

The Heart, Mind, and Soul Of a Multilingual Society

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Abstract

This paper was presented in a plenary session of the 2010 International Conference on Teacher Education (ICTED).

It argues that language is central to an individual's and community's identity, dignity, and creativity and presents a vision of education in which nurturing and maintenance of mother languages is front and center. This vision involves the *heart* (students), *mind* (educators), and *soul* (community) of a multilingual society—elements that are fundamental in the preservation of its linguistic and cultural identities. This means educating *all* students to live in a multilingual and multiethnic global city, that colleges and universities bring the mother languages present in their communities to their classrooms, and that community members are fully engaged in the creation of a peaceful and vibrant community that recognizes and celebrates its linguistic and cultural richness.

Key words: language, multilingual education

We as educators, at all levels of the educational field, are in the most amazing profession in the world.

As educators, we have the opportunity to influence culture, science, creative thought, future inventions, unlimited creativity, and most of all, we can guide students to envision and aspire to live in a more just and peaceful world.

If we, individually and collectively do our job well, we can raise our students' consciousness about the preservation of the environment; inequitable conditions in society; and the preservation of world languages and cultures. This is why we must strive to develop our students' humanitarian capacities needed to *change the world* (Oaks and Lipton, 2007), and we can do so by listening and paying attention to multiple narratives, from multiple voices, multiple languages, and from multiple socioeconomic perspectives. We have the conditions to do so, and there is no other profession that can make this claim.

We have daily opportunities to influence society, yet often seem to be in disbelief of our potential as educators. This disbelief becomes evident when we choose to oblige to mandates requiring us to engage students in activities focused on extracting literal facts from mandated textbooks, and later test them to confirm their abilities in regurgitating trivia. What a waste of our potential! Instead, we should be centering our efforts on the development of critical thinking, leading to the development of students' abilities to engage in activities geared to enlarge their world knowledge and the wisdom needed to envision that they are members of, not only their immediate society, but also of a world community.

Guiding students to live and learn in the 21st century and in a global society necessitates the courage to build their confidence to critically examine information we give them or is presented in textbooks; to construct their own knowledge; to participate in academic conversations on educational and social themes; to learn second and third languages; and to explore local, regional, national, and global ethical issues. What's more, education in multilingual societies demands our commitment to explore language and cultural diversity at local, regional, and global levels. We need to make students, colleagues, and the community aware and accountable for the future of mother and heritage languages, but what is even more crucial, in multilingual societies, is to engage

students in the examination of the status of their own languages. This alone would enhance our educational and humanitarian capacities to a just, peaceful, equitable, and responsive society.

We are in the only profession in the world capable to *change the world*, and again, there is no other profession that can make this claim (Oakes and Lipton, 2007).

As I open our conversation, please suspend reality for a moment to reflect on a memorable teaching moment. I am sure we all have had many of those moments!

What comes to mind at this moment is the disparity with which the media reports on issues concerning the ecological and linguistic balance in our world. While we frequently hear in newscasts and documentaries about the concern of endangered animal species, it is seldom to find in the news, documentaries, or films about the concern for languages that are facing extinction.

Just as only a few days ago, I saw an announcement in the television that said: “Your contribution of \$5.00 a day can save the polar bears.” I reflected on this ad, and I questioned, do we need to be concerned about endangered animal species? My response was, of course we do! Our concern lies in the fact that the extinction of one species leads to the possibility of a world without hundreds or thousands of animal species. When this curtain of possibility becomes wide open, we may see nothing but a desolate scene in ecological imbalance, and this image must bring us to the realization that we need to be respectful of and care for the environment. However, what it is even more compelling is to imagine that this curtain may open to reveal a bleak scene in which over 3,500 languages have disappeared, as it will be the case in a few decades, if we do nothing about it. (Scebold, 2003; Nettle and Romaine, 2000).

It is evident that the world is moving toward linguistic hegemony in which only a few languages will survive. This homogenization is taking place as a result of ethnocide, linguicide, or linguistic euthanasia (Headland, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Ethnocide and linguicide are happening in all parts of the world as a consequence of powerful nations ongoing attempts to mainstream ethnic and linguistic minorities at the cost of their mother languages and cultures, while

linguistic euthanasia is language death due to a society's decision to choose a foreign language as an official language or language of wider communication, at the cost of their own (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

The excuse that some nations have for linguistic genocide is that 'one language and one culture' provides them with the cultural coherence that enables the nation to be united, uphold political and economic power, and be able to clamor patriotism. However, what is missing in this message is that unification of language and culture means submission of minority languages and cultures in order to promote a unified political and economic agenda in favor of mainstream society.

Another school of thought is that languages are dying because they go through the same evolutionary process as living organisms; therefore, we need to accept the fate of the 'survival of the fittest'. We can also view the process of language domination—not as an evolutionary linguistic process but as a process of social, economic, and political domination. Whichever is our view, we need to be conscious of the consequences of language death (Crystal, 2000).

So what does the prospect of allowing the extinction of languages mean to the world, and more specifically to us living and practicing our profession in multilingual societies? Is there anything we can do, or shall we remain deaf to the silence that will come with their extinction?

What is the relevance of the extinction of languages to the Philippines? The Philippines archipelago with its 7,107 islands, is categorized as one of the richest biodiversity and linguistically diverse regions in the world (Headland, 2003) with its 181 distinct indigenous languages and 10 immigrant languages, as reported in Ethnologue. (<http://www.ethnologue.com/>). As educators living and practicing our profession in multilingual societies, we need to be watchful of the languages we are in contact with and know the signs that point in the direction of their extinction. At the same time, we need to have a vision of education in which the nurturing and maintenance of mother languages is front and center.

I recognize you are vigilant about the preservation of the linguistic richness of the Philippines, as shown in your attempt to advance education in the mother languages, and I applaud you. As a matter of fact, a picture of a sign that said: “

Reclaiming the right to learn in one's own language' taken in Manila this year sparked my imagination and inspired me for our conversation today.

I entitled my presentation: *The heart, mind, and soul of a multilingual society* because these three elements are fundamental in a thriving multilingual society aspiring to the preservation of its linguistic and cultural identities. The *heart* of education is represented by our students, the *mind* by the wisdom of educators fully committed to service them, and the *soul* by a community that understands and supports its multilingual and ethno-culturally diverse environment.

I will frame my conversation with a narrative about my experiences in Nicaragua and California, because they illustrate the challenges of multilingual societies. I also wish to bring forth the understanding that language is central to individuals' and community's identity, dignity, and creativity, and finally, I will provide you with a vision of multilingual education as an emancipation of the intellectual capacity needed to prepare students to succeed in a global society.

While in my Nicaragua experience, linguistic richness was nurtured by national and international political and educational entities, in California I was witness of challenges and disputes about the worth and richness of linguistic varieties, and language policies aimed at linguistic apartheid and the eradication of mother or heritage languages.

My Nicaraguan story begins with the first forums on bilingual education held in 1997 (during the passing of hurricane Mitch) and ending in 2005 when funding for the program I was working for came to an end. During this span of time I was key consultant for bilingual education in the Nicaraguan Autonomous Regions of the North (RAAN) and South Atlantic (RAAS). In this capacity, I visited some of the most remote villages in what is called the Miskito Coast, travelling by small airplane, *panga*, and SUB under extreme climatic conditions.

My love affair for these regions and their peoples began when I first talked with students who were in a normal school of teaching. I was overwhelmed by their candor, commitment to their studies, and their willingness to participate in activities in which the governor of the RAAN, Sub-Minister of Education, international donors, politicians, educational administrators, their teachers, and community leaders were going to discuss the future of bilingual-intercultural

education. Most of all, they were going to discuss the adequacy of their teacher preparation. It also impressed me that they were merely children (14-17 years old), living far away from their homes, but enthusiastic at the prospect that they would become teachers.

The night before the forum, I met with the students, and asked them for recommendations that would help me bring this diverse audience closer to me, but most importantly to the focus of the forum: Intercultural bilingual education. Without hesitation, they said: “Speak to them in Miskitu”. That evening they became my teachers, and I their pupil. They taught me how to greet the audience in Miskitu. It became a long greeting, rehearsed during the course of the evening. The following day, after hearing the Vice-Minister of Education, the RAAN Governor, and the Chief of the American program and main donor of the event, I greeted the over 200 participants to the First Forum of Bilingual Education in the RAAN.

As I began to speak, silence invaded the room, except for a few gasps. I looked at *my students*, and seeing their smiles, I knew they approved. When we took a short break between speeches and activities, they came to me, and one of them, acting as spokesperson said:

“You got their hearts in your hand!”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because everyone heard you in Miskitu.”

Later, community leaders came to me to share their satisfaction of having heard Miskitu, their language, for the first time in an official meeting. This was the beginning of my love affair with the RAAN and its peoples.

I worked with Miskitu and Sumo-Mayangna educators in this region in many projects, which necessitated extensive travel throughout the region under inclement geographic and weather conditions. Nevertheless, the heat and the difficult travel conditions were compensated by the way I was greeted at each stop of my journey. It warmed my heart, especially during the seven hours it took to travel upstream Rio Coco, when I heard people on the shore yelling, “Doctora! Doctora! Teacher! Teacher! Bienvenida!” They had heard I was on my way to some village, and they came to the shore to wave their hands. This was their way to let me know they appreciated my efforts and understood how much I cared for them and their children.

Working with educators in this region was exhausting, because Miskitu and Sumo-Mayangan teachers would come to my hotel at 7:00 a.m. with their paper tablets and pens and pencils, ready to ask questions about how to teach language, literacy, and intercultural education. We would congregate for formal sessions from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., and at the close of the session for the day, they often followed me to my hotel to continue asking and writing way into the evening. On my return to California after a week or two in the region, I was exhausted, but immensely touched by their commitment to learn how to better education for the students in the region.

The scope of my work included assessment, evaluation, training, material development, curricular transformation, as main activities. I also developed Spanish proficiency tests for students and teachers, which were used at the national level. However, training took most of my time and their time. I was inundated with a sense of admiration when I found out that many of the teachers had to travel by foot, *panga*, truck, and air to attend the training meetings, and that the trip took between 3-5 days each way. Nevertheless, they came, they learned, they were enthusiastic, and in their enthusiasm they and I had little sleep. I was privileged to work with and for them!

I was also commissioned to conduct a sociolinguistic study, which provided insights on the reality of intercultural bilingual education. The most revealing and relevant results were specific to how we use the mother and the target languages and what we do in the classroom. The results pointed to the fact that use of the languages must be consistent, for all purposes, and all functions.

Traveling back to United States, the scene was different. No federal or state government commitment to mother languages, but on the contrary, anti-bilingual movements that gave way to laws and policies obliging public schools to use only English. The disregard for the number of limited-English proficient students and the fact that this population is steadily growing at the state and national levels, confirms what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) names as linguistic genocide. At the national level, in 2000-2001, there were 4.6 million limited-English speaking students enrolled in public schools, and the expected numbers by 2030 is 40% of the total school-aged population in the country (Thomas & Collier, 2002). The policies of the federal government were consistent with the disregard they had for the education of limited English speaking (LEP) students in a language they could understand, the mother language. The fact that the federal government changed the name of the Office of Bilingual Education and

Minority Languages Affairs to “The Office of English Language Learning” reflected the Federal Government’s indifference for the linguistic rights of language minority students. The present administration has done nothing to change this perception, and the name of the office remains as “The Office of English Language Learning”.

In California, Proposition 227 required that “all public school instruction be conducted in English...and the main goal of all programs was to make LEP students fluent in English”. This mandate placed enormous pressure on school districts, in which the population of limited-English proficient students outnumbers monolingual speakers of English. Teachers were placed between ‘the rock and the hard place’: To continue to provide primary language assistance to their students and face dismissal, or abide by the mandate fully aware that their students could not advance academically. This is another example of contempt for the linguistic rights of minority languages students. However, it appears that policing the use of languages in the classroom has become somewhat more relaxed.

Joshua Fishman (1976) described well the perceptions and sentiments in the United States for bilingual education. He described it as the *enrichment of the rich and the disease of the poor*. His description fits well, as we observe the ongoing emergence of two-way bilingual immersion programs in Chinese-English, Spanish-English, and other languages. These programs have been aimed at the development of bilingualism (enrichment) for English monolingual students—not for mother language development and maintenance. The main goal of these programs has been the enrichment of English-monolingual students, but with some hope to alleviate the *linguistic illness* of minority language students by moving them away from their mother language and bringing them into an all-English academic context. Irrespective of the intent of these programs, minority language students are benefiting from them because language development and academics are consistent throughout the instructional day, and in these programs, language minority students have access to academics in a language they can understand. It appears as though dual language immersion programs have become the wave on which mainstream and minority languages students are expected to surf toward academic success.

Now, I would like to give you my vision of a dynamic, *educational, and socially-just* multilingual society.

This is a society that understands the many challenges brought about by multilingualism and multiplicity of cultures in contact. It recognizes that a singular and most compelling challenge is that of educating ALL students so that they become academically successful and prepared to live in a multilingual and multiethnic global society. And, meeting this challenge requires the fusion of the *heart, mind, and soul* of an entire community, member of a society whose vision is grounded on the successful education for ALL students and on the fact that what happens inside the classrooms begins with policies that must be developed by educators—not based on political convenience or economic considerations. This society demands that colleges and universities fully accept their responsibility of being the *cradle* and the *carriage* on which educational policies are formulated and carried toward their implementation. It also asks that institutions of higher education recognize and accept their responsibility in the liberation of oppressive practices in education by revitalizing the preparation of language teachers. **Universities can do this!** However, this revitalization entails bringing the mother languages present in their communities to university classrooms and bringing to light the fact that institutions of higher education can no longer continue to promote multilingualism in society, while at the same time consenting to leave the mother languages outside their gates. Furthermore, in this vision, universities are committed to ensure that teachers trained in their institutions are fully prepared, willing, and committed to *change the world*.

In this vision, **teachers** are fully cognizant of the difference between isolation and engagement in their teaching practices. That is, between *individual-specific learning* activities that often lead to stifling creativity and reduction of learning to literal understanding of facts, and *collaborative learning* that provides the opportunity for social dynamics leading to more vital thinking, intellectual growth, and expansion of their linguistic and intellectual capacity.

Parents and community members are fully engaged in the creation of a peaceful, yet vibrant community that recognizes and celebrates its linguistic and cultural richness. They are also politically involved and willing to act proactively for the enactment of laws aimed at freeing individuals and communities from linguistic and cultural oppression; they do not silently accept laws intended to restrict individual and collective thought and their expression in the mother languages; and they are ready to react whenever and wherever

there are affronts against linguistic and/or ethno-cultural individuals or groups, either through court systems, the ballot, or by peaceful rebellion.

This is the ideal society envisioned by the forefathers of American democracy.

Thank you for letting me share with you my passion for the teaching career; my belief in the richness of a multilingual society; my experiences in bilingual-intercultural education in Nicaragua, which illustrate challenges in multilingual education, but at the same time depict teachers' commitment to mother languages.

I am confident that, as *cultural workers*, and with our heart and soul in our hands, we can successfully guide our students to help us *change the world*.

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