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Reflections on Language as a Precondition for Educational Equity

The link between language and education continues to become increasingly complex due to the ways in which language is understood to be a part of larger issues related to identity, citizenship, and equity in society. This paper explores the relationship between language and educational equity by looking at research studies that show how students' academic achievement is affected by the language of education. Research shows that key to understanding and creating equitable conditions for education, policy makers and education administrators need to consider the implications that language choices for students. But often there is a disconnect between language and education research. This disconnect then hides the essential role of language to students' academic achievement. The paper concludes by reflecting on the relationship between language, language policy, and issues related to education equity and the responsibility of the academic and policy communities to critically reflect on their role in these processes.

Key words: language policy and planning processes, educational equity.

Элиз С. Эн

Білім алуға заңды түрде теңдей қол жеткізу үшін шарт есебінде тілдік тәжірибені талдау

Тіл өзгешелік, азаматтық және қоғамдағы теңдікке қатысты ауқымды сұрақтардың бөлігі болып саналатын бағыттарға байланысты; тіл мен білім арасындағы қатынасты түсіну қиындауда. Бұл жұмыс студенттердің академиялық жетістіктеріне білім беру тілі қалай әсер ететінін көрсететін зерттеулер негізінде тіл мен білім беру теңдігі арасындағы қатынасты түсіндіреді. Зерттеулердің көрсеткеніндей, білім алу үшін тең жағдай жасаудың басты компоненті білім саласындағы саясаткерлер мен билік басындағыларға оқушыларға оқу тілін таңдаудың қандай салдары болатынын түсіну және ескеру қажет. Дегенмен көп жағдайда тілді зерттеу мен педагогикалық зерттеулер арасында орасан зор алшақтық бары хақ. Сонымен бірге тілдің академиялық табыстылыққа жету құралы ретіндегі маңызды рөлі зерттеулер назарынан тыс қалуда. Бұл ғылыми жұмыс тіл, тіл саясаты және білім теңдігіне академиялық және саяси топтардың жауапкершілігіне қатысты сұрақтар арасындағы қатынасты көрсете отырып, осы процестерге сыни тұрғыда талдау арқылы қорытынды жасайды.

Түйін сөздер: тіл саясаты және жоспарлау процестері, білім теңдігі.

Элиз С. Эн

Анализ языковой практики как условие для равноправного доступа к образованию

Связь между языком и образованием с каждым годом приобретает все более сложный характер, что связано с пониманием языка как части более глобальных вопросов, касающихся личности, гражданства и равенства в обществе. В статье рассматривается взаимосвязь между языком и равенством образования применительно к исследовательским работам, которые показывают, насколько результаты учебы студентов зависят от языка обучения. Исследование показало, что ключевым компонентом для создания равных условий образования, политикам и управленцам в сфере образования следует понимать и учитывать последствия выбора языка обучения для учащихся. Однако зачастую между исследованиями языка и педагогическими исследованиями существует огромный разрыв. При этом жизненно важная роль языка для достижения академического успеха остается

вне сферы исследований. В статье представлены размышления о связи языка и языковой политики, а также рассмотрение вопросов, связанных с доступностью и равенством образования и ответственности научного и политического обществ в критическом осмыслении своей роли в этих процессах.

Ключевые слова: языковая политика и процессы планирования, равенство образования.

According to Article 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) (1948),

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. [1]

In the aftermath of World War II, the drafters of the UNDHR acknowledged that basic education was a fundamental right. [2] Equity, in the simplest sense, is about fairness. Fairness then can be thought of in terms of the distribution of resources and availability of and access to opportunities. Educational equity then is thinking about fairness and equity in an educational context. Some general areas of concern then could include (but are not limited to): the targets or focus of concern, e.g., children, governments, teachers; objects, e.g., programs, enrollment, school completion; and defining what constitutes an equitable distribution of available resources.

This raises the question that policy analysts and education researchers have been asking since, which is “how does one measure whether the fundamental right to education is being met or not?” And given the increasingly complex contexts in which education is being provided, along with how the nature of work itself is changing, is it simply enough to provide physical education for all? Moreover, given the reality of limited resources as well as the public realization of the politics of education, governments have been forced to acknowledge that education policy itself is not values-free and that policy makers are complicit in “devising policies and programmes which went beyond access” and led to increased educational disadvantage. [3, 4]

While disadvantage can be attributed to a number of different variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, education levels of parents and other family members, presence of violent conflict within proximity to one’s community), this paper argues that language is a pre-condition to education success and therefore, a precondition to educational equity. This is important to think about given the integrated nature of today’s global economy, in which English has emerged as the leader and language of widest communication. In this sense, the effect of globalization, defined by David Held as the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” can be seen even in the market penetration of English language advertisements for products like Coca Cola in areas that seem so remote and removed from the global economy. [5] However, this is particularly important to think about in contexts that are undergoing drastic language reforms and systemic changes in their education infrastructure like in Kazakhstan.

Generally, language and issues related to education are implicitly interconnected even if they are not explicitly discussed. When an education intervention, in the form of a top-down mandate or policy is implemented, the issue of what language that intervention will take place in is always pre-determined. Thus, education policy makers now adopt the question language policy researchers asking “What should be spoken in schools, to whom, by whom, and why?”

Numerous studies looking at students educational experiences have found that the use of their mother tongue (or primary home language) in school often leads to greater academic success. For example, looking at Native American students of Navajo descent in the United States, Joshua Fishman observed that “Local tongues foster higher levels of school success, higher degrees of participation in local government, more informed citizenship, and better knowledge of one’s own culture, history, and faith.” [6] Fishman then went on to show that “Navajo children in Rough Rock, AZ, who were schooled initially in Navajo were found to have

higher reading competency in English than those who were first schooled in English. [7] In a negative illustration of this, Dena Ringold notes that for Roma children, their disadvantage in schools throughout Europe is “compounded by the fact that many do not speak the national languages at home and thus begin primary school at a disadvantage”. [8]

Thus, both linguistic and education research support the assertion that language is a precondition to educational equity.

However, language (and notions of what language is) is situated in its own socio-cultural and political context which then complicates the aforementioned assertion. Noam Chomsky spoke to this when he wrote that “questions of language are basically questions of power.” [9] It might be more accurate to say that language reflects power while also reinforcing existing power relationships. Using Basil Bernstein’s formulation of the verbal deprivation theory and the *Lau v. Nichols* case to the U.S. Supreme Court, the next section provides an illustration for how the theorizing of language itself is situated in a particular socio-political context.

The development of the verbal deprivation theory and its dissenters

Basil Bernstein was a British sociologist by training. In the 1970s, he contributed a number of seminal works about the relationship between language, class, and processes of socialization. The point of departure for Bernstein was what he called the “local, empirical problem of the social antecedents of the educability of different groups of children.” [10] Namely, his point of departure was his observation that there seemed to be patterns in different social factors that characterized children’s educational performance. Drawing from the writings of Durkheim, Whorf, and Cassirer, Bernstein posited that there was a fundamental link between symbolic systems, social structure, and the shaping experience. This shaping then takes place through the “social significance of society’s productive system and the power relationships to which the productive system gives rise”, which was similar to the Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and cultural capital. At the crux of his argument then, Bernstein argued that, by using linguistic syntactic analysis, since class is the most influential socialization force, it was the elites (or the middle class) who had access to an elaborate code (reflecting higher level,

sophisticated thinking and communicating) and the masses that had a more restricted code.

One of the main criticisms of these ideas was that Bernstein was linking social class to speech capacity and access to language codes, reflecting too much dependence on notions of class for the purpose of language acquisition. And although Bernstein did respond to criticism and clarify concepts in his later work, these ideas became a point of departure for other researchers, including Carl Bereiter, an educational psychologist in the U.S., who formulated the “verbal deprivation theory”.

In the 1960s and 70s, urban, African American children as a demographic in the US had poor academic performance. The verbal deprivation theory took Bernstein’s class-based notions one step further in order to link race, class, and capacity for language acquisition together to explain students’ lack of academic achievement. The theory posited that because of the poverty of stimulus (that is, lack of stimulating resources and materials) in the homes and neighborhoods of these children, they were consequently unable to form complete sentences or thoughts, and were therefore culturally “deficient”. Given the socio-cultural and political issues being debated in the United States during the 1960s and 70s, one can clearly see how the context shaped the theorizing taking place in academia (which then had direct impact on how children were treated and seen in schools).

In response to this however, linguists like William Labov, wrote a number of articles using the same tools as Bernstein and Bereiter challenging their results. In fact, Labov’s findings showed that the way non-standard speakers of English (which included the urban, African American community) manipulated and used the language was systematic and did not reflect some type of verbal or cultural deprivation. But the point that Labov’s research was intended to make was that the “essential fallacy of the verbal deprivation theory lies in tracing the educational failure of the child to his personal deficiencies” [11] where somehow the one was linked to the other. Twenty-five years later, Jim Cummins further observed that

...school failure on the part of culturally diverse students were

generally attributed to some inherent deficiency, either genetic or experimental (e.g., “cultural

deprivation”, bilingual confusion, etc.). Their focus on inherent deficiencies of the bilingual child served to deflect attention away from the educational treatment that the children were receiving. [12]

What the development and debate about this theory showed was how language (and how it is theorized about in academia) shaped and negatively affected the way education was being discussed during that time period.

The *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court case

During that time period, language was not only being theorized in academia but it also became the subject of the landmark case, *Lau v. Nichols*, in which a San Francisco Chinese American community eventually brought the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1970, there were 2 856 Chinese language speaking students in the San Francisco school district that needed help. Of these students only 15% received help in some capacity. The issue was that more and more of these students were dropping out of school to form street gangs, which had a negative effect on the community. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that the

... imposition of a requirement that, before a child can effectively

participate in the educational program, he must already have acquired those basic skills is to make a mockery of public education. We know that those who do not comprehend English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful. [13]

While this ruling led to an assimilationist approach for English language learners which is problematic from a multilingualism standpoint, this ruling was the first legal acknowledgement by the U.S. legal system that not comprehending the language of the classroom would negatively affect a student's ability to have a meaningful experience in the classroom. Surprisingly however, the verbal deprivation theory continues to show itself in language and education-related policies and in teacher practice. Teachers often equate lack of language proficiency with laziness, underachievement, lack of capacity to learn, and learning disabilities. In fact, one study found that “[minority] students who were labeled as ‘language disabled’ lost ground in IQ tests and other achievement tests after three years of being in special education classes.” [14]

Since *Lau v. Nichols*, a number of studies have shown that language of education (and access to it),

along with students' socioeconomic backgrounds and resources, are all factors that affect students' academic performance. [15-20]

Discussion

The objective of outlining this discussion was to show that it is not enough to assert that language is a precondition to educational equity. Language itself is theorized and conceptualized in specific socio-cultural and political contexts, which themselves are imbued with ideologies and agendas. To this, Bakhtin wrote that “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is hereoglot from top to bottom; it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing socio-ideological groups in the present.” [21] In this sense, language is in one sense, a representation of the milieu of tensions that exist between different socio-cultural and political interests at any given moment in time. But language is also the area in and through which stratification and discrimination can be seen. Again, this brings to mind Chomsky's observation that “questions of language are basically questions of power.” [9]

If language is pre-condition to educational equity, then it follows that the development of a language of education policy needs to be critically and carefully formulated. A language policy is a “body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in a society, group, or system. [22] But by virtue of what it is, a language policy privileges one or more languages over others. And since language is often intertwined with notions of nation-state building, identity formation, and nationalism, assumptions related to the language of education have not often been contested or problematised.

But as public policies, language policies are designed to achieve a specific outcome using a limited amount of resources. This privileging of language then can build inequity into the educational infrastructure, further disempowering populations that have limited or no power in the political system. This raises the first issue. In this day and age of post-structural, identity politics and the pragmatic reality of limited resources, what constitutes a legitimate group? Or put another way, what constitutes relevant difference? For language groups, at what point (or size) could a group demand that they be acknowledged as a legitimate, resource-receiving group from a government?