SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2010-007

Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective

By Ofelia García and Hugo Baetens Beardsmore

(paperback), 1-4051-1994-2 (paperback).

Reviewed by James Arritt
SIL International

Overview

Ofelia García, professor of urban education at the Graduate Center of the University of New York, has written a valuable guide on the principles and practice of bilingual education entitled Bilingual Education in the 21st Century, a Global Perspective. García, who has co-authored works with both Joshua Fishman and Colin Baker, is an unabashed advocate of bilingual education. Indeed, in the first sentence of the book she states, “bilingual education is the only way children in the 21st century should be educated in an increasingly multicultural and polylinguistic world” (emphasis in the original). With such an audacious start, does the rest of the book fulfill its lofty premise? In a word, yes. Bilingual Education in the 21st Century, a Global Perspective, delivers a thorough treatment of bilingual education policy and practice. It both advocates for bilingual education and enlightens on how to implement it through chapters on bilingualism in the curriculum, bilingual pedagogy and practice, bilteracy, and assessment of bilinguals.

In an analogy that extends throughout the book, García compares language practices in our multilingual world to a banyan tree, the tropical tree that consists of a tangle of trunks arising from a twisted, knotted root system. García sees the complex language use of multilinguals like the banyan: both are full of life and strength. García uses the word languaging to describe people’s discursive practices; as a majority of the world’s population is bilingual, in her words, they translanguaging. The translanguaging of bilinguals goes beyond code-switching. Their language use, that is their translanguaging, is based on prestige, appropriateness, preference, ability, and a host of other factors that help them make sense of their bilingual worlds. García contends that bilingual education should reflect the translanguaging nature of the world’s bilingual population.

García thoroughly describes the various types and frameworks found in bilingual education, including the theoretical underpinnings, goals, and motivations of each. Her division of bilingual
education according to ideology, monoglossic and heteroglossic, is an important contribution. A monoglossic ideology, the ideology that underpins most bilingual education at present, views the languages of a bilingual as discreet and separate. According to García, the thinking behind this ideology is rooted in the mid-20th century notion of diglossia and is still appropriate today in many societies, but not all. Some societies, especially the multilingual situations of Africa and Asia, require a more flexible view of language ecology, function, and practice. In these societies, the black and white lines of diglossia have leaked into something more amorphous, flexible, and dynamic.

Applied to bilingual education, this understanding of bilingualism and diglossia demands a heteroglossic ideology. A heteroglossic ideology views the languages of a bilingual as interactive, complimentary, and dependent upon each other, never in competition, with the different languages having different functions. A heteroglossic ideology recognizes that students can enter school at different points on the linguistic continuum. Heteroglossic programs can be recursive (looking to restore the language of the past, as in a language revitalization project) or dynamic, such as two-way (dual language) programs or the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs of Europe. On the other hand, monoglossic programs can be ‘strong’ or ‘weak’, i.e. transitional or immersion, but they all approach the languages from a monolingual norm: a student enters school knowing only one language and either loses that language and learns another (subtractive) or maintains that language and adds another (additive). García contends that even the best of the monoglossic programs, for instance an additive immersion bilingual program, sometimes do not truly reflect the needs of bilinguals. Often in such programs, the two different languages are separated from each other by space, teacher, or subject; in other words, when it is time for instruction in one language, that language is the only one allowed. García suggests that such separation is not beneficial and that depriving students of the ability to speak their home language undercuts one of their greatest educational assets. She favors a heteroglossic approach which would allow for the students to translanguage in a way that comes naturally for them.

One of the particular strengths of the book are the chapters summarizing different models of bilingual and multilingual education in the United States, Europe, South America, Africa, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia. These chapters, numbering over one hundred pages, put the ‘global’ in A Global Perspective. They would be a treasure trove for someone implementing a bilingual education program. García’s colleague Hugo Baetens Beardsmore writes the chapter on bilingual education in Europe (an informative section to an American reader). García examines classic cases such as New Zealand’s Maori ‘language nests’, Miami’s Coral Way Elementary School, and the trilingual language program of Luxembourg. She also employs various researchers to describe dozens of language programs throughout the developing world. For all their good work, they fail to explore the many programs featuring minority language mother-tongue primary education. One exception is a program in Orissa, India that features initial education in the tribal mother-tongue and a sliding allocation of three languages through the primary grades. All of these sketches, though brief, include sources for further study.

In the following sections I discuss some topics that García includes that might be of special interest to bilingual educators: Content and Language Integrated Learning, code-switching, and a brief description of two programs cited as models. Also presented is a comparison with Colin
Baker’s textbook as well as an overall evaluation of *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century, a Global Perspective*.

**Content and Language Integrated Learning**

The Council of Europe promotes an MT+2 language education policy: the students will study their mother tongue and two additional languages in primary and secondary schools. One of the programs used to implement this policy is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This approach utilizes a second language to teach content. The foremost goal of a CLIL program is for the students to learn academic content; language acquisition is secondary. American and Canadian immersion programs, on the other hand, put more overt emphasis on language acquisition. CLIL programs aim for students to develop ‘functional competence’ in their productive and receptive abilities and enough of the second language so they can come back to it at a later date. If, however, a school wants its students to become even more proficient in a second language, they simultaneously have the students studying that language in a language class as well as receiving it through a content class. This double dose of the language helps improve students’ language accuracy as well as fluency. The CLIL approach promotes bilingualism, develops cross-linguistic tolerance, and allows students to translanguage. Beardsmore describes how CLIL is being implemented in Europe and the challenges to implementing it.

**Code-switching**

García sheds light on code-switching, a controversial topic in bilingual education. She cites Fishman, who opposes code-switching on the grounds that it hastens language shift. In an educational context of unequal power between the languages, Fishman likens code-switching to the use of a weakened microbe that inoculates the system against itself. Just enough of the mother tongue is used to help the students survive; eventually the mother tongue goes away. García, though, takes a more nuanced view of code-switching. She sees the use of the L1 as an important resource for the emergent bilingual learner; indeed the whole premise of mother-tongue based bilingual education is that students learn best in the language they speak first. But in a classroom setting, with the language of instruction often being the language of prestige, how can the L1 be used in a way that does not lead to its becoming subservient? Here is another scenario García warns against: a teacher is doing a lesson using the mother-tongue of the students, a lower-prestige language, and she constantly peppers the lesson with the dominant language. This haphazard code-switching undermines the mother tongue.

Garcia gives the following guidelines for what she calls ‘responsible code-switching’ in a bilingual classroom. First, when the language of instruction is an endangered language, code-switching to the dominant language should be minimized. Second, if the language of instruction is the dominant language, code-switching to the mother tongue should be done purposefully, not randomly. The mother tongue should not be used just to give classroom instructions, to discipline, or to get a student’s attention. Instead, Garcia suggests that code-switching is helpful when giving the definition of a word, when providing a linguistic summary, and when providing a summary of the lesson: not only does this kind of code-switching help clarify meaning, it provides an overt linguistic contrast.
Model Programs

What might a heteroglossic classroom sound like? García would claim that such a classroom would feature students translanguaging as they interact with each other, the texts, and the teacher. García observed such a classroom in a two-way (dual language) kindergarten class in New York. The program features a Spanish medium teacher and an English medium teacher in adjoining classrooms instructing both Spanish and English native speakers. During the day the students alternate between the classrooms, mostly in homogenous language groups. Yet for part of the day the students are linguistically mixed and García observed that at these times the students used both languages to negotiate meaning. Often in the mixed language groups a bilingual student translates for the emergent bilinguals. García notes that not only does a translator play a valuable role in the classroom, his or her bilingualism is encouraged and appreciated. In the mixed class periods, translanguaging enabled social interaction, made the content comprehensible, and fostered second language acquisition.

Beardsmore describes a primary level CLIL program in Austria called the ‘Salzburg’ model. This program integrates second language content instruction throughout the curriculum starting in grade one. Each day the students receive a fifteen minute module of instruction via the second language in one of their subjects (except for German). Often the target language is English, but seven other languages are offered. This model exposes students to a second language in a high context setting and doesn't demand too much of its teachers. Students are not expected to become fluent speakers in the target language; they do, however, begin to conceptualize in the second language and are prepared for more formal language study later.

García and Colin Baker

One might wonder why García would write a bilingual education textbook, considering that her friend and colleague Colin Baker, already had written Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. There is room for both books. Baker’s book is probably better for an undergraduate going into bilingual education as he more thoroughly covers some of the underlying concepts, such as Cummins’s Common Underlying Proficiency, the Threshold Theory, and BICS vs. CALP (even though García does discuss them.) García’s book is much more suited for an advanced bilingual education teacher, an administrator, program planner, or a consultant. Baker’s book covers more topics related to bilingualism in general and approaches the subject from a more sociolinguistic perspective. García, on the other hand, sticks more closely to bilingual education allowing the reader to see it through a worldwide lens. Baker is more balanced, citing research both for and against the efficacy of bilingual education. García spends less time justifying bilingual education and more time expanding and illuminating it.

Overall Evaluation

García's book has merit. It is a valuable addition to the literature on bilingual education, especially in its world-wide survey of different types of bilingual programs. Even if these sketches aren’t very deep, they provide a good starting point and overall picture of what is happening in bilingual education. She provides a resource-rich guide to the frameworks, practice
and pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment necessary for bilingual education. Another helpful contribution is the distinction of the recursive and dynamic programs under a heteroglossic ideology. In her mind, a classroom that truly embodies and permits the authentic translanguaging of bilinguals is the best way to educate them. She is idealistic, but advocates often are. Although she writes convincingly about the power of heteroglossic bilingual programs, many of her proposals undoubtedly will be written off by monoglossic-oriented educational officials. In the meantime, García has set a lofty target to shoot for.

References