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Essentialist Traps and How to Avoid Them: Language as Key for Empowering Education

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Through the monolingual bias and essentialist understandings of language in education, multilingual youth across the globe have consistently been portrayed as deficient based on their linguistic practices. Deficit approaches in education stem from a colonial project meant to silence the voices and erase the experiences of the Other, and although there is a long tradition of pedagogies that try to counteract this form of discrimination, these attempts are typically built on principles and assumptions that reproduce essentialism and dynamics of marginalization. In this position paper, I argue that it is necessary for educators to engage with non-essentialist understandings of language and multi-sided perspectives on multilingualism to develop pedagogies that are empowering for multilingual youth in Sweden. By engaging with the decolonial notion of linguistic citizenship, educators in Sweden can allow fluid understandings of multilingualism to enter the classroom, creating spaces for socio-political participation and dialogue at the margins of institutional arenas in which language can be negotiated. This measure creates opportunities for empowerment for all students, engaging them in the reconstruction of language and giving voice to stories that would otherwise remain silent.

Keywords: decoloniality, empowering education, linguistic citizenship, multilingualism, voice

Introduction

In recent decades, scholars in applied linguistics have become increasingly focused on issues that connect multilingualism with social justice (e.g., García et al., 2021; Ortega, 2019; Rosa & Flores, 2017), giving rise to a rich debate on the colonial origins of the concept of language and the consequences it has had on both research and education. According to research that highlights issues of inequity, the essentialist conceptualization of language as a bounded system through a monolingual paradigm has contributed to the disallowance and erasure of countless lived experiences of multilingualism (e.g., Ortega, 2018, 2019; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). A growing strand of research that criticizes the monolingual paradigm is based on the critical exploration of the Global South, which refers “both to the conditions of suffering and inequality brought about by capitalism and colonialism and to the resistance to such condition” (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, the Global South is not confined to post-colonial contexts or southern geopolitical areas but relates more broadly to the oppression and disenfranchisement of people (see Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017). According to this logic, inequities connected to the southern struggle and resistance through language practices in societal arenas and education can also be found in contexts of the Global North, such as Sweden, “in the form of the excluded, silenced and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia and racism” (Santos, 2012, p. 51).

To counteract social injustice in education for multilingual youth, there have been multiple attempts to create new pedagogical approaches, called asset-based pedagogies, that focus on and utilize the students’ experiences to improve education (see Morrison et al., 2019, for a useful overview), such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In Sweden, where monolingual policies have been the norm in school environments (Rosén, 2017) and political discussions about multilingualism enforce essentialist perspectives (Milani & Jonsson, 2018), translanguaging pedagogy (García & Wei, 2014) has recently gained traction in educational discourses (e.g., Bagga-Gupta, 2022; Jonsson, 2018; Paulsrud et al., 2018). At first glance, these asset-based pedagogies seem to be beneficial attempts to create equitable conditions for marginalized students, also resonating to some extent with the goals proposed by decolonial scholars aiming at deconstructing hegemonic hierarchies of language and knowledge (e.g., Kerfoot, 2020; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020; Stroud, 2018). However, a closer inspection reveals that by maintaining essentialist perspectives on language, these pedagogical attempts may instead be potentially harmful to the

students that are supposed to be empowered. As such, these models have been targeted by heavy criticism for reproducing the dynamics of exclusion they were meant to avoid (e.g., Jaspers, 2018; López, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014).

In this position paper, I argue that addressing inequities requires engagement with non-essentialist understandings of language and transformative approaches to education. The goal should be to develop pedagogical models that aim to decolonize language and consider the intricate nature of linguistic phenomena in diverse geopolitical contexts (see Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Therefore, I propose a different approach to language in education, a more appropriate perspective that allows to create spaces for student voices to be heard and linguistic resources and boundaries to be negotiated. In my view, such an attempt includes an exploration of the concept of *linguistic citizenship* (Stroud, 2001, 2018), which would allow different perspectives on language to co-exist in the educational environment. Conversely, if we continue to develop pedagogies that reproduce inequity by maintaining the monolingual paradigm as the undisputed norm, it is impossible to create opportunities for all students to bring their diverse experiences and realities to the classroom.

La Questione della Lingua: The Issue of Language in Essentialist Terms

To understand the necessity of challenging mainstream understandings of multilingualism in educational contexts, what Gramsci calls *la questione della lingua* (the issue of language) needs to be brought to light. A clear description is given by Stroud (2018):

Linguistics as a field of knowledge grew out of a colonial project intent on capturing the voices of the colonial subaltern. As a technology for constraining and containing the diversity of others, it scoped constructs of language out of processes of invisibilization of voice, denial of (racial) entanglements and suppression of histories, processes that were more or less violent and trauma laden. (p. 34)

In other words, the study of language has been built on ontologies that were instrumental to maintaining imperial and colonial power by Othering the oppressed and making their realities illegitimate. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of language has been made invisible through essentialist connections between speakers and linguistic practices. In general, essentialism is the assumption that a certain group of people share inherent, fixed characteristics and cultural practices

(Alvaré, 2017; Sleeter, 2012; Wee, 2018). With regards to language, an essentialist assumption would then construct certain linguistic practices as tied to a specific societal group a priori, ignoring mobility or change. Ortega (2018) points out that “[e]ssentialist ontologies of language help perpetuate the construction of learners as by definition deficient speakers ... language is treated as preexisting bounded knowledge located in the brain and owned by an idealized speaker prototypical of the originary community” (p. 72). Thus, in an essentialist tradition, the “mother tongue” (strictly singular) is seen as inherently connected only to the “native speaker”. Through this monolingual paradigm, the complexity of languaging has been hidden, as have many southern epistemologies that relate to multilingualism and interaction (e.g., Bagga-Gupta, 2022; Makalela, 2017; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). In this vein, innumerable studies in different disciplines have framed multilingualism as extraordinary, constructing the world through monolingual lenses (Ortega, 2018).

In sum, as part of the colonial project, language has been conceptualized to create distinctions and categories that maintain the deficiency of the racialized Other (Rosa & Flores, 2017) and that hide forms of knowledge that do not conform to the Western canon (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Traditional Western ontologies of language should be seen as essentialist, as they construct languages as separate, static, and bounded entities. By the same token, assumptions of fixed connections between ethnolinguistic groups and ways of speaking have “invisibilized the realities of everyday multilingual practices and complex social relations” (Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017, p. 9). Therefore, maintaining a monolingual bias and a focus on languages as separate systems silences most people’s lived experiences (Heugh, 2017), making their multilingualism(s) invisible through the dominant ideologies of language (see Woolard, 2020, for an overview). In a similar way, it is harmful to view language in normative terms that picture multilingual speakers as deficient and “native speakers” as the only legitimate users of certain linguistic practices (Dewaele et al., 2021; Rampton, 1990). Following these essentialist concepts, multilingualism has been construed in Western knowledge as the capacity to use multiple, separate languages, which García (2009) refers to as “additive multilingualism”.

On the other hand, non-essentialist ontologies do not separate languages a priori. Rather, they conceptualize language as a process and distinctions as emergent from communication and interaction between speakers (Ortega, 2018). In this regard, Pennycook and Makoni (2020) argue

that from a decolonial perspective, language should be seen as a second-order abstraction, namely a system emergent from speaker practices, rather than as a first-order construct, a pre-existing system that speakers draw from. According to such a perspective, named languages are brought into existence by speakers, constructing socio-political distinctions between ways of languaging (García et al., 2021; Love & Ansaldo, 2010; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). This means that multilingualism is not a singular, universal phenomenon, as “the very idea that multilingualism could refer to the same thing in diverse contexts of communication is ... an absurdity” (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 45). Therefore, as Heugh (2017) frames it, “attempts to articulate a universally applicable theory of diversity, for example, of linguistic diversity or multilingualism, are likely to be flawed” (p. 212). Rather, multilingualism(s) should be seen as contextually bound and differently shaped perspectives that essentialist notions lack the potential to fully describe. Accordingly, non-essentialist ontologies better reflect the diversity of multilingualism and manage to extend language to southern perspectives and experiences, which rarely fit in the concept of multilingualism in traditional Western ontologies.

In line with these assumptions, many researchers in the field argue for an integration of multiple perspectives on language (Bagga-Gupta & Carneiro, 2021; García et al., 2021; Heugh, 2017; Heugh & Stroud, 2019), seeing different ideologies and realities as deeply entangled and connected to each other in complex ways (Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017). Thus, what should be sought after in education is an approach to language that creates spaces in which language can be negotiated and reconstructed rather than defined a priori, and in which different experiences of multilingualism can be voiced.

Diversity of Voice and Negotiations of Language

As an overreliance on traditional understandings of language has been clearly shown to silence most experiences of multilingualism defined by southern struggles (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020; Stroud, 2018), the only way forward seems to be the integration of non-essentialist understandings of language when shaping education. As Stroud (2018) points out, “if we are to engage seriously with the lives of others, an imperative is reconceptualizing language in ways that can promote a *diversity of voice*” (pp. 17–18). What is crucial then is a serious approach to contextualized realities of language, lived experience, and voice. For example, Szelei et al. (2019) emphasize the role of student

voice as a pedagogical tool in multicultural contexts in mitigating both Othering and colour-blindness in education. Moreover, Langmann (2016) shows ways in which diversity can be approached in a decolonial fashion that allows for different voices to be heard. She points to the fact that the voice of the Other needs to be expressed away from the language of the oppressor. Deumert (2018) mounts a similar argument about creating opportunities for non-recognition and non-translatability of the Other through voices of anger, allowing screaming and noise to become acts of resistance. Thus, to allow for a diversity of voice, we must accept that experiences of the Other are not always understandable or possible to explain in the limits of what is sayable in the language of the oppressor (Langmann, 2016).

A focus on voice in educational arenas would enable multilingual youth to counteract perspectives on language that do not reflect their experiences and needs. Stroud (2001, 2018) proposes the notion of linguistic citizenship as a way to draw upon non-essentialist ontologies of language as well as speaker voices to create grassroots initiatives of negotiation and reconstruction of language. Linguistic citizenship is a decolonial approach to multilingual practices that focuses on the opportunities to create spaces of socio-political participation and the empowerment of subjectivity through the negotiation of language (Stroud, 2018). As a response to oppressive discourses of language in education and a way to challenge the essentialist nature of movements for linguistic human rights, linguistic citizenship is

the situation where speakers themselves exercise control over their language, deciding *what* languages are, and what they may *mean*, and where language issues (especially in educational sites) are discursively tied to a range of social issues – policy issues and questions of equity. (Stroud, 2001, p. 353)

Thus, I want to underscore the fact that, through acts of linguistic citizenship, marginalized individuals and groups can reappropriate and take control over the values and uses of certain linguistic resources in education by creating spaces of conviviality.

Problematic Models in Education: Essentialist Implementations

If the conceptualization of language as static and bounded is part of a colonial project, it clearly should not be the fundament on which we build an education that aims at empowerment and social

transformation. Nevertheless, essentialist concepts of language have been strongly dominant in most forms of education, which has led to what are commonly called “deficit approaches”, which “reflect superiority of a group’s practices, expectations, and experiences” to those of marginalized groups (López, 2017, p. 196). Paris (2012) explains that “the goal of deficit approaches was to eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and to replace them with what were viewed as superior practices” (p. 93). Deficit approaches have constructed Othered students as “deficient in language” (García et al., 2021, p. 205), viewing their languaging as something “to be overcome in learning the demanded and legitimized dominant language” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Accordingly, the school should be seen as a site of struggle and of language regulation that strengthens colonial dynamics and reproduces inequity among different groups of students (e.g., Jaspers, 2018; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020; Phyak et al., 2021).

At this juncture, we need to turn to asset-based pedagogies. This broader group of pedagogical approaches sees the practices of the students, their knowledge, and their experiences as valuable and draws upon them to improve the education for marginalized youth (López, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019). As a response to deficit approaches in education that are complicit in marginalizing students, asset-based pedagogies were developed to counteract discrimination and inequity in the classroom and instead offer education that gives good opportunities to student groups that are otherwise marginalized by the school system. For example, many asset-based pedagogies have been developed in recent decades to empower multilingual youth by legitimizing their diverse experiences and bringing them to the school environment; to resist and counteract hegemonical hierarchies in the school and society; and ultimately to avoid essentializing students’ cultural practices (e.g., Gay, 2018; Morrison et al., 2019). These pedagogies share a common theoretical focus in re-centring students’ knowledge, their experiences, their stories, and their voices as resources in the classroom in order to explore their life-worlds and allow their diversity to be heard.

One of the most influential pedagogical frameworks considered an asset-based pedagogy is culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), first proposed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995). CRP as a model mainly aims to criticize regular (deficit-based) education for being strongly tied to the universalizing cultural representations and practices of dominant groups, trying instead to offer education that empowers marginalized students and allows them to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1995;

Gay, 2018; Morrison et al., 2019). In its initial conceptualization, CRP was meant to be a model to improve the academic success of racialized students in the United States, but Morrison et al. (2019) assure that CRP could be further applied to students of different ethnolinguistic groups and in different geopolitical spaces. In Gay's (2018) conceptualization of CRP, she distances CRP from monolithic understandings of cultural practices by defining culture as "a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning" (p. 8). She points out that "in dealing with culture it is dangerous to assume, seek, or attempt to present a monolithic or *single story* for an ethnic group or individual" (Gay, 2018, p. 10, my emphasis). The risk of the single story has been pointed out by other scholars as well (Bagga-Gupta, 2022; Stroud & Heugh, 2021), as it makes diversity and experiences invisible. In line with this focus on narratives, Gay (2018) further emphasizes the crucial need for education to engage with the stories students live, with the most interesting ones "born in trouble" (Bruner, 1996, as cited in Gay, 2018, p. 3), which also reflects the struggle portrayed through southern perspectives. In line with the view of multilingualism(s) as individual and biographically framed phenomena (Busch, 2017; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020), stories become crucial in education that considers decolonial needs.

On the question of linguistic practices in education, Gay (2018) highlights the need for an acknowledgment of diversity, advocating for multiple languages to co-exist and be used as resources for learning when teaching heterogeneous groups of students. Despite this, later in her book Gay (2018) describes students' language needs based on the ethnolinguistic groups they belong to by essentializing their linguistic practices and defining their language a priori, which somehow implies that she sees non-standard linguistic resources only as scaffolding for learning standard forms in education. Therefore, CRP in practice does not seem involved in a deconstruction of language and focuses instead on language from an essentialist perspective that involves separation of named languages. In fact, CRP has been criticized over the years for being implemented in ways that further maintain and reproduce problematic categories and essentializing practices towards marginalized students. Paris and Alim (2014) criticize essentialist tendencies in asset-based pedagogies, saying that they "have too often been enacted by teachers and researchers in static ways" (p. 91) that do not take the dynamicity of student practices into account. A similar critique has been voiced by Sleeter (2012), who discusses issues with the implementations of CRP; for instance, she argues that practitioners employ CRP in a trivialized way that builds on simplistic

and essentialist understandings in relation to the students. Thus, it appears that the good intentions of practitioners are not sufficient and “must be accompanied by pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as the courage to dismantle the status quo” (Gay, 2018, p. 13).

In sum, the issue with essentialism in education has not faded away with the introduction of asset-based pedagogies. Therefore, we should consider these attempts as inherently insufficient because these pedagogies seem to have changed very little regarding language; they do not allow language to be reconstructed or non-essentialist ontologies to be central to approaches in education for multilingual youth. Although clearly empowering in certain ways for some students, these attempts in education often end up being essentialist as they assume univocal links between ethnicity and linguistic practices (Alvaré, 2017; Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2012).

Frameworks of Multilingualism: Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Model

In contrast with CRP, other pedagogical frameworks have tried to reconceptualize language in a more fluid way. For example, translanguaging was introduced as a pedagogy that counters deficit perspectives and attempts to describe multilingualism as a resource rather than as a problem (see García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging is theoretically framed in a way that challenges essentialist notions of language as static and bounded, instead describing multilingualism as a dynamic process and distancing itself from the separation of named languages (García, 2009). Specifically, García et al. (2021) describe translanguaging as a “way to understand the vast complexity and heterogeneity of language practices, avoiding their conception as problems and their evaluation in the negative terms of the colonial imaginary line” (p. 208). As such, translanguaging refers to the unbounded and fluid way language is used, and translanguaging practices may include linguistic resources from different named languages. Furthermore, translanguaging refers both to a theoretical standpoint on multilingual practices and to a pedagogical practice (García & Wei, 2014), and it has been adopted by educators in varied contexts (García et al., 2021). When used in education, translanguaging is described as a transformative pedagogical approach that should be integrated into and permeate the whole education, through which students can utilize their entire linguistic repertoires as tools for learning, constructing identity, and making sense of their experiences (García & Wei, 2014). Assuming a non-essentialist perspective on language, translanguaging could therefore be used as a tool to create spaces for

student voices to be heard and to involve students in the multilingual classroom. Namely, García and Wei (2014) argue that using translanguaging as a means for learning and engaging in the classroom creates spaces of tolerance in which students can construct new identities and which allow opportunities for social transformation.

Especially in Swedish schools, which have become particularly linguistically heterogeneous environments, translanguaging pedagogy has been quickly embraced and has become popular and widespread in educational discourses and practices (Bagga-Gupta, 2022). Teachers and students seem to agree on the fact that translanguaging is a convenient and helpful practice that contributes to their learning in a meaningful way (Jonsson, 2018). Nonetheless, translanguaging is only used partially in Swedish education. That is, teachers use it as a practice for specific activities or situations, while maintaining a separation between different named languages (e.g., Jonsson, 2018; Rosén, 2017), which defies the original idea of the pedagogical model. Thus, despite its clear focus on language, efforts to implement translanguaging pedagogy are not always successful.

Translanguaging has received critiques about its implementation and transformative limits, much like the critique aimed at CRP mentioned above. García et al. (2021) point to the fact that translanguaging has been applied in regrettable ways that maintain categories which the notion is supposed to avoid. This is evident in Swedish education, as exemplified above. In addition, Jaspers (2018) addresses weaknesses in the framework, arguing that the presence of fluid language in the classroom does not inherently lead to social transformation. As I mentioned earlier, a universal theory or approach to multilingualism is unrealistic and unwanted. Jaspers (2018) warns of translanguaging potentially becoming “a dominating force, a moral imperative that disqualifies other concerns with language” (p. 7). His point is that translanguaging seems to force a top-down focus on multilingualism in education, which creates spaces for certain voices rather than all voices. As it seems, translanguaging is framed as a panacea for the issue of language, which is a problematic stance because it attempts to find a universal approach to multilingualism in education.

Dialogue and Resistance: Towards Empowerment through Linguistic Citizenship

In light of the essentialist tendencies in the implementation of pedagogical approaches that attempt to be empowering, new approaches to language in education for multilingual youth need to integrate multiple perspectives on language. Not only does multilingualism need to be allowed or

encouraged in the school environment, as is being done with translanguaging, but spaces for its negotiation also need to be pushed forward. Therefore, to do justice to the dynamic nature of multilingualism and to allow speakers to define boundaries between languages, I propose Stroud's (2001, 2018) concept of linguistic citizenship as a perspective on the ideologically entangled realities of multilingual youth. Stroud (2001) recognizes the transformative potential of linguistic citizenship in education and the importance of grassroots participation to achieve student empowerment. A framework based on linguistic citizenship would respond to the "need for a perspective that situated linguistic practices and representations of speakers firmly within their everyday socio-political strivings for agency, transformation and participatory citizenship" (Stroud, 2018, p. 19). Furthermore, linguistic citizenship properly addresses the issue of language as it "critically interrogates the historical, socio-political and economic determinants of how languages are constructed, at the same time as it pinpoints the linguistic, structural and institutional conditions necessary for change" (Stroud, 2018, p. 20).

Hence, a focus on linguistic citizenship allows for different experiences of multilingualism to enter the classroom and be reconstructed by recognizing the dynamic and constructed nature of language boundaries. This potential has been explored in recent studies by Awayed-Bishara et al. (2022) and Phyak et al. (2021), who look at multilingual youth in education through the lenses of linguistic citizenship. Although focusing on different contexts, these studies engage with the potential of multilingual practices, especially in spaces that foster dialogue and voice. Awayed-Bishara et al. (2022) focus on English classes in a Palestinian school, where the students use Arabic to allow themselves to have a political voice in the classroom, renegotiating what is sayable and resisting oppressive language policies. Phyak et al. (2021) explore dialogue as a decolonial tool, showing how discussing ideologies of multilingualism in their own education gives Nepalese youth a critical awareness to resist monolingual policies. Turning to the Swedish context, a study by Milani and Jonsson (2018) shows that linguistic citizenship not only works in a post-colonial context but also in the Swedish context, clearly indicating that there is a South in the North with regards to issues of language. The study addresses linguistic citizenship in a school context where students challenge a teacher's perception of non-standard Swedish. The teacher supposedly constructs a policing practice on the basis of an essentialist conceptualization of language, which creates a situation of frustration and disempowerment for the students. The students then engage in an act of linguistic citizenship by entering a dialogue that challenges the boundaries of Swedish imposed on them by

the teacher. Milani and Jonsson's (2018) example reveals a mismatch between the expectations and the understandings of multilingualism between different actors in a Swedish educational context. Similar to Phyak et al. (2021), Milani and Jonsson (2018) also show that dialogue concerning language boundaries and ideologies of multilingualism is in itself an act of resistance and that access to spaces of linguistic citizenship can be particularly helpful for multilingual youth. In sum, if different experiences and understandings of multilingualism are present in a Swedish educational context, applying a linguistic citizenship perspective to pedagogical choices clearly has the potential to become empowering for all students.

Final remarks

In this position paper, I have argued that previous attempts at developing pedagogies that empower heterogeneous groups of students through language have not been sufficiently transformative. Although these pedagogies were well-intended and rooted in well-founded concepts, their practical implementation has perpetuated essentialist perspectives. Therefore, I have emphasized the need for new pedagogies that focus on non-essentialist understandings of language to create empowering education that engages with diversity of voice and silenced experiences of multilingualism. Following considerations by decolonial scholars of language, we need to have proper lenses to understand, explore, and deconstruct linguistic hierarchies in school environments. For this reason, I have proposed that Swedish education for multilingual youth ought to implement pedagogies informed by the notion of linguistic citizenship. Although this approach should not be seen as a universal solution, it has the potential to achieve a decolonial education that provides students with spaces for socio-political participation, in which they can negotiate which linguistic resources have value for them and how they can be used. As I hope to have shown here, linguistic citizenship can push education towards decolonization. Such an approach allows for differences to be addressed in a healthier way, creates space for a plurality of voices, and allows for language to be defined by the people involved in the communicative practices.

In sum, while both CRP and translanguaging pedagogies struggle to avoid essentialist and hegemonic remnants of deficit approaches to education, an approach based on linguistic citizenship could instead successfully avoid these essentialist traps by engaging students in grassroots participatory spaces in which linguistic resources and boundaries could be negotiated.

In this way, multilingual youth can be empowered, and their voices can be heard and integrated in the process of reconstructing the role of language in their own education.

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