiliation felt by young speakers of Arabic’ (Legendre, 2004: 61). But then, it also insists on the economic advantages for France of its relationship with Arab countries. It quotes a previous report (Berque, 1985) which came to the same conclusions 20 years ago, yet very little has been done to improve the status of Arabic in our schools, and Berber does not figure anywhere.

Bilingual Education in France

As we have explained elsewhere (Hélot, 2003) bilingual education in France is viewed mainly as a way to improve foreign language learning for monolingual pupils and not as a means to support bilingual children to cope with the curriculum in their second language.

The same language categorisation shown in Table 3.1 applies to the different models of bilingual education available. Of course these models have a different history, but again, the main focus today is on dominant European languages for which the approach known as *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) has been developed. CLIL is viewed as innovative because the FL is used as medium of instruction for one or two school subjects (Gajo, 2001; Baetens Bearsdmore, 1999). The appellation ‘European section’ stresses the fact that such classes are also meant for pupils to develop a stronger sense of European identity. The main problem with the implementation of this model is that it is élitist since children are assessed to enter such a programme. This means that only high achievers can avail themselves of bilingual education.

Table 3.2 shows that some progress has been made concerning RMLs³ but it is only under European pressure that they have become better protected in legal terms and by affirmative educational policies. Moreover, the immersion model of bilingual education as it is known in Canada (Rebuffot, 1993) is available to all pupils in theory but only as partial immersion and only in regional minority languages. The total immersion model that was demanded by parents in order to redress the very low level of family transmission of RMLs was twice rejected by the Constitutional Court because it contradicts the priority guaranteed to the French

Table 3.2 Bilingual education in France (public sector)

| <i>Type of Language</i> | <i>MFL</i> | <i>RML</i> | <i>IML</i> |
|---|--|--|---|
| Type of bilingual education | One or two subjects taught through the foreign language <i>CLIL</i> | Half curriculum in French/ half in RML <i>Partial immersion</i> | Possible to have one or two subjects taught through the IML, but very rare. <i>CLIL possible in theory</i> |
| Languages | English (dominant) German, Spanish, Italian | Corsican, Breton, Basque, Catalan, Creole Occitan, etc. | Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese |
| Target pupils | All pupils | All pupils in theory | All pupils in theory |
| Level | Secondary only | Primary & secondary levels | Secondary only. Very rare |
| Name of programme | <i>Sections européennes</i> | <i>Classes bilingues</i> | <i>Sections orientales</i> |
| Entry requirements for bilingual programmes | Assessment in maths and French | No assessment. Must join programme as early as possible | No information available |

language. And immersion education is not available in MFLs because most parents would choose English first.

As to IMLs, the situation reflects again the wide gap between the rhetoric of official texts and the reality at school level. While ‘Oriental Sections’ were created at the same time (in 1992) as ‘European Sections’ for the so-called ‘Oriental languages’, such classes are very rare and few teachers and parents even know that they exist.

This situation is not very different from what prevails in other European countries. Extra and Yagmur’s (2004: 18) research shows that ‘At the European level, guidelines and directives regarding IMLs are scant and outdated.’ Indeed, IMLs are still too often considered by speakers of dominant languages and by policy-makers as obstacles to integration. This is particularly true in France where the Republican ideals of integration have played such an important part in educational policies and in the central role given to the French language at school.

It is against this background that we would like to present a school project where an alternative model of language education was developed. In this model languages were not categorised but envisaged in an inclusive approach, the knowledge of minority language speakers (pupils and parents) was valued and transformed into a learning resource for all, and monolingual pupils and teachers learned from bilingual children.

The Didenheim School Project

The project in Didenheim, in the province of Alsace, was not started with the idea of improving language teaching. While the teachers were aware of the lack of motivation for learning German as a foreign language among primary school students,⁴ their aims were much broader. Firstly, they wanted to address the linguistic and cultural diversity present in their class in order to improve the climate in the school. Secondly, they wished to use diversity as a means to face and go beyond differences in order to build a common classroom culture of tolerance and openness towards others. Therefore, the objectives of the project were not language learning but learning to live together. The pupils' differences were no longer meant to be ignored or hidden but brought forward and shared with pupils, teachers and parents.

The project's objectives

The teachers' objectives were:

To bring the children into contact with other languages and to sensitise them to the use of languages, to familiarise the children with other cultures through the presentation of festivals, traditions, costumes, geography ... and last but not least to promote the acceptance of differences, to learn about others and to attempt to break down stereotypical misconceptions. (Minutes from school project meeting, 7/10/00; our translation)

Both dimensions of the project have been innovative in the French context, and especially the combined objectives of education about linguistic and cultural diversity for the development of tolerance and openness to others. We present it here as an example of good practice in the domain of anti-racist education in France, where the revival of ethnic or religious intolerance is being felt in schools as well as in society at large.

The project was set up in 2000 for three years and rubber stamped by the local inspector since all primary schools must propose school projects on various topics that are part of educational priorities. The teachers were aware that tackling problems of intolerance also involved reaching outside the school, and therefore based their project on parents' participation. All parents were simply asked whether they would like to come and present their language and culture to three classes of children aged six to nine, during Saturday morning sessions. Over a dozen parents volunteered and the children encountered 18 different languages and their related culture, through a very wide number of pedagogical activities prepared by parents in collaboration with teachers. As the project grew, exchange students from the local teacher education institute came to present Russian and Finnish

for example, and sign language was offered by a hearing-impaired teacher and her interpreter.

It should be made clear that the project was started by the teachers themselves, and was not an experiment that we set up ourselves. Our analysis is based on participant observation, notes and video films taken over three years. Apart from suggesting the inclusion of sign language, and giving some legitimacy to the project because of our presence as researchers, the teachers and parents ran their project according to their own agenda.

Language diversity in Didenheim: The home and school contexts

Table 3.3 shows the discrepancy between the number of languages presented to the children through the project and the number of languages that, according to the primary curriculum, can be taught in the school. The middle column shows that even in a small school like Didenheim (approximately 90 children), the number and variety of languages spoken at home is much greater than what the school offers. It should also be explained that among the taught languages, only German is compulsory and taught to all children, although it is not spoken at home (Alsatian is). English was offered for one year only because it threatened the position of German in a region where the official policy is to give priority to the German language.

Table 3.3 Languages in Didenheim

| <i>Presented in the project</i> | <i>Spoken at home</i> | <i>Taught at school</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Turkish | yes | yes |
| Moroccan Arabic | yes | yes |
| English | yes | (yes) |
| Polish | yes | yes |
| German | no | yes |
| Spanish | yes | no |
| Berber | yes | no |
| Brazilian Portuguese | yes | no |
| Serbo-Croat | yes | no |
| Mandarin | yes | no |
| Italian | yes | no |
| Alsatian | yes | no |
| Vietnamese | yes | no |
| Malay | yes | no |
| Japanese | no | no |
| French sign language | no | no |
| Russian | no | no |
| Finnish | no | no |

As to the teaching of Moroccan Arabic, Turkish and Polish, the classes are optional and restricted to children whose parents belong to these 'origins'.

In the school project, on the other hand, languages were not used to separate children: all the pupils were presented with the 18 languages, whether they spoke them at home or not. Indeed one of the objectives of the project was to legitimise home languages, to give all languages equality of status. Teachers went beyond the categorisation imposed by the curriculum and took an unusual stance: they decided on their own language policy for the three classes involved in the project.

Language awareness: An alternative and complementary approach to language learning

It should be made clear, however, that the model of language education implemented in Didenheim is very different from models whose aim is language learning. The model described here is known under the English label of 'language awareness' (Hawkins, 1984) and in French as '*éveil aux langues*' (Candelier, 2003a) or '*éducation et ouverture aux langues*' (Perregaux *et al.*, 2003).

Language awareness (LA) does not mean learning a multiplicity of languages, but coming into contact with many different languages in order to understand the way language works and the function of languages in society. Thus it is not language learning, it is not bilingual education, and it is not mother-tongue teaching; but it has implications for bilingual pupils and for pupils who speak minority languages because it gives a place and a space to languages which are usually ignored in the mainstream classroom. LA is based on the principle that monolingual pupils should be exposed to linguistic and cultural diversity, and not just through learning one dominant FL. They should also come to understand that some of their peers speak more than one language and know different cultures, and that multilingualism is much more of an asset than a disadvantage.

The way the teachers in Didenheim implemented the LA approach was of course influenced by their original objective – parents' participation was crucial to the project. This had many positive consequences. First of all, it meant the languages were presented in their social settings and linked to the culture of the speakers who use them, as well as to their personal history (for example, the reasons why they migrated were discussed). Understanding cultural diversity was as important as discovering linguistic diversity. We have explained elsewhere how stereotypes can be overcome through meeting real people and engaging in dialogue with them (Young & Hélot, 2003).

What happened during the language awareness lessons?

The children loved the activities and looked forward to their Saturday

morning sessions with great curiosity. 'Which language is it this morning?' they were heard to ask in the schoolyard. They were very curious and very keen to discover languages they had never encountered before. They had no difficulties repeating tones in Mandarin Chinese and really enjoyed using the language in songs with actions. They were quick to notice the same ideograms being used in different contexts (the *Happy* Birthday song and *Happy* New Year written on the board). They loved practicing new sounds like the /r/ phoneme in Spanish, or repeating new words such as the Spanish 'azul' whose sound they took great delight in reproducing. While hesitant at first to use Alsatian, the local German dialect, in the classroom, they went on to sing enthusiastically, and when asked which words they liked in that language they showed no hesitation in producing all the words or expressions they knew. One pupil also asked why Alsatian was called a 'dialect' and not a language.

After watching a film about a school in Finland, the children wanted to know whether there were class reps in that country, as there are in their school in France. During the Vietnamese sessions they were not afraid to ask the Vietnamese mother why the colour of her skin was different, and why she had come to France. They also questioned her about the war. Sign language was met with awe, an impressive silence and full attention. Many very pertinent questions were asked: Is the same sign language used all over the world? How do you answer the telephone when you are deaf? 'How does one learn sign language? Who taught you sign language? etc. Pupils also manifested an almost immediate desire to learn some of the signs in order to communicate with the hearing-impaired teacher.

Berber presented the opportunity for one child to state with pride that it was the language of his absent father. Moroccan Arabic was discovered by the pupils to the sound of Moroccan music accompanied with mint tea and special cakes prepared by the Moroccan mother. The Italian lesson consisted in making pizzas from a recipe in Italian and working out the meaning of words through comparison with French. Turkish had a particular impact on the Turkish-speaking children who witnessed a Turkish mother in the role of teacher, their own teacher learning their home language and their peers learning about everyday life in Turkey. One child heard his name being pronounced correctly for the first time in front of his peers and his teacher. The teacher became aware that serious mispronunciation of a first name can rob a pupil of his identity.

The video recordings show how much the Turkish children's behaviour in the class changed after the sessions of Turkish language and culture. The words of one of the teachers are significant: 'Now they exist in the class, before they did not really exist.' What she meant was that the children made their presence felt, that they had their hands up and participated much more in class activities. In other words that they found their voice in French once

their home language had been acknowledged in their school. The project was also much talked about in the Turkish community, who welcomed it because such collaboration is still very rare in French primary schools.

More generally, most pupils were interested in knowing how the adults in front of them had learnt French, for example 'Is it difficult to learn French when you are Chinese?' They were very quick to make comparisons with French. When it was explained to the children that in Finnish all written letters are pronounced, one child concluded that, unlike French, it must be very easy to learn to read in Finnish. Told about reading in Arabic from right to left, they asked about Berber and whether it was the same for that language. Shown the alphabet in Russian, the children had no problems picking the identical letters to the Latin alphabet and working out the different ones. One pupil asked how to say 'I love you' in Russian, and the whole class at once wrote it down in their copybooks, in order to be able to use the expression.

Again and again their questions showed their thirst for knowledge about language and languages once the programme had started, as well as about the people who speak these languages. During the week, the teachers made sure to include in other school subjects some aspects of the language and culture presented the previous Saturday. For example, bilingual tales were read in French with the original language shown to the children. And art lessons included calligraphy work in Cyrillic or Arabic script.

The variety and richness of the activities prepared by the parents provide an example of what a language awareness curriculum for young children can include – from singing to cooking, to learning different rules of politeness, to human geography, history of migration, reading and writing, learning to listen to new sounds to differentiate them, finding clues to understand a language close to French, and, last but not least, feeling respect for languages spoken by one's peers.

Teachers and parents co-constructing knowledge about multilingualism and cultural diversity

Our evaluation so far has concentrated on the social dimension of the project and how relationships have changed in the school and even outside the school. While not all problems of intolerance between the children are solved, the teachers have noticed marked progress in the attitudes of their pupils towards the minority language speakers, as well as a readiness in all children to use the languages they can remember whenever a special event takes place. A child's birthday, for example, now means that *Happy Birthday* is sung in several languages, including sign language, which the children rarely forget. An outing on a pedagogical farm will give rise to questions about language and language use of the farmer. As a Turkish mother explained the during the final interviews:

Before, my children had problems with other children, but since I have given the class about Turkish, everytime we meet children from the class, they say to me, they want to speak to me, but before it was different, now they even say the word, they say 'merhaba', some of them say hello, I'm happy.

These examples show that not only has the *habitus* of the school changed but children also show more open attitudes outside the school. Up to a certain point, the school has begun 'to sow the seeds of multilingualism' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2004). It has become inclusive of linguistic and cultural diversity, teachers and pupils are now aware that multilingualism is part of our world and that one should learn to value it. But it should be stressed that this transformation came about as a result of the collaboration between teachers and parents. While knowledge about various languages and cultures could be laid out in a book, a recording, pictures or film, in Didenheim the parents' participation made all the difference. The meals prepared and shared together, the personal photographs and objects brought in, the traditional clothes the children tried on, the sand from the Moroccan desert which the children could touch, the personal testimonies of migration, meant that the pupils and their teachers had a direct experience of diversity. We know how important this is at primary level where new knowledge needs to be contextualised.

Moreover, the parents' participation was decisive for other reasons. It showed the teachers that a collaborative approach could be developed, and it showed the parents that the teachers needed them and that they could take part in their children's education. Through the project, the parents' linguistic and cultural knowledge and heritage became a source of learning in the eyes of all the children, as well as in the eyes of the teachers. In the final interviews, some children commented on the role of parents: 'It's good that other people come to our class because the teacher does not come from other countries'; 'We understand better when it's outside people who come to present their languages'; 'My mother, she knows more than the teacher'.

Parents' are also very positive about their own participation and they testify to the change of attitudes in their children towards their home language. For example, a Berber mother told us:

It's clear my son is very proud that his mother came into the class. He does not say it, but he asked, would I go back, and was disappointed when I said no ... but now he looks at books of poetry in Arabic at home, he did not do that before.

Through the teachers' trust and support, many parents felt empowered and changed their relationship to the school. They invested a lot of time and energy on their preparations, attended evaluation meetings after their

sessions, and supported the parents who had to present the next session. They also learned to overcome their fear of being in front of a group of children, as well as being watched by teachers and filmed by researchers. In the final interviews they all said how much better they understood the workload of teachers and their professionalism.

As a result of the close collaboration with teachers, the gap between home cultures and the school culture was reduced. Parents who were previously reluctant to approach the school became part of a real pedagogical project that is quite different from an after-school or end-of-term activity. In the words of one of the teachers 'the walls of the school have come down,' and so have the barriers of the national language and culture. The languages spoken at home became a collective resource for all: pupils, teachers, parents and researchers. But beyond the celebration of diversity, something else was constructed. As explained by the Year 2 teacher:

I think we tried to take the differences, to focus on them, on the good aspect of differences and how enriching it can be ... the cultural aspects were so different from our culture, but there is also everything we live together, we build the history of the class together with the children who are rich from their own experiences, their personal culture, but we put all this together to build a common history for our class.

What is particularly interesting in this comment is the fact that the teacher is able to envisage differences and universality in a complementary fashion. On the one hand, she questions the basic principles of our education system by focusing on differences, but on the other, she strengthens the common ground on which she wants the children to learn. She sees her class as a small community of learners who need to understand what it means to live and work together. In other words the project is not about singling out particular pupils because of their home background, but is aimed at integrating linguistic and cultural differences into the construction of a common history for the class.

This aspect of the project shows that the process of socialisation at school can include a plurilingual dimension. Even if not all children speak a language other than the school language, the acknowledgement of their peers' home languages and the pedagogical activities carried out in a wide choice of languages transform the class into a multilingual space that is shared by everybody and where no one feels excluded because of his language or her culture. This is fundamentally different from FLT classes where everyone learns one dominant language and no reference is made to the other languages known by some of the pupils.

In Didenheim, before the project started, the children left their home language outside the school gate. Now they see it as part of the school curriculum. It is important to state once more that LA activities target all

pupils, not just bilingual pupils, because monolingual children also need to distance themselves from their own language – which is also the school language. This was expressed in a felicitous way when a first year Didenheim pupil asked after several sessions of different languages, ‘Is French also a language then?’

We are well aware that bilingual learners need much more support than LA activities to develop their competence in both their languages in order to cope with the cognitive demands of the primary curriculum (Cummins, 1981, 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins, 1988). But how can we have bilingual education programmes when there are so many different languages in a class? We agree with Bourne (2003) who argues that mainstream teachers must address the question of linguistic and cultural diversity.

The inclusion of bilingual books in the school library is an example of the way multilingualism is now concretely present. The project could be taken further and encompass support for bilingual literacy with the help of parents. For, although the Didenheim teachers cannot help their pupils to learn to read in their first language, they have now given their bilingual pupils resources to work with at home. This is all the more feasible because the teachers now value parents’ support and have changed their attitudes towards their bilingual pupils’ L1. The Year 2 teacher explains her position thus:

I have to admit my position has changed on this subject: one is quick to think that speaking French at home means the child will learn French faster. Well, it’s true that this year, through the project and everything that was put into place in this school, we became aware of the importance of knowing one’s mother tongue before acquiring anything else, so, yes, my opinion has changed on this matter.

In France, where the priority of the national language is so central, and where it is seen as the major instrument of integration, most teachers are hesitant to make it possible for the home languages of their pupils to be legitimised. In Didenheim, the teachers decided to go beyond the top-down curriculum (which imposes one foreign language at primary) in order to embrace the linguistic diversity of their pupils. In this way they created possibilities for many languages rather than restricting them. And, within the LA approach, the more languages the better, because the more diversity, the more the children can be motivated to learn – not only dominant languages, but the languages of their family, their neighbours, or distant people. LA activities are also particularly suited to classrooms where a multiplicity of languages is present because, the more languages are in contact, the more comparisons can be made and the more obvious the relativity of cultural practices becomes.

In their own way, these teachers questioned the power relationships at work in the education system. They gave equal place and equal status to all languages. They legitimised their pupils' home knowledge and the knowledge of their parents. They were not afraid to switch places with parents and put themselves in the situation of learners. They even went further in the sense that they were able to transform the common perception of minority languages and cultures from being a problem into being learning resources (Ruiz, 1984a).

Language Awareness and Teacher Education

The Didenheim experience gives us plenty to think about on the subject of teacher education. Firstly, we should remember that teachers are often constrained by the limits of their curriculum but, when faced with everyday problems such as racism, they are quicker to react and devise pedagogical solutions than policy-makers are. We believe, like Cummins (2000), that real changes happen at the school level, and that educators have a choice even within a constricted context. Therefore, it is most important for researchers to analyse the way teachers are coping with the linguistic and cultural diversity of their pupils and to report on projects such as the Didenheim school where, even in a strongly monolingual instructional context, the teachers were able to create an environment that not only acknowledged minority languages but legitimised them.

We should add that none of the three teachers involved in the Didenheim project felt they had the competence to teach a FL (neither English nor German). Even if FLT is an obligatory component of the curriculum, many primary teachers, well aware of the importance of offering a good phonological model to young learners, do not feel confident enough to teach a FL. While they have no choice but to take the FLT didactic courses when they are training, we believe that introducing them to the principles of LA would be more profitable to them. For whether they are going to teach a FL or not, teachers need to understand the complexity of linguistic situations some of their pupils are experiencing.

While the didactics of FLs deal with the learning of only one FL envisaged from a monolingual point of view, LA activities as they have been developed in the best-known European projects (Candelier, 2003b; Perregaux *et al.*, 2003), deal with as many as 70 different languages. Of course, the objectives of the two models are not the same, but they could be envisaged as complementary. And yet, how can one work on the cultural objectives of 'otherness' (Roberts *et al.*, 2001) set out in the FLT curriculum when only one FL is concerned and no one in the class speaks it? What about the knowledge of so many French pupils who already have their own personal experience of other cultures and other people? As shown in the

Didenheim project, opening to others can begin with learning a few words from the home language of one's classmates. From the teachers' point of view, is it not self-defeating to talk about opening to others in the English class and at the same time to negate or ignore the otherness of one's own pupils?

In the French curriculum at present, no school subject deals with the question of linguistic and cultural diversity, not even the section entitled 'Living together' (MEN, 2003: 97–104). Therefore, as language educators, we feel that more than one pedagogical model should be presented to future primary teachers, and that it is not enough today in our globalised world to learn one or two dominant languages. Just like the protection of the environment is now part of the science curriculum, young children should be made aware of the wealth of languages spoken by human beings and of the value of their own, whether they are monolingual, bilingual or multilingual.

In the domain of teacher education, language awareness activities can be a basis for a first introduction to sociolinguistics. It can help future teachers to reflect on their own language-learning experiences and to change their attitudes towards the traditional ideal criteria – the model of the native speaker, the 'perfect' bilingual, the priority of the national language, the relationship between L1 and L2 for minority speakers at school. The materials developed for the EVLANG and JALING European projects (Candelier, 2003a, 2003b) and the Swiss EOLE project (Perregaux *et al.*, 2003) give examples of what a curriculum in LA can include. The activities designed for children can easily be used with teachers and are also accompanied by teachers' manuals which address many issues related to language and languages. It can also make them aware that 'when linguistic diversity is the norm, it is no longer acceptable for mainstream teachers to believe that supporting second language learners is not an essential part of their responsibility' (Bourne, 2003: 29).

Thus the competence needed by teachers for LA is of a different nature from FLT competence. It focuses on attitudes rather than on aptitude, and it should lead to reflection on the relationship between language and power, on the lack of equality towards different languages in our curriculum (Heller, 2002; Hornberger, 2003), as well as to awareness of the way power operates in a classroom.

As to integrating parents into pedagogical projects, the Didenheim experience could be cited as an example of good practice. The teachers were very supportive and open to the parents' varied suggestions, appreciative of their efforts, sensitive to their needs. Teachers were also very motivated to learn from parents. This was particularly important again for the parents of minority backgrounds who usually find it rather intimidating to approach teachers. What was built over the three years was a relationship of mutual

trust and respect without which the project could not have taken place and which led to a real educational partnership (Cummins, 2000).

Conclusion

As a model of language education, LA fills a gap in teacher education and includes objectives that go far beyond those of FLT. It builds bridges between languages themselves, between various school subjects, between home and school, and between school and the wide world where multilingualism is the norm. We would say that it represents a first attempt at 'accommodating the greater language and cultural hybridity of the 21st century' (García, 2006).

Admittedly, more research needs to be carried out to evaluate exactly what children learn through LA activities and how much of an impact it can have on their attitudes and motivation to learn languages. The LA model is not a panacea. Recent research at European level (Genelot, 2002) indicated that the approach benefited children with learning difficulties as well as children from multilingual background, but only when they had been exposed to at least 35 hours of LA activities. The work of De Goumoëns *et al.* (1999) in Switzerland showed that teachers responded very positively to the LA model and believed it was important not only for minority language speakers but for monolingual pupils as well. The Didenheim project shows convincingly that young learners are very keen to know more about the wealth of languages spoken in their environment and in the world. Thus it questions the early FLT model where the learning of one dominant language such as English tends to dampen pupils' curiosity for other languages.

Finally, and most importantly, the LA model is neither a model for monolinguals nor is it a compensatory approach for minority speakers. It is an inclusive model, aimed at all learners, integrating the languages and cultures of all pupils, based on learners' knowledge of any and every language, including the school language. For these very reasons, it can be a first step towards making our schools multilingual.

The Didenheim project shows that teachers are able to devise 'radical' programmes (Bourne, 2003), that they could adapt their mainstream classroom to respond to the needs of their bilingual pupils, and through this process educate their monolingual pupils. Furthermore, teachers can learn to develop cooperative, team-teaching strategies with parents, which have the effect of empowering parents from minority backgrounds. If multilingualism is about 'how people relate together' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2004a), the Didenheim project is an illustration of a learning community coming together to learn together to live together in harmony.

Language awareness websites

Austria:

- Kiesel: www.zse3.asn-graz.ac.at

Belgium:

- <http://www.mag.ulg.ac.be/eveilaulangues/>

California:

- Language Awareness for Education: Leo Van Lier's personal site about LanguageAwareness at http://maxkade.miiis.edu/Faculty_Pages/lvanlier/language.html
- <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/>

Canada:

- ELODIL: www.elodil.com
- Site sur l'aménagement linguistique et les langues dans le monde <http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/>: e

Finland:

- Metalinguistic Awareness and foreign language learning (Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä) at www.solki.jyu.fi/english/research/

France:

- <http://plurilingues.univ-lemans.fr/index.php>

United Kingdom

- ALA: Association for Language Awareness at www.lexically.net/ala (Richard Aplin, Treasurer, School of Education, University of Leicester, 21 University Rd, Leicester, LE1 7RF, UK)
- *Language Awareness*: Journal of the ALA association, published by Multilingual Matters, Clevedon: UK (on-line magazine subscription required) at www.multilingual-matters.co.uk

Council of Europe:

- http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Languages/

Notes

1. These terms are our translation of *Délégation Générale pour la Langue Française* (known as DGLF) and *Délégation générale pour la Langue Française et les langues de France* (known now as DGLFLF). The emphasis is ours as well.
2. The term 'Berber' will be used throughout this chapter because it is the term used in France for the people and the language and was also the term used in the project discussed here by the Berber participant herself. It is not a derogatory term in France, where the umbrella term 'Amazigh' is used only by experts. Amazigh covers several dialects such as Kabyle, Tachelhit, Rifain, Chaoui and Touareg.
3. See Colinet & Morgen (2004: 261–275) for more details and recent figures.
4. There are many reasons for this: the historical situation of Alsace, and the fact that German is still perceived as 'the language of the enemy' (Mombert, 2001), the lack of choice of other languages particularly English, the pedagogical approach and its lack of links with the local dialect, Alsatian.

Summary

This chapter presents a *language awareness* project in a primary school in Alsace, France where, over three years, children aged 6 to 9 have been introduced to 18 languages and their associated cultures. The aims of the project were twofold – to legitimate the regional and immigration languages of some of the pupils in the eyes of all learners (monolinguals and bilinguals alike), and to educate children to the wealth of linguistic and cultural diversity before they start to learn one foreign language at primary school.

The language awareness approach developed in the project is analyzed in terms of an alternative model of language education that can transform the traditional monolingual habitus of most schools and sow the seeds of multilingual education. The educational partnership developed by the teachers with the parents is an example of a collaborative approach through which speakers of minority languages can be empowered.

Cet article relate une expérience d'éveil aux langues dans une école primaire en Alsace, France, expérience qui a duré trois ans et au cours de laquelle 18 langues et les cultures qui leur sont associées ont été présentées à des enfants de 6 à 9 ans. Le projet avait deux objectifs principaux: la légitimation des langues minoritaires régionales et de l'immigration auprès de tous les enfants, qu'ils soient monolingues ou bilingues, et l'éducation à la pluralité linguistique et culturelle avant le début de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère à l'école.

L'approche de l'éveil aux langues, telle qu'elle a été développée dans le projet, est présentée comme un modèle alternatif d'éducation linguistique qui pourrait transformer l'habitus monolingue traditionnel de nombre d'écoles et jeter les bases d'une éducation au multilinguisme. Le partenariat éducatif que les enseignantes ont su construire avec les parents est un exemple d'approche collaborative qui a permis aux locuteurs de langues minoritaires de voir leur langue, leur culture et leur savoir valorisés. (French)

Artikkelissa esitellään Ranskassa, Elsassin maakunnassa toteutettu projekti, jossa pyrittiin lisäämään oppilaiden kielitietoisuutta. Kolmen vuoden ajan perusasteen 6–9 – vuotiaille lapsille esiteltiin 18 eri kieltä sekä niihin kiinteästi liittyviä kulttuureja. Projektin tavoitteet olivat kahdenlaisia: ensinnäkin haluttiin legitimoida oppilaiden käyttämät – joko alueelliset tai maahanmuuttajaryhmien käyttämät – kielet kaikkien oppilaiden keskuudessa, olivatpa nämä yksi- tai kaksikielisiä. Toiseksi haluttiin kasvattaa lapset ymmärtämään kielellisen ja kulttuurisen rikkauden arvo ennen kuin he aloittavat ensimmäisen vieraan kielen opiskelunsa perusasteella.

Projektissa kehitettyä kielitietoisuutta lisäävää lähestymistapaa analysoidaan vaihtoehtoisen kielikasvatuksen pohjalta. Tämä malli voi muuttaa useimpien koulujen noudattaman perinteisen yksikielisen käytännön ja antaa ideoita monikieliseen opetukseen. Opettajien kehittämiä kasvatuksellisia yhteistyö

vanhempien kanssa on esimerkki yhteisöllisestä lähestymistavasta, jonka avulla vähemmistökielten puhujat voivat voimaantua. (Finnish)

Der vorliegende Artikel beschreibt ein französisches Projekt zum Thema Sprachbewusstsein, das drei Jahre lang in einer elsässischen Grundschule mit Kindern von 6 bis 9 Jahren durchgeführt wurde. Die Ziele des Projektes waren einerseits die Legitimierung von Regional- und Einwanderersprachen: 18 verschiedene Sprachen und die damit verbundenen Kulturen wurden von der ganzen Klasse behandelt und dadurch im Klassenverband aufgewertet. Auch wenn sie zu Beginn nur für einige der Schüler Bezugswert hatten, wurden damit alle Schüler – ein- oder mehrsprachige in gleichem Maße – angesprochen. Andererseits sollten die Schüler allgemein für die sprachliche und kulturelle Vielfalt sensibilisiert werden, bevor sie dann in der Grundschule eine Fremdsprache lernten.

Hiermit wird ein alternatives Modell der Spracherziehung im Sinne der language awareness vorgestellt, welches den traditionellen monolingualen Habitus zahlreicher Schulen verändern und die Grundlagen einer Erziehung zur Mehrsprachigkeit legen könnte. Die erzieherische Partnerschaft, welche sich im Kontakt zwischen den Lehrerinnen und den Eltern entwickelt hatte, konnte bei den Sprechern von Minderheitensprachen das Selbstbewusstsein steigern und somit zu mehr sozialer Gerechtigkeit beitragen. (German)