

The cost of doing nothing: Educating language-minoritized students

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Introduction

Research has shown that children learn faster and better in a language they understand, that they are less likely to repeat a grade and less likely to drop out of school (see for an overview Reljić, Ferring & Martin 2015). We know that the majority of the world is plurilingual: there are more people who speak more than one language than there are monolinguals.¹ And we also know that European classrooms are increasingly multilingual and super diverse.

Yet, our education systems continue to be based on the premise that the average student is a mother tongue speaker of the national language. We rarely prepare future teachers to deal with the multilingual and multicultural classrooms they will be facing.

Not educating children in a language that they understand comes at a significant cost to our societies. Repetition and dropout for example carry substantial costs, both for the state and for the individuals affected.² Going even further, looking at the foregone earnings of balanced bilinguals in the United States it shows that those who master both their mother tongues and the national language earn 3000 US dollars more than bilinguals who only master English but not their home language (Agirdag 2014).

Various strategies and programmes involving mother tongue education have been proposed and are implemented across Europe. Few if any, are structurally embedded in the national education systems and even fewer aim at developing minoritized children's home languages, but typically use these only as 'bridges' to the dominant language (Kambel 2014). In contrast to these subtractive programmes, additive bilingual programmes build on, rather than erase children's mother tongues.

However, to engender real, systemic change, and to avoid perpetuating or deepening the racial and linguistic divide between mother tongue speakers of national languages and language-minoritized students, additive bilingual programmes are not enough. Flores & Rosa (2015) argue that we need to start thinking about ways to "empower teachers to move beyond pedagogies geared toward responding to students' purported linguistic deficiencies or "gaps" and to develop a more robust vision of how language-minoritized students' educational experiences could combat raciolinguistic ideologies."

In this paper, I want to discuss the ideas of Flores & Rosa and use examples from the Netherlands to show that these raciolinguistic ideologies are not limited to the context of the United States. But first, I will consider the concept of translanguaging which I see as important starting point for further discussion.

¹ http://education.cambridge.org/eu/whats-new/thought-leadership/2016/1/multilingualism-the-norm-in-a-21st-century-global-society#_ftn1

² In the Netherlands, the direct costs relating to grade repetition have been estimated at 500 million a year for the state (CPB 2015). This excludes the indirect costs for the pupil, his or her family and classmates. In Germany, grade repetition costs are estimated to about 9% of total expenditure on primary and secondary education. (OECD 2011, UNESCO 2012). Dropout costs have not been calculated in the Netherlands but these costs include (for the early school leaver): lower income (throughout life), less opportunity for mobility and training, less chances of finding employment, less financial security, lower self esteem, lower health and a greater chance to become a victim of crime and violence. The *societal costs* associated with drop-out include lower tax income, greater reliance on social services, increased criminal activity, less participation in electoral and political processes and less social cohesion (CPB 2006). See for the costs of early school leaving in Europe: Brunello & De Paola 2013 and http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/europe-esl-costs_en.pdf. On the opportunity costs of mother tongue education in Europe and other parts of the world see Heugh 2006, Grin 2004, Patrinos 1996 and World Bank 1995.

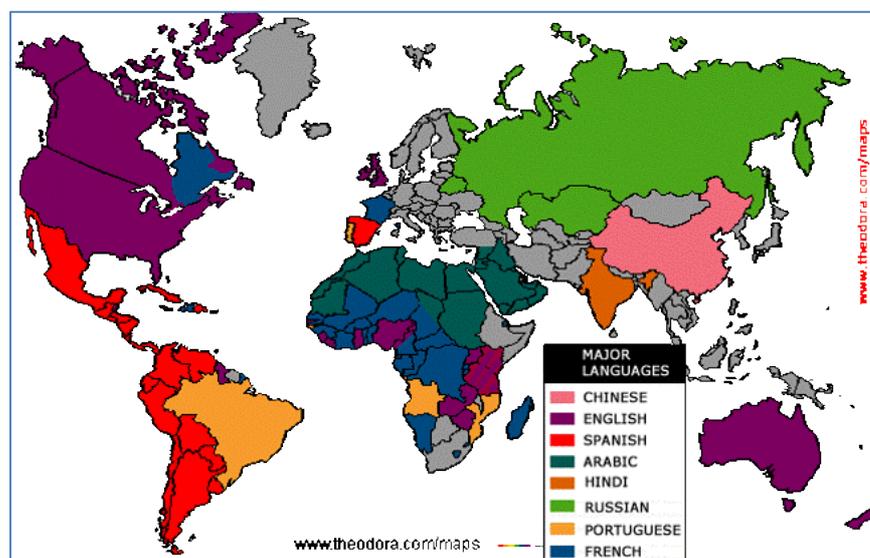
Translanguaging

To understand the concept of translanguaging as proposed by Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García and Wallis Reid (2015), it is necessary to make a distinction between (1) named languages and (2) idiolects. Named languages are what we would normally call 'languages' from a cultural, social and political - 'an outside' - perspective. They are not real from a linguistic point of view - they are social constructs - often associated with a geographical space (a territory) and a particular history. An idiolect by contrast is "a person's own unique, personal language, the person's mental grammar that emerges in interaction with other speakers and enables the person's use of language" (idem: 289). This is the language that each individual actually uses, as seen from the speaker's perspective.

Translanguaging occurs, according to Otheguy, García & Reid, when a speaker is able to use his or her full linguistic repertoire, "without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (idem: 289).

Languages as social constructs

That languages are social constructs is no news to linguists, but can be news for teachers, politicians or the public at large: most people firmly believe that it is perfectly possible to draw a line around a language and to equate that line with a national or regional border. English is spoken in England, Dutch is spoken in the Netherlands, Flemish in Flanders and so on. Language maps such as the one below are widespread and serve to "establish a link between language and territory as a central and normal way to think about language use" (Piller 2016: 33).



Map courtesy of www.theodora.com/maps, used with permission.

Comparable maps were produced in the late 19th and early 20th century to depict the distribution of 'race', when it was widely believed that there were 'white', 'yellow', 'brown' and 'black' races. Unlike language, which has not yet been recognised as a social construct in the public mind, one could argue (or at least *hope*) that it is fairly well known that there exists no such thing as a biological 'race'. Yet 'race' continues to be widely used in everyday conversations, because the color of your skin, the texture of your hair or the form of your nose, can have very real social and material consequences. It may determine where you sit in the classroom (at the back or at the front, see Weiner 2015) and what expectations your

teachers have of you, which greatly influences your educational performance (Payne 2008, Papageorge, Gershenson & Kang 2016), or whether you are even allowed to attend school in the first place (see the recent uproar in South Africa³ where girls were sent home to straighten their hair with chemicals, as afro hair was deemed inappropriate).

This is why the distinction between named languages and idiolects is so relevant: ones idiolect or linguistic repertoire, particularly when used by a racialized or otherwise minoritized body, has important social and political implications. As mentioned earlier, everybody has their own linguistic repertoire, so everybody, both monolinguals and plurilinguals, is capable of translanguaging. But as Otheguy and his colleagues point out, plurilinguals are often not allowed to use their full idiolect in the classroom, whereas monolinguals only have to suppress a small part of their linguistic repertoire (the part they use for speaking with their peers outside the classroom for instance).

Allowing plurilingual children to translanguage in the classroom is an important help for them: “Clearly, learning to deploy one’s idiolect so as to be considered a speaker of English or Spanish or Euskara or Hawaiian is an important sociolinguistic accomplishment and a valuable social skill. But learners must first be allowed to speak freely, so they can develop the lexical and structural features for the different social contexts in which they are expected to interact.” (Otheguy, García & Reid 2015: 302)

Various ways have been suggested for teachers to give room to translanguaging. These range from giving children the opportunity to write essays in their own idiolect (using their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning) to allowing small group discussions among speakers of the same named languages (see Celic & Seltzer 2013, Arpacik 2015).

Raciolinguistic ideologies

For some children however, it is not enough to master the social skills to be considered a speaker of a named language. That is because these children “will always be racialized by the white listening subject” (Flores & Rosa 2015: 168). For this, they introduce the term *raciolinguistic ideologies* which “conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices. That is, raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects.” (Idem: 150)

Although the European historical, social and economic contexts differ in important ways from the United States, we can see similar practices and structures at work on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

For example, in the Netherlands the majority of teachers are white monolingual Dutch-speakers who come from middle class backgrounds (Driessen 2015). During a panel discussion organized in Amsterdam earlier this year, young people with a multilingual migrant background were invited to share their experiences with language exclusion in education. One of the participants, a social worker, was born in the Netherlands and raised by a Dutch mother and a Turkish father who only spoke Dutch at home (in fact, she lamented not being able to speak Turkish). Although Dutch was the only language she had learned, she explained how she was made to feel extremely insecure about her Dutch language skills at school. It seemed that her teachers attributed her grammatical errors to her physical features in combination with her last name: she ‘looked’ Turkish, she had a Turkish last name, so she must have problems with the Dutch language.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/31/south-african-students-speak-out-ban-afro-hair-pretoria-school>

A bilingual high school student, born and raised in the Netherlands with a Dutch mother and an English speaking (dark-skinned) father from Guyana had a similar experience. Despite her high marks, she was consistently labelled as a 'low achiever' in primary school and was repeatedly asked to undergo IQ tests and testing for possible dyslexia and other linguistic deficiencies. Again, although difficult to prove, it seemed that her ethnic background was what the teachers 'heard' and 'saw' rather than her actual achievements. Interestingly, Dutch university teachers recently raised concerns about the many grammar and spelling errors in the Dutch language by the student body in general.⁴

Not only students but also minoritized teachers face closer scrutiny of their Dutch language use as this teacher at a school for higher vocational education reveals: "In my opinion, allochtonous [black, migrant, non-westerner] teachers are judged very harshly on language. Much harsher than I am judged on my language use. With my dyslexia I get off very easily" (Meerman & Gründemann 2013: 34).⁵

The examples above suggest that it is not only up to the individual to use their social skills to be considered a named language-speaker. It also depends on how the dominant listener perceives the speaker: "Failing to acknowledge language-minoritized students' common racial positioning and the ways that such positioning suggests deficiency, ..., normalizes these racial hierarchies and provides them legitimacy through the perpetuation of a meritocratic myth: the idea that access to codes of power and the ability to use these codes when appropriate will somehow enable racialized populations to overcome the white supremacy that permeates U.S society." (Flores & Rosa 2015: 166)

What I learned

As I found out in Suriname, where I assisted with the production of a bilingual math book at the request of indigenous (Amerindian) parents and teachers, workshops on how to teach bilingual math are not sufficient to motivate non-indigenous teachers to actually use these materials. To address three centuries of colonization and a Dutch-only education policy requires deep personal reflection on racial and language bias and as Gorski said in relation to intercultural education: an awareness "to seeing what we are socialized not to see" (Gorski 2008: 522).

Not trained as a linguist, I had to come a long way to understand that there is no such thing as 'a language'. The concept of translanguaging hinges on this understanding. What I have tried to argue here is that real, systemic change may occur only if we are willing to engage in a far more critical debate on the social and political contexts in which our education policies are embedded and actively work to expose and resist the language ideologies that underpin our education systems. The question is: how can we do that?

Some suggestions

- As a first step, I think we need to pay attention to the experiences and realities of minoritized students: their stories which are rarely heard can help us gain a deeper understanding of the educational system and the complexities of how race, language and other social categories interact.
- Further, as Flores & Rosa propose, we need to raise awareness among teachers (the 'white listeners') of how language ideologies can stigmatize the linguistic practices of

⁴ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/09/05/scripties-en-tentamens-vol-taalfouten-4150187-a1519847>

⁵ Original in Dutch: "In mijn ervaring worden allochtone docenten door studenten heel hard afgerekend op taal. Veel harder dan dat ik wordt [sic] afgerekend op mijn taalgebruik, ik kom als dyslect heel goed weg".

minoritized students: what is the role of the listener in producing minoritized speakers and how can we change that?

- Finally, language-minoritized students should be empowered, not by teaching them how to assimilate or adapt to dominant language practices, but by valuing their own linguistic practices (through translanguaging for example) while at the same time raising their awareness of how power, language and social position interact. This can help them “to imagine and enact alternative, more inclusive realities” (Flores & Rosa 2015:168).

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