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Adult language education and migration: Challenging agendas in policy and practice

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Introduction: New perspectives on changing circumstances

The linguistic, political and pedagogic dimensions of language learning in migration contexts are changing fast. National policy responses to the dynamic diversity associated with migration can be uneven and contradictory. At the same time novel pedagogic practices are emerging to enable newcomers to gain access to the languages of wider communication, practices that often involve the adoption of a critical stance. This paper examines these two tendencies together, juxtaposing the policy landscape with aspects of emergent current pedagogic practice in adult language and migration contexts in the developed west and north.[1]

National policy and local pedagogic practice regarding adult language education for migrants varies from country to country. However, there are commonalities – in some cases startling similarities – too. Firstly, there is a tendency for national government responses to the language learning needs of adult migrants to be at odds with what actually happens 'on the ground'. This mismatch is not only in terms of the expected content and focus of language education, but also of the very

nature of today's language use itself. Secondly, policies that are imposed can also be appropriated, subverted, interpreted in new ways. Indeed policies themselves can emerge in local contexts of practice.

These observations align with two current trends in the fields of sociolinguistics and language education. People's mobility, and the mobility of communication, has led to the development of a sociolinguistics of globalization, and a concern with how global processes are played out in the warp and the weft of actual practice (Blommaert 2010; Duchêne, Moyer & Roberts 2013). Moreover, in ethnographically-informed studies of language policy there is a related concern with scale. Attention in this tradition is upon language policies not as formations created at abstract scales but as processes (Ricento & Hornberger 1996) and as locally-situated sociocultural practice (McCarty 2011; Johnson 2013). The remainder of this paper expands on these themes more fully. We make reference to a recent book that we edited on policy and practice in adult migrant language education (Simpson & Whiteside 2015), and to individual chapters in that book.

National policy and adult migrant language education

In-migration into states in Western Europe, North America and elsewhere in the developed west outpaces the elaboration of policies and infrastructure which address the presence of new migrants, and the linguistic diversity that their arrival entails. National policies concerning language education for new arrivals in most western states are inconsistent, contentious and contradictory, responding in uneven ways

to the dynamic diversity associated with migration. This is not to say that national governments do not accept that new arrivals should use the dominant language of their new country. Indeed, political and public rhetoric frequently makes reference to the obligation that migrants have to 'speak our language', often in the name of national unity. Such discourse is informed by deeply entrenched language ideologies, i.e. 'beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use which often index the political interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation states' (Kroskrity 2001: 1). The ideology of a standard language that should be used in the public (and even private) sphere across a country is particularly well-established. This 'one nation one language' ideology is interlaced with other beliefs about national identity, for example the ideal that the nation state should be as homogeneous as possible, and that a dimension of that homogeneity is monolingualism.

The notion of a stable distribution of languages following national boundaries – and indeed the notion of languages as stable and bounded entities – runs counter to lived language experience. Daily language use in migration contexts inevitably involves individuals drawing upon their multilingual repertoire as a situation demands (Creese & Blackledge 2011). But although multilingualism is the norm on the ground, monolingualism is hegemonic in many places: that is, it is accepted as an unquestioned common sense 'given' by the majority of people that one language stands above others as having particular status as the national language of the country. Monolingualist policies appeal to, and resonate

with everyday understandings of the importance of a standard language as a unifying 'glue' for a nation. The mobility of contemporary globalization presents something of a problem to such fixity, i.e. to the idea of the nation as a fixed entity. The imagined homogeneity of a nation (in linguistic terms) is maintained by national policy and political discourse, but is challenged by mobility and diversity.

The hegemony of the standard language is a feature of political discourse across the developed west. There is variety between states in the rationale for supporting such hegemony, associated with the social, political and historical trajectory of particular nations. In France for instance there is a centralizing tradition, where standard French is viewed as a tool for the integration of migrants in the name of republican universalism (Adami 2015). In the UK policy and public rhetoric in recent years uphold the priveleging of standard English to counter religious and political extremism (Simpson 2015). In Australia, where an understanding of cultural pluralism has only recently developed, the learning of English has historically been considered part and parcel of the process of assimilation into an Anglo-Australian culture (Nicholas 2015). And in the US, adult migrant language education and immigration policy, while confused (Spruck Wrigley 2015), is underpinned by a largely unquestioning acceptance of English as the *de facto* national language.

Given the central position of the standard variety of a national language, however, it should come as no surprise that the understanding of

language education for migrants at the scale of national policy rarely embraces multilingualism, that is, the development of competence in the dominant language as part of a multilingual repertoire. Even in places where multiculturalism is promoted and diversity is embraced, such concern tends not to extend to linguistic diversity. And in some cases, monolingualism is explicitly promoted to counter a view of multiculturalism which understands ethnic communitarianism as ghettoization (Oakes 2011). This sentiment resonates with a concern that where difference is valued, it can still be used to organize society hierarchically. In Hymes' (1996) terms, where there is difference, there is inequality. It is certainly easy to marginalize the linguistic 'other', i.e. a user of a language other than the standard or dominant one.

State-driven discourses of homogeneism are somewhat paradoxically also prominent in countries which have some sort of official status as bi- or multilingual. In those which are engaged in a process of nation building, and in those which have strong regionalist nationalist movements, such discourses are strongly evident. For instance, Quebec's co-option of language in the service of immigration policy bolsters the numbers of francophone migrants coming in to the state, and hence enhances the position and status of French across Canada as a whole (Bouffard 2015). In Catalonia, an autonomous region of Spain, the status of the Catalan language has changed greatly in recent years. Under the Franco dictatorship in Spain it was a forbidden language and developed an identity as the language of an insider group. Today Catalan is promoted by political elites and supported by much public

discourse and the media as a dimension of Catalan nationalism, and is employed as a tool of nation building as the dominant language of an autonomous state, one that aspires in some quarters to further autonomy from Spain and to independence (Branchadell 2015). Again there is variety between states, however. A contrasting picture of minority language use is evident in Ireland, an officially bilingual country with a symbolically central language, Irish. There is not a great appetite for learning Irish in Ireland's urban centers, where it is little-used, and language education for migrants there focuses on English for pragmatic reasons (Sheridan 2015), though in something of a policy vacuum.

Language learning and integration

Understanding and using the dominant language of the new country is a *sine qua non* of integration and social cohesion, amongst policy-makers, language education practitioners and new arrivals alike. This stance assumes that acquiring competence in the standard variety of a language equips newcomers with the means to navigate a fresh social context. This extends to competence in reading and writing: an assumption easily made that literacy in the standard variety is a pre-requisite for daily life and is the route to a successful future. From here it is but a short step to another easy assumption: that once competence in the language has been achieved, all the problems one faces as a migrant will be solved – as if all social groups using the standard variety are natural allies. But this rests on a misunderstanding of competence: language development, like the development of cultural competence,

has no ‘end state’. There is no one set of linguistic and cultural resources that suffices to meet the complexities of urban life (Blommaert 2010). Moreover, linguistic homogeneity certainly does not correspond with socio-cultural and political alignment. Speaking the same language does not preclude conflict. There is no doubt that proficiency in the national language – including its written form – can confer advantage, be it economic (finding and keeping a good job, for example) or social (the ability to gain and develop a voice that can be heard in the public domain). But access to the powerful language of a country is not sufficient to overcome unequal distribution of social capital like education (Wiley 2005).

A further question about language learning and integration is ‘integration into what?’ This is pertinent in an age of globalization and mobility, where the nation state is no longer the stable entity it perhaps once was. Historically the equation has been that immigrants gain loyalty to a new state and culture by relinquishing ties to older ones: what Portes and Rumbaut (2006) call ‘subtractive assimilation’. Today’s migrants though need multiple cultural competences and translingual awareness (Canagarajah 2013): their learning of the new language is part of the development of a complex mosaic of multilingual and multicultural communicative competences, repertoires and language resources. Subtractive assimilation becomes obsolete.

Dual nationality, circular stays and sojourns, and online media eliminate either/or scenarios, e.g. affiliation to this country or that one, and the

social contexts of receiving countries themselves become increasingly diverse and polycentric. New arrivals are not joining an established homogeneous insider group, but are part of globalized, transnational culture. Yet presenting language learning as being for integration discursively positions newcomers as outsiders who are by definition not yet 'integrated'. As Nagel (1986) has shown, states thus create 'ethnic minorities' by treating disparate groups as though they were part of some aggregate defined arbitrarily by a set of external differences from the majority.

An insight into how governments understand integration can be gained by examining how they invest in the participation of new members of society. Integration equates with assimilation into an economically productive workforce. As a broad neo-liberal agenda sweeps the globe, language education for migrants often aligns with a discourse of employability. Access to statutory classes is limited to those seeking work, and content is restricted to job-hunting or generic preparation for low-grade employment – as if people's only concern was finding a job. Such a narrow understanding of language education does not value the economically unproductive, that is, those not in the workforce or actively seeking work. Pockets of practice do exist, however, where broader concerns beyond employability are addressed. Chapman and Williams (2015) identify and discuss four English language and literacy programs for young adult migrants in Australia without foundational literacy in their expert languages. They describe these programs as *transformative*, in that they combine instruction in language and literacy

with practical engagement with local communities: such engagement, they suggest, has the potential to change the communities themselves as well as the new arrivals who are joining them. Intke-Hernandez (2015) describes a Finnish language education program, the *Capable Parent* program, for a sector often invisible to the workforce education agenda: stay-at-home mothers. Adopting an ethnographic approach to her study of the teaching and learning at a family center near Helsinki, she came to understand that 'the learning was in the hands of the mothers themselves.' And writing in a Canadian context, Fleming (2015) shows that ESL teachers' understandings of citizenship go well beyond an instrumental, banal integration of the pliant would-be citizen into the workplace and the administrative culture of the host society. Many Canadian ESL practitioners espouse forms of active and justice-oriented citizenship in their teaching, integrating meaningful citizenship content into pedagogy, even for beginner learners.

Language and citizenship testing

A relatively recent arrival on the political scene is the use of language testing in the service of immigration policy in the form of language and citizenship tests. The implementation of these tests varies. The language proficiency required to pass them ranges from high (the UK) to low (Spain). The tests can be prohibitive for less educated adults (the Netherlands) or relatively symbolic, as in the US. They can also be cripplingly expensive.

McNamara and Ryan (2011) suggest we pose two questions about language tests for citizenship, residency and entry to a country: the first relating to their fairness (do they test what they should?); and the second to their justice (should they test what they do?). On the first question, Kurvers and Spotti (2015) describe an entry test to the Netherlands which is assessed using voice recognition software, seriously disadvantaging applicants whose expert language's phonological system does not relate closely to that of Dutch. On the second question, we might ask, what makes language and particularly literacy such an important criterion for entry to a country and for residence? For an answer, we can consider firstly the role of language in the building and shoring up of national identity in the face of progressive globalization. Secondly citizenship tests often but not always purport to cover general knowledge of the values and customs deemed essential to civic participation. But the level of proficiency required (at least in some countries) hardly ensures the ability to read about or understand debates about political or legal issues, or discussion and critical engagement with the nature of supposed core values. Citizenship tests are not for the benefit of the prospective citizen. In effect they are language and literacy tests acting as gatekeeping devices (Gumperz 1982, Reay 2001) in immigration control.

The CEFR

Connected to this is a notable feature of both language learning programs and the citizenship and language tests that migrants have to

pass to remain in – or even gain access to – their new country: the widespread use of the CEFR – the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The CEFR evolved from work begun in the 1970s by the Council of Europe, which aimed to provide a common understanding and set of descriptors of language competence for educated Europeans, to aid the design of language learning programs and assessments (Council of Europe, n.d.). Today's CEFR has six levels, from A1 ('the ability to communicate in short and simple sentences in a familiar context') to C2 (near-native use of oral and written language). The CEFR has become widely used as a description of what constitutes acceptable language performance remarkably quickly, and in recent years in learning contexts beyond those originally envisaged (e.g. in schooling for migrant children; in assessment of adults with little competence in literacy). This, as well as its employment outside Europe, and its inappropriateness in situations of linguistic diversity, has received critical comment (Leung & Lewkowicz 2013; Janssen-van Dieten 2006), as has its use as a benchmarking tool for the requirements of language and citizenship. On that point, the CEFR is used (or abused) as a very effective gatekeeping device. Extreme examples of this tendency are seen in the Netherlands (Kurvers & Spotti 2015) and the UK (Simpson 2015). In these cases visa applicants have to pass language tests at particular levels on the CEFR even before they enter the country. This in effect extends a country's borders globally, with profound implications for peoples' mobility and their family lives (Blackledge 2014).

Divergent themes

Thus far we have indicated certain commonalities in contemporary adult language education in migration contexts in the west: a mismatch between national policy and practice on the ground; and the tendency of policy to treat languages and literacies as singular, homogeneous, autonomous and stable entities when they are not. Although commonalities abound, apparent also are idiosyncratic patterns in the development of migration policies related to divergent geographical, historical and ideological factors. In terms of geography, the long, sparsely populated US border has facilitated the historical exploitation of Mexican guest workers (*braceros*) and undocumented labourers (Wrigley 2015). Canada, with its vast under-populated areas, has embraced immigration (Bouffard 2015), whereas Australia, with an Anglo majority but proximity to Asia, has a history of exclusionary migration policies (Nicholas 2015). Post-colonial and imperialist ties with 'sending' countries have characterized much policy, except in countries with no such historical relationships. Countries with long histories of inward migration like the US, the UK and France, and historically diverse populations, have layered trajectories in language integration policies. In contrast historically 'sending' countries such as Finland and Ireland are experiencing population diversity for the first time (Pöyhönen & Tarnanen 2015; Sheridan 2015).

Challenges to teaching practice

The political battles and unresolved migration and language policy debates of recent years have dealt adult immigrant language education

a series of blows, setbacks and reversals. While new arrivals are exhorted to *use* the dominant language of the new country, opportunities to *learn* that language are often difficult to identify. Migrants tend to understand the importance of being able to gain access to the powerful language of their new environment and the powerful varieties of that language. For many, therefore, learning the language is a primary concern. Yet in most states in the developed north and west, the trend is towards cutting funding and shifting responsibility for language education to charity-based and other non-governmental agencies. This has often been done in the name of austerity, in response to economic downturns.

There are exceptions: France and Quebec have increased public control over language programs (Adami 2015; Bouffard 2015). Finland still provides relatively generous subsidies for immigrant language study, although right wing political opposition to immigration there is growing, placing funding under threat (Pöyhönen & Tarnanen 2015). In the US the picture is mixed: public funding ignores bilingual and literacy programs despite their recognized effectiveness, and language planning efforts linked to immigration reform are thwarted by political stagnation (Lukes & Lyons 2015; Spruck Wrigley 2015).

There is an unintended but beneficial consequence of governmental indifference towards – and abrogation of responsibility for – adult migrant language education: spaces open up for experimentation and the development of approaches to teaching more suited to the realities

of migrants' lives in superdiverse, multilingual neighborhoods and workplaces. These are places where tensions related to perceived ethnic, racial, class and cultural difference are rife. In such settings, what is needed are creative and resourceful responses to the challenges of transnational migration. Rather than shying away from complexities, there is a need to put them front and centre, considering them affordances for developing language, critical awareness and agency.

There is an equal need for experienced and linguistically trained teachers, knowledgeable in emergent and bi-literacy, and with some cultural competence and linguistic awareness of the populations they serve. Yet ironically, as the need for a broader cultural and linguistic knowledge base grows, funding reductions in many cases have instead led to the de-professionalization of teaching: teachers of marginalized students are themselves forced to the periphery, and ill-funded programs rely on unpaid or part-time workers. The emergent literature on adult migrant language teaching has examples of resourceful teachers who compensate for lack of funds by creating their own materials, enlisting higher-level students to do translations and interpreting (Garrido & Oliva 2015, discussing Catalonia) and drawing upon volunteers (Doyle 2015, with reference to Ireland). These solutions are hardly sustainable long-term. The broad pattern of reduced funding has also diminished access to statutory classes for working adults, with hours of instruction diminished to inadequate levels (from 20 to two-four per week in Ireland; in Catalonia, the

entitlement is a total of 45 hours). Many programmes are of short duration or a scant few hours a week.

Even the most experienced and well-qualified teachers encounter difficulties in designing and implementing programs that provide relevant language learning experiences for communication in the various domains of life encountered by new arrivals, and for critical examination of those domains. As we noted earlier, new immigrants need explicit help with understanding and adapting to increasingly plural and complex contexts and the linguistic and cultural challenges they pose.

Challenging policy agendas: the need for innovative classroom practices

As McCarty (2011), Hornberger and Johnson (2007) and others have shown, bottom-up language planning and policy is actualized by incremental shifts in discourse practices at the ground level. We detect the beginnings of a seismic shift in the discourses of monolingualism and the practice of teaching a national language to newcomers: teachers and language education researchers are rejecting a language pedagogy that focuses only on the transmission of language facts. They recognize that adult migrant language students are often plurilingual but with what Blommaert refers to as 'truncated repertoires' (Blommaert, 2010) – that is, only limited competence in a number of languages. Students have varying degrees of literacy in several scripts to begin with, some may have missed out on formal education as children; and they may

have little exposure to the host country national language in their daily lives. In adult migrant language education classes, policy tends to be realized in practice. For example, the dominant language is normalized while others are marginalized, or it is over-interpreted as the language of equality and emancipation. It is imperative that this tendency is counter-balanced. Classrooms need to be seen as spaces where multilingualism, translanguaging and interculturality are the norm, where hybrid forms are accepted, where teachers explore and then draw on students' linguistic and non-linguistic communicative resources and skills to gradually help them increase their control over their participation in their new contexts. Likewise teachers need to reject pre-designed syllabi in favor of emergent curricula, and to shift responsibility for decisions about content to students.

It is also encumbant on teachers of migrants to adopt a critical approach to engagement with language and literacy, understanding that the new language is used to read 'the word and the world' (Freire & Macedo 1950). Recognizing that unschooled migrants in particular face further marginalization, teachers can strive to avoid delegitimizing students with little or no formal education. Criticality can mean different things: perhaps including students' multilingual voices and experiences in pedagogy, or making room for the complexities of plurilingual identities in student writing. Critical of what they see as national agendas that promote docile, assimilated citizens, teachers might express a strong commitment to social justice and equity. They can view integration as a two way street, recognizing the rationality of choices and strategies

immigrants use to manage their new circumstances. They can encourage their students to challenge stereotyped and assigned identities, and invite discussion of race and class and differences in cultural values, using these discussions to introduce vocabulary and structures (e.g Cooke et al 2015).

Language learning materials

A focus on communicative competence in second/other language teaching has led to the production of language learning materials which imagine prototypical communicative events. These often bear little resemblance to the lived experiences of poor and marginalized immigrants, who are more likely to encounter supermarkets where no one talks, recalcitrant bureaucrats, impatient doctors. Language learning materials produced specifically for immigrants also tend to focus on heavily functional language, dealing with basic survival and adjustment to life in the new country. Yet language learning in migration contexts is situated, i.e. it does not reference idealized versions of national culture, but is grounded in the realities of local practice. There is a need for teachers to push beyond 'survival' language by taking their cues from concrete local experiences, shifting control over topics and activities to students, whose experiences then drive the curriculum. Using these activities as context for language practice, students can be socialized into particular activities around situated language use, and into using language as a vehicle for increased participation.

Conclusion: New agendas for the top

There are considerable difficulties in implementing emergent and critical curricula on a large scale or at institutions and in policy regimes where accountability requires standard and predictable outcomes. Yet the stakes are high: where immigrant populations are not given the opportunity to develop competence in the dominant language of their new country they risk being denied a voice with which to challenge the conditions of their lives. There are way-marked paths: Luke (2000) discusses the institutionalization of critical literacy in adolescent education in Australia. He suggests that two keys to the effective implementation of critical approaches are (1) state accountability systems that do not rely on reductionist measures of progress, and (2) a teaching core willing to engage with new theories. This is not straightforward, and implies a need for cultural change in national policy, in inspection regimes and in teacher education. As Auerbach (2001) acknowledges, adopting critical language teaching poses considerable challenges in each new context. Nonetheless policy makers have much to learn from models which support mutual engagement with, and engagement between, newcomers and an established population, where all voices are heard. Bringing together an overview of the policy landscape and examples of practice in different places makes it possible for those in policy roles to learn from an array of practitioners and their students. What happens locally – i.e. policy-making on the ground – is more salient than much national policy. This is particularly the case where national policy is falling away, is incoherent or lacks direction.

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Endnote

This paper is based on the plenary presentation given at LESLLA 2014. It has the same title as a book that we edited on policy and practice in adult migrant language education (Simpson & Whiteside 2015). It appears in a different form as part of the introduction to that volume.