

## **Exploring the use of migrant languages to support learning in mainstream classrooms in France**

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### **0. Introduction**

Finding ways of exploiting learners' L1 proficiency in multilingual classrooms has still to get on the agenda in France despite interesting experiments such as language awareness carried out by Candelier (2003). Unfortunately, first languages have often been considered as an obstacle to the development of competence in the French language at school. Mother tongues were identified as a handicap until 2002 (MEN 2002b, 2002c, 2002d) in the curriculum despite a number of research projects proving the contrary (for example, Cummins, 2001; Lüdi & Py, 1986). These research projects share the common finding that learners' first language is always a good foundation for second/additional language learning.

I first wanted to understand, at the beginning of 2000, if mother tongues were used in classrooms with immigrant pupils. I decided to conduct both policy and classroom analyses, first studying official policies on teaching immigrant pupils and then observing classroom activities. This ethnographic approach was complemented by interviews with pupils, teachers and parents. My analyses confirmed the hypothesis that the use of migrant languages is rare and mostly represented as a potential threat to teaching and learning French. Understanding the

different reasons leading to these beliefs and practices can offer an interesting discussion on how migrant languages can be used in schools and the benefits of this approach.

## **1. General policies, specific pedagogy and impact on migrant languages**

First, I would like to explore the studies at a macro level such as general policies regarding migrant pupils in France. Then I will explain what kind of specificities were observed in classes and schools following an ethnographic approach.

### ***1.1. General policy and impact on migrant pupils and their plurilingualism development***

#### ***1.1.1. A double bind: welcoming migrants and rejecting their languages***

French territory has always been torn between policies of assimilation and integration. The French motto is “liberty, equality and fraternity”, and France sees itself as a land of hospitality for immigrants. French schools have always had the obligation to include all migrant pupils even if their parents came illegally to France. This law and the country’s self image could have led to the use of migrant languages in schools. But this did not happen; other laws and the economical crisis had a completely different effect compared to what might have been expected. For instance, different bi-lateral laws were created between France and immigrants’ countries of origin from the late 1970s. The aim was to teach migrants’ mother tongues to newly arrived children in France. The problem, which still exists, was the lack of connexion with French schools. Language teachers from immigrant countries do not work with French teachers. They give language lessons to pupils outside school. This is regrettable, considering that home languages could help facilitate the learning of French and foreign languages.

#### ***1.1.2. Languages, the market place and attitudes towards French in France***

As Bourdieu (1982) and the sociolinguists Boyer (1997) and Calvet (1994) have argued, the vitality and image of a language is linked to its economic power. Immigrant languages have very little value in the market place.

The problem of the market place is also linked to the francophone world. France ensured (and still tries to ensure) its political and economical domination with the help of its language. Besides, in order to maintain unity in the country after the 1789 Revolution., one of the objectives was to “eliminate” (this word was used in texts written by Abbé Grégoire in 1794) other languages (Breton, Occitan etc.). Until the middle of the 20th century in France, it was “forbidden either to speak a regional language or to spit”, as was written on notices in schools and in some public spaces. French schools are still reluctant to give value to migrant or regional languages, but also to any variation from the norm that is represented by the positive image of the Parisian standard adopted by the media. Social, generational, sexual, geographical and even oral variations of the standard are seen as dangerous for the development of French at school. Of course, it is a way to reproduce elites and prevent people from other classes from gaining power in society (Bourdieu, 1970). Poor or handicapped bi/plurilingualism is radically linked to economic class.

### *1.1.3. A turn in the 2000s: an attempt to change the negative image of migrant languages*

These different criteria can help us to understand why migrant languages have been described as a “handicap” in the official texts of the French Ministry of Education since 1982. It was thus impossible to imagine using them as an asset to develop proficiency in French and bi/plurilingualism.

But in the 2000s, the will to change the negative image of deprived migrant groups and “handicapped” native languages was visible in official documents (MEN, 2002b, 2000c, 2000d). The centres responsible for migrant schooling which had also the task to help pupils in

deprived suburbs split into two different type of centres : those dedicated to migrant schooling and the others to deprived suburbs. Thus, there was an attempt to decouple economic difficulties and language learning, although some politicians continue to link delinquency with lack of competence in French (Benisti, 2004; Bentolila, 2007) despite arguments to the contrary from university researchers in linguistics. Assimilation via language is the aim of the hidden French language curriculum. That is why it is so difficult to integrate the use of migrant pupils' languages with mainstream teaching. This particular version of assimilation is anti other languages to try and unify the Nation which allows only French language. This kind of assimilation thanks to language prevents migrants from gaining power from communautarism.

### ***1.2. Ethnographic studies in classrooms: difficulties in using migrant languages***

#### *Co-constructing ethnographic data in schools (with teachers, pupils, parents, materials)*

The study started in 2002 until now in schools in the South of France (Gard and Hérault regions) first in 5 primary schools (for 6 to 11 year-old pupils), then to 4 secondary schools (from 11 to 16 year-old teenagers) and 3 pre-elementary schools (from 2/3 to 5 year-old children). Then some other schools in Toulouse, Paris regions became part of the study. Some classrooms were dedicated to migrant pupils, some were not, depending on schools. Despite the heterogeneity of the situation, the aim of the study is to describe attitudes and practises of plurilingualism (if any) and then to explain the results.

The method combines macro and micro approaches. I recorded and analyzed different discourses and practices : teachers, directors, inspectors, pupils, parents. I could then confront these data with official policies (macro level), on the one hand, and the interactions recorded in classes, on the other hand (micro level). This macro and micro vision can reflect the complexity of the situation .

#### *Discourse analyses and plurilingualism representations*

Discourse analyses and the question of representations/ stereotypes concerning interculturality and plurilingualism are the heart and tool for methodology, following the French linguistic tradition for discourse analyses (Pêcheux in the 1960's) and then the Anglo-Saxon development of interactional studies imported and popularized in France by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990). Actually, discourses build representation and stereotype. When they are related to plurilingualism they can show the different attitudes co-existing in schools. These crossing views between discourses and plurilingualism representations have already been famously explored in Switzerland with Py and Lüdy (2002) and conceptualized by Moore (2008) and recently by Stratilaki (2010)

Considering data, a first finding concerns the ambiguous definition of plurilingualism in French schools. The results can be linked to a lack of knowledge among teachers of the impact of factors such as interference, time and variation on language acquisition. Consequently, if teachers largely do not know how languages generally function, asking them to work at a meta-level with migrant pupils' languages might be difficult. Besides, we noticed a constant misunderstanding in communication. Misunderstanding arises inevitably when a foreign language is taught, but it becomes a difficulty when teachers cannot identify it. Finally, misunderstanding is often perceived as a kind of cultural and linguistic problem coming from migrant languages and migrant people instead of being considered a normal process in the language classes.

*1.2.1. Researcher asking for the asset of plurilingualism, teachers answering on being bi- and monolingual*

During these last 10 years, I have repeatedly asked and recorded pupils, teachers, school principals and parents what they think about *plurilingualism*. Then, I use discourse analysis to study the results. To sum up briefly, *plurilingualism* is not yet a common word in any recorded discourses. Most of them reformulate “plurilingualism” as “bilingualism”. Bilingualism is seen as “perfect” or not, by which is meant that the true bilingual has to speak like a native speaker in all their languages. In other words, being bilingual is the addition of two languages that never interfere with each other, whether in pronunciation, syntax, culture, or when they are used for spoken or written communication. This false conception of bilingualism creates difficulties when the researcher proposes the use migrant languages at school. Languages are still conceived as pipes that are sealed off from one another do not communicate (Heller, 1996) and the same is believed to be true about identities. Bilingualism is presented in the different transcripts that were analysed as two cultural identities that do not impinge on one another. This

belief, reinforced by the media message that migrants are a threat to French workers and security, explains why migrant pupils' languages are perceived as a threat to teachers and, more generally, to schools. As one teacher commented: "when [migrant pupils] use their languages at school, nobody knows if it is to insult us".

To avoid such reactions, we highly recommend to educate teachers and inform parents and pupils so that they become open to other standards and understand plurilingualism as an amalgam of uneven but complementary competencies.

### *1.2.2. A lack of knowledge about acquisition processes: interference and variation*

Currently, because of the dominant language policy and ideology, very little information is available on the positive role of migrants' languages. Linguistic interferences between French and migrants' languages are mostly seen as a problem not as a sign of developing competencies in French. Besides, parents, pupils and teachers do not recognize some languages as languages, for a variety of reasons. It can be because some languages are only oral have few value on the languages market place (Amazigh, Romani) or simply because the norms migrants speak are more or less distant from standards (for instance different kind of Arabics). This leads to the belief that the use of migrant pupils' languages is useless and even "dangerous" to the development of competence in the language of schooling.

### *1.2.3. The focus on French as knowledge rather than skills*

As suggested below, the ability to write French is the ultimate competence to develop for any pupil. The ability to reflect on texts, focusing on literary figures and metalinguistic knowledge, is also very considered very important for French teachers. Orthography and grammar are taught until the age of 15 (mostly by giving dictation, and requiring pupils to learn rules). We do not contest French orthography and grammar can be complicated. Linguists consider French

as a irregular language. The Académie Française has always been reluctant to normalize irregularity (Siouffi & Steuckardt, 2006). It hides the fact that linguistic complexity is a way to allow only a small elite to master French. Some official texts (MEN, 2002a) deplore the opacity and selective technical language used by textbooks and teachers. It does not help pupils to improve their French.

#### *1.2.4. Misunderstanding in exolingual communication and the threat of the use of migrant pupils' languages*

Misunderstanding between native and non-native speakers is common. The problem can come from a mispronunciation (the word in question may then mean something else or appear to be a curse or simply inappropriate). Misunderstanding can occur at the syntactic level considering the words order and provoke contrary meaning. For instance, the agent may become the patient : “the cat eats the fish” or “the fish eats the cat”). The trouble may be non-verbal: the use of tense space, gestures. The cultural values associated with specific words or phrases may be different. During the ethnographic studies, these misunderstandings arose repeatedly (Auger, 2010). These misunderstandings were perceived by teachers as a sign of was also migrants languages “poorerness”, It became urgent to provide information on that aspect of exolingual communication and to propose activities designed to make positive use of migrant pupils' languages.

## **2. The use of migrant languages: an experiment**

In official policy texts as well as in the representations of teachers, parents and pupils, the use of migrant languages and, more generally, migrants' cultural background are seen as negative, or at least exotic uncommon.

I will first explain why informing teachers about the concept of interculturality is important if migrant languages are to be used in their classrooms. Then, exploring the use of migrants' languages in practice will lead to compare whatever languages co-exist in the classroom. Sample activities entitled "Let's compare our languages" are proposed as a means of mobilizing migrant pupils' languages as resources to support the development of their proficiency in the language of schooling. A discussion of teachers' and decision makers' reluctance to allow the use of migrant languages will help us to understand how we should work with decision makers both in schools and in the Ministry.

### ***2.1. Interculturality: a concept central to understanding the importance of using migrant languages***

.Interculturality (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1995; Abdallah-Pretceille and Porcher, 1998; Byram, 2011; Zarate *et al.*, 2011) is a synonym for variety, and variety and diversity of apprehension of the world can be perceived as a threat to established systems. The hidden curriculum maintains a French elite (see section 1.2.2 above), but the intercultural situation can become an asset when it is used to exchange experiences and see one's own system differently in relation to other contexts. Interculturality leads to shared expertise. In fact, on the one hand, teachers have knowledge pupils must appropriate and, on the other hand, teachers discover pupils' useful competences which can be exploited to support the learning of French. The status of error changes; we will see later on that the activities become a tool to think of how to explain and practice differently.

The activities which will be described below are based on exchange, on reciprocal relationships between teachers and pupils, and make use of past experience. This is not conceived of as a handicap but rather as a resource to build new knowledge, especially language knowledge (but my aim is not to separate linguistic from other competences, because a human



being is a whole). The use of migrant languages in an intercultural perspective is a way of exploiting positively the intercultural pedagogical context and of using diversity and even confrontation (between languages, points of view) as a stimulus to discussion and work in class. It builds cooperation between everybody. The heterogeneity of the group is perceived as a resource and develops empowerment (Caubergs, 2002). The use of their own languages can give migrant pupils the power to increase their knowledge of French, but it also benefits French native speaker pupils, helping them too to develop their competences in French. As Goethe observed, we do not know our own language if we do not also know other languages. The perspectives introduced by referring to different languages give distance to the mainstream language of the classroom and instead of weakening it, strengthen it greatly (as shown by the ethnographic study).

## ***2.2. From the positive use of intercultural contexts to the development of language and sociocultural competences***

Comparing languages has a social constructivism background (Bruner, 1983, 1991) and Vygostky (1934/1997). Class discussion and interaction on migrant languages and cultures lead to co-construction of knowledge and skills, which is the only way to develop competences. It is difficult to interact in a language when one has just started to learn it, but one can listen to the interaction of others as children learning their first language do before they begin to speak. Interacting is not synonymous with speaking. Analysing interactions in language classes that used discussion activities, Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler (2005) found that teachers continuously adjusted their instructions, so that pupils developed linguistic by also sociocultural and institutional competences.

Discussing in classes provokes positive attitudes of listening to one another and co-construct the knowledge and skills. It requires at the same time linguistic and metalinguistic abilities. It increases interest in the topic more than dealing with French only.

### ***2.3. Exploring the use of migrant languages in practice***

#### *2.3.1. From vertical to horizontal methodologies*

The official French texts on teaching migrant pupils (MEN, 2002b, 2000c, 2000d) say that it is possible to take into account competences that have been developed in other languages, whether developed at school or outside. However, the text does not explain the way teachers could take these competencies into account.

My ethnographic study led me to propose that migrant languages should be used to help pupils develop French language competences, and, especially at the beginning, that oral activities should be used to avoid discouraging pupils who do not know how to read and write. That is why oral discussion is one of the most important forms of activity. Allowing the use of migrant languages opens traditional, vertical, transmissive methodology to the intercultural context and developing a horizontal methodology. Horizontal methodology refers to the taking into account and the activation of the learner's languages, even if some of the languages were learned outside school.

#### *2.3.2. Using migrant languages to compare the various languages present in the classroom*

My research showed that teachers are still largely unaware of interlanguage theory (Corder 1980). Instances of interference are perceived as mistakes and the image of pupils' languages is mostly negative. Comparing languages can help to develop awareness of the interlanguage process. The learner is not undergoing his interlanguage "mistakes" but he takes them as an

asset to progress in the development of his competences.. Activities that involve comparison are intercultural because one cannot help making comparisons with one's former experience when faced with a new language and culture. These activities can be used with any child, whatever languages he or she speaks and whatever his or her level of French. For instance, teachers can work on sounds with pupils newly arrived in France, and then move on to vocabulary and syntax. The writing process is not excluded; comparisons can be made between different writing systems, the use of grammar etc.

That is why I have developed a DVD entitled *Let's compare our languages* (Auger, 2005) and a teachers' book with activities to initiate multilingualism in class and activate transfers from one language to another (focussing on the language of schooling). The notion of empowerment is very important for the pupils as well as their teachers because, as explained before, the traditional culture of learning and teaching does not really allow empowerment to take place. Thanks to these activities, teachers and pupils have their negative representations about first languages transformed. Pupils improve readily thanks to their teachers, who were trained to use the DVD. It is clearly a new pedagogical approach for both pupils and teachers in France, recently recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2009) five years after the European Commission (Auger 2005) .

Our selection of activities entitled "Let's compare our languages" (Table 1)<sup>1</sup> mobilizes first languages as a resource to facilitate migrant pupils' access to the language of schooling, in conformity with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the Council of Europe's platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education.<sup>2</sup>

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### 2.3.3. *Comparing languages in other contexts: looking for links between languages and people*

The word “comparing” can be confusing because it can imply hierarchy. One should understand that “comparing” is a pretext to create links between languages, to use migrant languages as resources. This perspective of comparison has always been practised since language learning is concerned. Recently, the European project *Evlang* (Candelier, 2003) is a serious attempt to help construct linguistically and culturally plural societies in order to promote solidarity. The Evlang activities involve observing different languages with different statuses and at the same time developing metalinguistic reflexion and consciousness of power struggles between languages with a view to avoiding them in the future. This programme has been implemented in Switzerland (Perregaux *et al.*, 2003) and in Canada, especially Quebec (Armand *et al.*, 2007). These activities differ from “Let’s compare our languages” in that they do not use languages pupils already know.

#### ***2.4. The reluctance of teachers and decision makers***

After analysing classroom data and proposing activities which could exploit migrant languages instead of stereotyping them, the study went on to analyse the reactions of teachers, pupils and parents reactions after using the “Let’s compare languages” activities.

##### ***2.4.1. “A language cannot vary”***

Most of the time teachers expressed the view that some languages vary too much to become a resource. They were unaware that all languages can have different standards according to contexts. Besides, if languages are only oral, teachers often assume, wrongly, that they are ungrammatical. Even some parents told me that it was wrong to make comparisons with oral Arabic.

##### ***2.4.2. “If pupils have knowledge that I don’t possess ...”***

Teachers were also reluctant to introduce a horizontal methodology. The traditional, vertical, transmissive way of developing language competences in class is still very common in French schools. Accepting that pupils have linguistic skills that they themselves lack is for some teachers a source of considerable discomfort. But we informed teachers that even if he/she forbade pupils from using openly their family languages, that is inevitably what pupils will do, silently, more or less consciently to develop the schooling language. Once again, by providing teachers with information on how languages are learnt, we can help them to change their habits and become more confident in the links they will create with pupils.

#### *2.4.3. “Some languages are too distant from one another for comparison to be possible”*

Migrant languages are sometimes non-Indo-European and teachers often think they are typologically too distant from the language of schooling to use them as a resource. For example, they do not know that Arabic words play an important role in French. They also sometimes overlook the fact that languages that are distant from one another on one level are much closer on another. For instance, German is relatively close to English on the lexical level but relatively distant from English on the syntactic level. The syntactic features of Chinese, on the other hand, share more overlap with English considering SVO order (Chao) .

#### *2.4.4. “Writing is a transcription of speech”*

Some teachers, parents and pupils are shocked because the activities proposed in “Let’s compare our languages” allow them to write what they hear with the Latin alphabet, even if the migrant’s language has a different alphabet or no written form. The belief that writing is an exact transcription of what we hear is a mistake; only the international phonetic alphabet (IPA) is able to translate sounds. The main reason for writing down what is said in class, even approximately, is to get visual resources to help develop competences. It also prevents teachers

and pupils from “sacralizing” writing. This fact has been criticized in the official texts referred to above.

#### *2.4.5. “Pupils lack metalanguage to compare languages”*

I noticed that some teachers were frightened by the fact that pupils who had not gone to school before arriving in France could not compare languages. But one should not confuse metalinguistic vocabulary (*verb, adjective, adverb*) with the capacity to reflect on language, which is present as soon as a child can speak. Metalinguistic terminology is not needed to take awareness, for instance, that the negative form is expressed by one or two morphemes according to different languages. Metalinguistic vocabulary can be taught at a later on.

#### *2.4.6. Opportunities for such activities*

Another source of reluctance is the school schedule: “When can we find time to include these activities?” teachers constantly asked. They can be included when interference between languages occurs, or when a new grammatical point, speech act is presented. It is not necessary to be a linguist to use these activities; teachers pick up what they need and can create other activities along the same lines according to their needs.

The only way to counteract teachers reluctance is to provide them with information about languages, how they are learnt, and how they are used to exercise power. I noticed that when I gave teachers or parents such information and at the same time proposed ways of using migrant languages, their reluctance decreased significantly.

### **3. Conclusion: to go further**

In this chapter I have adopted a critical ethnography approach (Heller, 2002). It aims is to connect the practice to historical moments, taking into account social dynamics. Regarding that

kind of study, the researcher is socially situated and is responsible for his or her study and research site. Expected change in this context is seen as transformation or evolution regarding the use of migrant languages in classrooms. The engagement is also visible through the creation of documents and collaboration with the field. Using the “Let’s compare our languages” activities to explore the use of migrant pupils’ language is a first step. A further step would involve allowing migrant pupils to use their home languages in classroom discussion if necessary and extending the activities to all subject classes, rather than limiting them to French classes or classes for migrant pupils. The experience we have accumulated to date could be used in any multilingual class in any other country in Europe and beyond : some interest has lately been shown in North Africa and Canada.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Video extracts are available free of charge in French at

<http://www.crdp-montpellier.fr/bsd/afficherBlocSequence.aspx?bloc=481293> and translated into English and German at <http://marille.ecml.at/>

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.coe.int/lang>

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