Language Acts and Worldmaking Debates: Traversing Traditions, Opening Opportunities

Language Education Activism

Modern Language Centre, King's College London

Languages Resources Centre

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A response to Anne Pauwels's (SOAS, University of London) Position Paper: Do we need a new 'raison d'être' for 'foreign' language learning?

Thank you, Ann, for sharing your reflections with us tonight. I was struck by your mention of linguistic nationalism, and of how we often equate the language with a monolithic understanding of the culture and the standard language of a state. That strikes me as a rather old-fashioned view of language teaching, and I hope it is not as prevalent as I think you are suggesting.

At the Open University, when we started teaching Spanish over 20 years ago, we adopted what was then an innovative approach of teaching Spanish as a world language, exposing students to a variety of Spanishes from across the Spanish speaking world. I remember back then we did some research with both our teachers and out learners, and I still remember the vast majority of students saying that they wanted to learn Castilian Spanish, i.e. the 'standard' variety spoken in Central Spain. When asked why they wanted to learn Spanish, however, the majority of them said they wanted to visit the coastal areas of Spain, or Latin America. It was easy to point out to them the contradiction between what they thought they wanted and the varieties the people they would encounter would speak.

Our role as language educators is to make our students aware of language varieties, and expose them to a rich, wide range of speakers. Our students appreciated this way of looking at the Spanish language and the Spanish-speaking world. By the way, we also found that a lot of our teachers of who spoke other varieties of Spanish, spoke some sort of 'pretend-Castilian' in class, believing that their language variety was somehow not appropriate in the language teaching context…. so we did have to work with our teachers to get them to understand our teaching approach.

You also say that in this linguistically superdiverse world in which we live, we see hybrid language practices, such as code switching and tanslanguaging, taking place in a wide set of contexts. I think all those of us who speak several languages at home or at work are well aware of how code switching can be a playful, joyful, and sometimes simply practical way to live between languages. And yet it is something that we don't often promote or even allow our students to engage in. We frown when they use an English word in the middle of a sentence in the language they are learning, we don't approve, we mark them down… and we deprive them of the fun!

Last week I was in Spain examining a PhD thesis where we were told about a degree course at the University of Mondragón in the Basque Country, in Spain on leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation. Students have to have a level B1 in English when they start their studies, and the whole degree is in English, but English language per se is not taught. It is just used, day to day, by staff and students. At first, in seminars and when presenting their work, students might struggle to speak English, and mix in Spanish or

Basque. This is perfectly acceptable, and it is seen as a step in becoming fluent users of English. Students are made responsible for their own learning. As they progress through their degree course, though, students gain confidence and experience in English, without being taught, without being penalised… Aren't these the sorts of practices that we should be looking at?

There are lots of other models of learners learning languages in the digital wilds, for instance amongst the thriving polyglot community, that we should also be looking at. Language learning is alive and well, but not necessarily in our institutions, and we should be looking at what is happening beyond the walls of our universities.

Finally, if I may, and to end where you started your paper, the premise of the debate was that "we need a radical new and coherent scope for the field that not only reflects current social and demographic changes, but that also aspires to exert influence and bring about change in society." 'Coherent' is a word that concerns and unsettles me, as it can also mean that we end up constructing straight-jackets for ourselves that hamper innovation and creativity. I would argue that, to foster innovation and creativity, we need to let a thousand flowers bloom!