Our Languages

a participatory ESOL project inspired by the Diasporic Adult Language Socialisation (DALS) project

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Socio-political background

British public concern about language learning, culture and global mobility is contradictory:

• On the one hand, social cohesion is said to depend on everyone knowing English – this is a constant focus of attention amongst politicians of all stripes.

• On the other, “the economy, international engagement, defence and security and community relations” are undermined by UK citizens’ English monolingualism (APPGML 2014), and “[t]he next generation of business owners must be ‘born global’ with language skills” (British Chambers of Commerce 2012).
We need to know more about:

• How multilingualism actually develops in homes and communities shaped by transnational mobility
• How this knowledge might inform and benefit the mainstream teaching and learning of English among adult immigrants
• What helps and hinders the maintenance of first language/mother tongue as well as the learning of English.
Language socialisation

• How linguistic and cultural processes interact together to enable new members of a community or institution to acquire discourse practices from more expert members and to become familiar with the norms, habits and ways of being of that community or institution (see Duranti et al 2012 for an overview).

• In migration contexts, a language socialisation approach provides a broad, socially grounded lens for exploring how newcomers navigate the challenges of new discourse practices and norms and offers a ‘nuanced account of immigration experiences with its conflicts, frictions and resolutions’ (Baquedano-Lopez & Figueroa, 2012: 540).
The DALS research Part 1

• Interviews and questionnaires with Sri Lankan Tamils living in London
• Researcher: Lavanya Sankaran
• Interviewees: established first generation, second generation and ‘newcomers’ (although these terms proved problematic)
• Some of the issues explored:
  • childhood and growing up
  • experiences of Sri Lanka during the civil war
  • migratory routes
  • experiences arriving and living in the UK
  • Tamil culture and identity, caste, class
  • support networks in the diaspora.
  • the role of language in all of these
Part 2: The DALS ESOL project

Aims:
1. To explore the question: how far do the experiences of other diasporic groups resonate with the Sri Lankan Tamil experience revealed in the DALS data?
2. To explore practical ways of establishing a pedagogical approach that is more in tune with students’ multilingual realities and those of the local community.
3. To explore the possibility of strengthening the relationship between sociolinguistic knowledge and teaching; to investigate whether and how reflexive explorations of sociolinguistic data can enhance ESOL pedagogy.
4. To offer students a better sociolinguistic understanding of their own situations.
The *Our Languages* Project

Two groups:

- Tower Hamlets College; Level 1 (intermediate), 16 students from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Morocco, Burundi, China, Italy.

- English for Action, Henry Cavendish Primary School, Streatham; mixed level; approx. 20 students from: Poland, Indonesia, Philippines, Morocco, Algeria, Gaza, Czech Republic, France, Italy, Spain, Colombia, São Tome, Romania, Pakistan, Bangladesh.

- 2 hours a week for 8 weeks

- Planning based on the themes emerging from the DALS data (discussions in the team based on some excerpts from interviews)
Some emerging themes

• Societal multilingualism, official language policies, language rights
• Individual communicative repertoires
• Languages spoken in different domains
• Use of mother tongue in public spaces
• Mixing languages at home and elsewhere
• Language socialisation in the home: teaching children mother tongue
• Positive and negative attitudes to multilingualism in the UK
• What to do if you are victim/witness of racism/language discrimination.
• English only in the classroom?
• What helps and hinders the learning of English
Obstacles to speaking languages other than English (1): ‘the street’

- An anti multilingualism ‘mood’. Worse since the EU referendum in 2016?
- Acts of discrimination against people speaking languages other than English in public spaces
- Example: ‘some people don’t like when you speak Polish outside. My friend in the supermarket was told to speak English when she was talking to her daughter’.
- This formed the basis for an exploration of this theme: why is this happening? What can we do about it? and so on.
Speak English!
Some people in the UK don't like it when people speak other languages. They are monolingual.

1. Speaking loudly
   - Bad education
   - Uncomfortable
   - Narrow-minded - narrow experiences
   - Post Brexit
   - No respect for migrants
   - newspapers
   - Social media

   People are not happy with the situation. They think migrants are taking their place.

   They think we can't speak English or we are not educated.

   Some businesses use other languages to attract customers (e.g., Bengali in the Chinese food market).

   Some people are open to diversity.
   - Open-minded
   - Personality
   - Culture
   - Tradition
   - Innate
   - People like them.
   - People like them
   - Higher level of education - greater tolerance
   - People are more open
   - Chefs skilled to serve diverse cultures

   Some people in villages - some people old-fashioned

   Curiosity
   - Some people think people should learn about other cultures.

   Gourmet 
   - People think it's good for the economy.

   Some people think it's a good idea to educate people about other cultures.

   But: Some people are hypocritical.
Obstacles (2): the home & community

• Some students held very strong beliefs about certain language practices
• Language mixing: everyone does it but some think it is ‘bad practice’
• The maintenance of mother tongue in the home:
  • People were unsure how to achieve this: some had strict language policies at home, others more relaxed
  • Conflicting advice from e.g. schools
  • Some told of family strife around mother tongue maintenance: children embarrassed of their parents and so on
  • Which mother tongue?
• Fear of community judgement (re. English competence but also use of mother tongue – ‘freshie’)

Parents have different languages.  
They don't speak the same language.  
Their kids speak their mother tongue fluently.  
"Fluency" is too difficult.  
Different languages at home.  
Kids don't like Saturday school.
Obstacles (3) The classroom

• In one class: strong opinions about the use of other languages in ESOL

• Reasons:
  • tradition of monolingual approaches to English language teaching.
  • politeness and solidarity with others in the class
  • lack of chances to speak English outside class
  • belief that using other languages as a resource is lazy, a shortcut.

• These became topics of discussion, and some people changed their mind:
  ‘I have two ideas now… sometimes I think only English is important in the class… sometimes I think no! In my head is conflict. English is important and our own language is important’
Language ideologies

• ‘beliefs, feelings and conceptions about language structure and use which often index the political and economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation states’ (Kroskrity 2006)

• ‘ways in which language uses and beliefs are linked to relations of power and political arrangements in societies’. (Blackledge, 2000)

• Language ideologies therefore, can help give an insight into the workings of power and how language is appropriated by powerful elites, for example in education or language polices, to maintain dominance.

• Ideologies operate both on a macro and a micro level: need to create spaces (e.g. in ESOL classes, community groups etc) to explore these – and to find ways to resist.
References

• APPGML (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages) 2014 Manifesto for Languages
