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Multilingual Education in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

Second-language learning is often associated with globalization: knowledge of more than one language gives people an âedgeâ by improving their communication skills and exposing them to diverse cultures; this, in turn, increases their employment opportunities. This argument is fine as far as it goes, but Europe and North America, the richest continents with the highest literacy rates, also have the lowest rates of linguistic diversity; in fact, in these geographic areas, bilingualism and multilingualism, and, by extension, bilingual and multilingual education, are more a matter of choice than necessity. The situation is different in Africa, where multilingual nations are the norm, and result from traditional groups being brought together in newly independent states upon decolonization. The educational significance of this multilingualism is the focus of Kenneth Harrow and Kizitus Mpocheâs *Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies*, a collection of twenty-two essays derived from a conference held at the University of YaoundÃ© I, in Cameroon, in 2006.

The volumeâs terms of reference seem broad, but

while countries in Africa, other than Cameroon, are mentioned in individual chapters (for example, those written by Gabriel Mba and Edgar W. Schneider), it focuses, for the most part, on language education and policy in Cameroon. This is no bad thing: the focus on Cameroon presents a fairly precise picture of the current state of affairs there, which is more useful than presenting readers with a superficial analysis of the situation in a number of countries. Moreover, Cameroon is perhaps the best possible example for illustrating both the problems and the potential of multilingual education: while English and French were the official languages adopted upon unification in 1961, estimates of the number of languages spoken in the country range from a conservative 200 to over 280. Cameroon is, therefore, what Loreto Todd, in her useful model of âMalvolian multilingualism,â refers to as âa country that was born multilingualâ (p. 7). Indeed, as Blasius A. Chiatoh explains, in Cameroon âthe average citizen speaks at least three or four languages—the mother tongue, a language of wider communication (LWC), the first official language (OL1) and the second

official language (OL2)â (p. 87). Given this situation, Edith Esch is right to observe that in Cameroon the roots of multilingualism precede schooling, and childrenâs linguistic socialization is âcharacterised by *complexity*, as well as *flexibility* and *fluidity*âeven before they learn to read and writeâa process that inevitably takes place in a language other than the mother tongue (p. 29, emphasis in original).

While Cameroonian society is multilingual, the stateâs education system is structured around the two official languages: French and English. Various issues arise from this situation. The two systems are very different: one is based on the âstrongly guided and front-led teachingâ common to the metropolitan French model, in which âschool knowledge is presented as pre-existing and incarnated by the teacherâ; the other on the English model, in which there is a âstrong element of individualisation ... in method of learningâ (pp. 36-37). Insofar as both language and pedagogy are culturally rooted, this affects national identity and unity. One of the more interesting attempts to merge the two systems is analyzed by Innocent Mbouya Fasse in âAn Atypical Case of Dual-Medium Education Programme in a Complex Multilingual Setting: The Horizon Bilingual Educational Complex in Cameroon.â Located in the largely francophone city of Douala, the Horizon Bilingual Educational Complex is a dual-medium, dual-curriculum school whose reputation among educationalists is sure to grow. The fact that it is successfully âovercoming the obstacles of its outstandingly complex multilingual setting to produce real bilingual and biliterate citizensâ makes it a model of educational reform for societies where official bilingualism needs to be more firmly rooted in the educational system (p. 156).

Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies also deals with the classroom ramifications of multilingualism. Esch calls for more research to be done into the means by which multilingual teachers negotiate multilingual classrooms, when students are being taught in what is essentially a formal English or French immersion setting. Practical, pedagogical considerations are also dealt with in several essays, in which the authors analyze various linguistic features of Cameroon English and argue that its distinctive nature needs to be taken into account when educational materials are being developed. Daniel Nkemlekeâs contribution is entitled âFrequency and Use of Modals in Cameroon English and Application to Language Educationâ; Mpoche explores the pedagogical implications of English anaphors (a word or expression, like a pronoun or a noun phrase, whose

meaning depends on its antecedent) on second-language learning; and Samuel Atechiâs analysis of the causes of communication breakdown has relevance for teaching. Furthermore, in a study that has applications beyond the Cameroonian classroom, Luther Zogang questions present-day, language-teaching orthodoxy that favors communicative approaches, and suggests that the absence of lexico-structural learning in a multilingual setting like Cameroon can lead to linguistic codes like âFranglish,â which is, according to him, âa real handicap for the communication of knowledgeâ in an academic setting (p. 219).

Cameroonâs complex linguistic history is outlined in chapters by Schneider and Stephen A. Mforteh. What emerges from the volume as a whole, however, is that little has changed in the countryâs educational system since unification; as a consequence, one topic that unites virtually all of the chapters is the need for reform. Most contributors seem to agree on the direction this reform should take: education in the two official languages has sidelined mother-tongue education, and academics believe that it is time to reverse this situation. With the help of organizations, like the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and the African Union, which âdeclared 2006 the year of the MT [mother tongue],â various projects have been initiated to facilitate the eventual implementation of mother-tongue education (p. 55). The Basic Standardisation for Unwritten Languages of Africa program aims to develop writing systems for indigenous languages; another program aims to ensure literacy in mother tongues; and, in addition, mother-tongue summer language institutes have taken place at universities, and ACALAN is working to improve the availability of mother-tongue information technology resources. The need for more generalized policy reforms is tackled by Chiatoh in âLanguage, Politics and Educational Innovation in Cameroonâ and Michael E. Apuge in âLanguage Conflict and Pedagogic Implications in Cameroon.â While both chapters deal with the subject of reform in practical terms, neither is concerned with the resource implications. Nonetheless, they build convincing cases for the need for a more coherent national language policy that reflects Cameroonâs linguistic reality, with Apuge calling for a quadrilingual (English, French, Cameroonian Pidgin English, and mother tongue) system to replace the current, bilingual one.

Because many mother-tongue languages do not have fixed writing systems, the lack of pedagogical materials, and reading material in general, is a stumbling block for teachers and students. Unfortunately, the chapters in

Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies that deal with literature tend to conceive of it as purely didactic in function, and the analyses they offer are, therefore, of limited value: texts are worthy of study because of their âmessageâ or because they are written in nonofficial languages, and authors seem to be little more than agents of linguistic reform. One chapter goes so far as to accuse authors of âmak[ing] things difficult for Cameroonian languagesâ by choosing to write in English or French, rather than working with linguists to develop and enhance the writing systems of nonofficial languages (p. 71).

The collection contains some thought-provoking chapters; overall, however, it has a slapdash feel to it and it would have benefited from more rigorous peer review, editing, and proofreading. The book is riddled with typos, bibliographic errors and omissions, and confusing and/or incomprehensible passages. An index would also have been useful. Some of the volumeâs shortcomings may stem from its conference origins. Conferences allow for an exchange of ideas and for common points to emerge organically through discussion whereas books

transfer knowledge and provoke enquiry in a way that requires editorial signposts indicating what those common points of discussion were. Editors Harrow and Mpoche have not provided these signposts, and the essays are organized without any apparent guiding principle. This problem is compounded by the absence of an introduction by the editors, which would have provided a rationale for the inclusion of specific chapters (for example, the chapter on e-mail discourse in Cameroon or, more puzzling still, the chapter on James Joyceâs *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916]). Organizing the essays by topic or theme (for example, educational history and reform, mother-tongue literature in the classroom, second-language pedagogy, and English and Cameroonian Pidgin English) would also have given the volume a more cohesive framework. In sum, *Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies* is a decidedly uneven collection whose chief merit lies in the light it sheds on the history of official language education and mother-tongue education in Cameroon since unification, and in the sharing of examples of educational innovation that are currently taking place there.

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