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Author(s)	Ruth Wong
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THE PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION IN A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY

BY RUTH WONG

Multilingualism and bilingualism are not phenomena of purely recent origin, though the view that connects the problem of tongues today with Western imperialism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries is generally admissible. But imperialism and opportunism existed also in the days of the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, the Roman, the Norseman, and the Turk. And attendant on each wave of conquest came an influx of immigrant peoples of diverse origins into the conquered or colonized territory. The pattern of conquest was generally this: mass transfers of groups of the indigenous people were effected in exchange with groups of colonists from the conqueror's homeland. The ostensible purpose was to uproot any cause and destroy any vestige of possible opposition to the new masters. The pattern of colonization was somewhat different: a deliberate, open-door policy was kept towards immigrants, who could help to develop the new country in such a way as to give the quickest economic returns. Sometimes, for expediency, the conquerors brought together, within a common boundary, neighbouring territories which had nothing at all in common except their human heritage.

Under these circumstances, little communication was required between overlord and serf, between the indigenous and the immigrant. In the former case, the serf was satisfactory so long as he brought the fruit of his labour to his new masters; of the conquered, only the elite were taught the language of the conquerors. In the latter case, the immigrant was preoccupied with his own needs in the new country, and the government, his employer, was the institution which held out the promise of fulfillment to his hopes. Communication with his indigenous neighbor was incidental, not really necessary. Thus, through the years of history, origins in different parts of the world, became the language of government and scholarship. The language of conquest took precedence over other languages as premier language, although the latter continued to be used by the common people.

Bilingualism or multilingualism – the state of things persisted for long periods of time because discrete groups of people lived side by side, without true awareness of one another. Yet, historically, the phenomenon, where it existed, never did present the educational issues which the present century has to meet. Even where the premier language did not simultaneously phase out with the period of conquest, as in the case of Latin, which continued for many centuries after the dissolution of the

Roman Empire as the language of scholarship, the development of various native languages was possible, until they displaced it in the natural process of time. Some languages even survived the intrusion of more than one conquest language and have been enriched thereby.

The point to be made here is that the phenomenon is old, but the context has changed. That educational problems of multilingualism are seen to exist today and intrude so naggingly upon our consciousness is due to the following reasons:

1. In the past, the infrastructure for communication over extensive areas was poor or simply did not exist. The little town or village set the limits for social intercourse. Inhabitants of two villages, as in the case of mainland China for hundreds of years.

The effective multiplication of mass media and their deployment have enhanced the value of communication. In the new perspective, multilingualism is seen as a barrier to communication.

2. Where in the past, distance and poor communication afforded weak support for nationalistic sentiments, today, the establishment of a clear national identity has become an achievable goal. Multilingualism, however is considered suspect because it poses a possible threat to this objective and may well represent disassociation and disorientation of groups with differing values, beliefs and objectives.

3. We are now in the age of mass education and of technology. The one requires a rapid spread of useful knowledge, the other a rapid attainment of means which make economic viability possible. Multilingualism in this context is extremely expensive both in terms of resources required and the time needed to achieve qualitative goals through education.

For these reasons, newly emergent countries with a multiracial, multilinguistic population address themselves, at independence, first to the choice of a language position. The decision is made as to whether multilingualism should form part of the pattern of their social fabric. A few countries summarily dismiss the problem by specifying a sole, official language which then becomes the language of school instruction. At the other end of the decision scale is the liberal attitude which allows certain major languages as co-official languages, while at the in-between position is that which admits the erstwhile colonial language as a compulsory second language to a stipulated national language. The respective positions vary according as the philosophy to which each country

subscribes with regard to the part language plays in bringing national goals to fruition. At the other end, language is viewed as the most important tool with which national unity may be forged; multilingualism is considered to be inconsistent with the desire for national oneness. At the further end of the scale, the continuance of multilingualism is seen as a further exemplification of the egalitarian ideal in a just and equal society. Here, the belief is that unity can be achieved through diversity; that, in the last analysis, language is not the overriding concern where unity is concerned.

The differing positions taken with regard to the national language policy do not obscure the fact that the aims in all multilingual societies are essentially the same, viz. to achieve national unity, to gain economic viability, and to hold each its own position in a brave new world, whose progress seems to outpace its own with unmatched speed.

For the purpose of this paper, therefore, I shall address myself to the problems of education within a society which is essentially multiracial and, by virtue of the presence of a relative degree of sub-group autonomy and independent activity, is therefore multilingual. It is assumed that in such a society there has not been established any strong monolingual tradition before independence, whatever the language policy it currently pursues. I shall attempt to consider these problems against the aims, which, as I have already observed above, are common to all such societies.

The Twentieth Century is one of constant change. Along the dimension of change, the multilingual society, like all other societies, has to contend with certain educational problems which are universals, namely, those which derive from changing expectations due to the population explosion, a shrinking world made possible by great improvements in communication, rapid technological progress attendant upon the knowledge explosion, and social changes brought about by both industrialization and urbanization.

There is also a second dimension, which I shall designate the dimension of difference. Along this are the universal problems associated with differences in levels of aspiration, in socio-economic status, in experience and in educational opportunity.

Taken together, the two dimensions present educational problems, some of which are of particular challenge to the multilingual society. They are particularly complex because of the language barrier and the differences in cultural backgrounds, in values and beliefs between its member groups.

These I shall subsume under the heads, the social, the pedagogical and the organizational.

Educational Problems of A Social Nature

To forge national unity, the multilingual society cannot merely rely on outward tolerance as a basis for unity. For tolerant behavior does not necessarily imply absence of ethnocentrism. It may be superficial as the averting of the eyes when something does not accord with one's own views or values, while the underlying belief is entertained that one's own ethnic, cultural or religious group is better than all other groups. Ethnocentrism as group loyalty may easily displace loyalty to the nation as a whole and, if it develops into prejudice, can contribute to intergroup conflict and disunity.

The tolerance which is practised must be based on an informed appreciation of the other groups and the contributions which they are capable of making, while each group exercises the privilege of preference for particular set of beliefs, values and practices.

Group differences in respect of race, religion and speech can be further aggravated by inequality in economic opportunities which may in turn create various forms of frustration within specific groups. The possibilities for social discrimination then arise, with some groups securing a source of status or opportunity which other groups cannot share.

The culturally plural society frequently faces a relative absence of value consensus. It is important that education within such a society should provide the cohesive force which draws all groups together in an acceptance of a central common core of values and help to strengthen the will to maintain each an agreement.

That education is recognized as having a specific role to play in such a society is borne out by the sentiments frequently expressed. It has been described as a "master-determinant" of social change and long-term economic growth. Government documents have referred to the role of education as an integrative social instrument, as the means of providing equality of opportunity in all fields of endeavor in the country and of removing all barriers to progress of the individual citizens, irrespective of ethnic origin, social background, political or religious persuasion. Thus, upon independence, curricula are changed to provide a local content, syllabi for various subjects harmonized for all systems of schools, special courses are introduced hopefully for a quicker take-off in the technological endeavor.

Yet when it comes to evaluating the efforts made, the gains in most cases have been few and continue to be difficult to wrest out of an approach determined largely by a past experience, which has not helped to translate rhetoric into a coherent and well-defined strategy. Here and there, topics are taken off or added on to subject syllabi on an ad hoc basis in true scissors-and-paste fashion; no objectives are examined for the inclusion of certain subjects in the curriculum; no questions are asked as to why some are still taught. Subjects, such as ethics and civics are added without too much thought wasted on such psychological considerations as to whether teachers who are themselves uncommitted to the set of values, felt to be desirable for the national well-being, can indeed transmit such values. Textbooks are re-written overnight with local historical and ethical content but are hardly evaluated as to their effectiveness. "What teaching styles are suitable for the affective aspects of learning?" is another question which needs to be answered.

If education is to play a role in achieving national goals, then the curriculum for schools should merit priority of attention. The context has changed, the sentiments are new, the goals are important, but the agent of change, the school has not changed. Essentially, they have remained true to the colonial prototype.

A further point of attention is the established fact that prejudice or intolerance are largely learned by the child from those who teach him – his peers, his teachers, community leaders, and other acquaintances.

Thus the training of the new generation to take its place in a united, though plural society should not be thought of solely in terms of what the school should do. There should be an integrated programme of education for which the education of parents and the use of mass media should be equally planned.

Educational Problems Of A Pedagogical Nature

Whether through errors of commission or omission of a colonial administration, which most multilingual societies experienced in the past, great disparities between groups are noticeably present, in educational experience, in levels of academic and social attainment, in economic well-being, and in status. To correct the imbalance, strenuous efforts are made to create opportunity through schools. The resources normally taxed by rapid expansion are further strained by new demands in respect of language and significant changes in such traditional subjects as mathematics and science.

Where the language of colonial days has been discarded, the problem of finding and training suitable staff for schools becomes acute. These teachers proficient in the new language of instruction do not all possess the requisite academic qualifications, while others equipped to teach specific subjects do not have the necessary language skills. Furthermore, the concomitant shortage of textbooks in the new language helps to reduce learning in classrooms to a meaningless note-rote diet, with few books available for reference and with the teacher inhibited by his own lack of facility at the language.

Nor is the situation much ameliorated in the case where the colonial language is kept alongside the national language or in the case of multiple, co-official languages. For here, the burden of language learning, which a school child has to bear, is heavy and, in terms of the time spent on language learning by contrast with that spent on other disciplines, is quite out of proportion with the total demand on his capacity.

Here, the problem of the training of teachers gains in complexity, since it is much more difficult to produce multilingual teachers or multiply the number of teachers for the teaching of each special language than to train all teachers uniformly for a monolingual purpose. The need to entertain a heterogeneity of language places also a strain on the teacher training institutions.

With all the attention to language, the standards of language learning and teaching declines. Because of this steady deterioration in language usage; a deterioration brought about by circumstances of rapid expansion against scant, initial resources – remedial work has to form a significant part of the programme of study at both training college and school levels, a wasteful necessity, evident of the less than efficient functioning of the educational process.

There is another aspect to language teaching in a multilingual society which begs attention. This concerns psyche-social problems of poor attitude, scant motivation and absence of opportunity. What are the factors in a multilingual environment which foster language development and that hinder it?

There is the need too to re-examine teaching methods and the production of teaching materials, particularly for language teaching. Inefficient language learning results in inefficient general learning. Teaching methods have suffered on the whole from two major weaknesses : either, they are stereotyped, unimaginative and typical of years of entrenched,

unrevised practice, or, where the reliance is placed on "modern" methods, the approach tends to carry an unnecessary bias, given by the advocate of a particular method. This precludes the informed application of various approaches to suit particular needs and situations.

In the preparation of materials for use in the classroom, the question needs to be asked as to how much attention should be given to the linguistically heterogeneous background of the pupils. Should there be the provision of as many different sets of materials (particularly for language learning) as there are learners with different languages? or should pedagogical considerations admit only the ability and need dimensions in learning without undue stress on the mother-tongue factor?

It has been implicit in the discussion in this paper that there is a recognized desire to equalize levels of attainment through educational opportunity and to remove disparities in economic and social status as much as possible. To organize action which produces results requires a systematic organization of the following:

(a) **OBJECTIVES IN EDUCATION** : these must go beyond rhetoric and wishful thinking. A thorough analysis must be made and priorities set, so that a proper programme of evaluation may be possible to ensure from time to time that a fair degree of fulfillment has been achieved.

(b) **RESEARCH INFORMATION** : this should be systematically gathered with respect to such psychological matters as prejudice, fear, attitudes, bases for intergroup co-operation and so on, as well as the sort of educational programmes most desirable for the promotion of national goals in the light of the findings of research.

(c) **STRATEGY FOR ACTION** : despite five-year plans in education which it is now quite the order of the day to publish and publicise, results continue to fall short of expectations. Perhaps what is lacking here is not so much a theoretical analysis of means and ends, but a strategy for implementation in practical terms.

Today sees the opening of yet another Conference for inspectors. The maintenance of the qualitative line in respect of standards in the educational output is very much within the responsibility of inspectors. I have tried to highlight some of the problems which are common to many of the countries represented at this conference. The ball is now in your court. In what way can the inspectorate help to meet the many educational needs of the multilingual society? This is an open question which I now leave with you.

