Researching language-in-education in diverse, twenty-first century settings

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ABSTRACT

The two opening sections of this Afterword show how the studies in this collection reflect wider trends in research related to language-in-education policy and practice in contemporary contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity: namely, the turn towards interpretive research and the diversification of research sites. The third section focuses on the nature of the innovation in research design and methodology that is evident in the different articles. Attention is drawn to the fact that, in each case, innovation is achieved by locating the research at the interface between research into communicative practices in classrooms and other fields of research in education. The fourth section is devoted to the way in which the authors address the epistemological and methodological challenges that arise in research in linguistically diverse settings. Here, the discussion centres on three main challenges: first, the challenge of dealing with asymmetries in researcher–researched relationships; second, the challenge of creating conditions for engaging in extended dialogue with research participants; and third, the challenge of critical, reflexive work and the need to be prepared to be surprised. The concluding section then calls for research that provides glimpses into avenues for change and development in different areas of language-in-education policy and practice.

Introduction

This collection of articles for Language and Education opens a new window on the epistemological shifts that have been taking place in language-in-education research in the context of contemporary diversities. Due to the increasingly rapid and fluid nature of the processes of social, cultural and linguistic change that have been at work in local neighbourhoods, schools and classrooms, for well over a decade, researchers working in educational settings in the UK, and around the world, have been turning towards interpretive research, focusing their attention on local, situated practices of teaching and learning and on the beliefs, values and understandings bound up with those practices. The aim has been to capture some of the ways in which local social actors – teacher, students and parents – are making sense of and negotiating the changing conditions of their lives (e.g. Blackledge and...
Diverse research sites and policy contexts

Language-in-education research is being conducted in an ever-widening range of multilingual research sites and is concerned with different forms of educational provision, in different policy contexts. This diversification of research sites is clearly reflected in the articles in this collection. They throw into sharp focus the current dimensions of diversity in Scotland and England. Geri Smyth’s research has been carried out in the city of Glasgow, in Scotland and one of her research projects (the Creative Learning and Student Perspectives Project (CLASP) project) was based in a primary school where student intake became much more diverse, in a relatively short period of time, due to changes in UK policy regarding the ‘dispersal’ of refugees and asylum-seeking families. Andy Hancock’s article presents research which was carried out in a Chinese complementary school in Scotland which meets on Sunday mornings. Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen located their research in two pre-schools in Scotland which were offering Gaelic-medium education. This research was being developed in a policy context in which the Scottish Government offers ample support for the revitalisation of this minoritised language. Constant Leung provides us with a detailed historical account of educational policy and provision in England with regard to the teaching and learning of English as an additional language. He also charts out the ideas underpinning shifts in policy directions and describes the nature and scope of research related to forms of educational provision that has been undertaken over the last decade or so.

Sheena Gardner discusses research which was conducted, with Aizan Yacoob, a Malaysian researcher, in a primary school in England, where a number of the students were of Malaysian background (primarily children of graduate students at a local university), and in four primary schools in Malaysia, where — as part of the national language policy — English is taught at primary level.
Innovation in research design and methodology

The articles brought together here provide detailed examples of innovation in research design and methodology. As Saxena and Martin-Jones (2013) have pointed out, in a recent review of research in classrooms characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity, innovation is often achieved at the interface between research into communicative practices in classrooms and other fields of research in education. Looking across the articles in the collection, we see several instances of innovation in methodology taking place at the interface between fields. So, for example, the research design of the CLASP undertaken by Geri Smyth with primary school children of refugee origin was primarily multimodal in nature — the interface here is with methodological developments in the study of multimodal communication in classrooms (c.f. Jewitt 2008). The research by Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen made links with the field of computer-based learning. Drawing specifically on the principles of design-based research (DBR), they introduced a tablet app for use by preschool children and practitioners so as to ‘investigate ways of diversifying opportunities for learning Gaelic in the playroom.’ This app also introduced opportunities for multi-modal communication in the pre-school playrooms participating in their study, since a facility for taking and uploading photographs, as part of a story-telling activity, was combined with a text file for creating written captions in Gaelic for the photographs, along with a sound file.

In Andy Hancock’s research in a Chinese complementary school, the interface was with the socio-constructivist tradition of research on reading and, specifically, research into learners’ strategies for learning to read. From this research tradition, he drew on two research methods — miscue analysis and think aloud protocols. These were incorporated into a reading conference format which facilitated a three-way dialogue between individual students, their teacher and him, as researcher. In the second half of his article, we see these three people engaging in a research conversation in one of the reading conferences, drawing on the diverse language and literacy resources available to them, and building knowledge together about the ways in which the child comprehended his own literacy learning. Together, they built a much fuller account of the child’s perspectives and learning strategies than would have been possible using traditional interview methods. Finally, the methodological innovation introduced by Sheena Gardner and her Malaysian colleague in their study, built on prior research into children’s voluntary socio-dramatic play (e.g. in home contexts). The researcher-initiated role play, adopted as a method of data collection in their study, involved video-recording children engaging in role play in school contexts away from the main classroom. In these role plays, the children revealed their understandings of what counts as ‘doing literacy lessons.’ As Gardner put it, the aim was ‘to give children the interactional space to take control of the specifics of the role play and present their perspectives and concerns.’

So, in sum, we see innovation in research design and methodology in the research presented in the articles in this collection. In each case mentioned above, several different methods of data collection and interpretation were employed, with the innovative methodological dimension of the research design being combined with other more classical methods, such as classroom observation, interviews with practitioners and the taking of field notes. All of these researchers were following the central principle of triangulation of data sources that guides research of qualitative and ethnographic nature.
Doing research in the context of diversity: epistemological and methodological challenges

One major strength of the contributions to this collection lies in the ways in which the authors addressed epistemological and methodological challenges that arise in research in linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts. Some of these challenges are explicitly discussed, in candid and thought-provoking ways. I will focus on each of these challenges in turn below and on the ways in which they were addressed.

Addressing the asymmetries in researcher-researched relationships

Three of the articles in this collection give a detailed account of research conducted with young learners in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity (the articles by Sheena Gardner, Andy Hancock and Geri Smyth). And, one article presents research which involved research with practitioners who were working with very young learners, at pre-school level (the article by Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen). In all cases, the asymmetries in the researcher—researched relationships, relating to age and social positioning, posed major challenges.

As in all research in linguistic and culturally diverse contexts, these researcher—researched asymmetries were clearly indexed by the ways in which researchers and research participants were positioned with regard to access to forms of linguistic capital that were considered to be prestigious in each of the educational settings. One key issue — regarding the language to be used in the conduct of these research projects — is captured in a vivid way in the vignette that opens Geri Smyth’s article. Here, one of the multilingual children in her first study is shown asking her what languages she spoke. Reflecting on this response, Geri Smyth writes: ‘He demonstrated with this question that, while the teacher and I may have assumed that the research would be conducted in English, this need not be the case.’ Later in the article, Geri Smyth turns to the official guidelines on research ethics guidelines produced by learned societies in the UK, and draws our attention to the relative absence of reference to decisions about the use of language in the conduct of social science research. It appears that the implicit assumption is that only English will be used, except in the case of research beyond the borders of the UK.

In the case of the CLASP project, Geri Smyth’s own response to the challenge regarding the language to be adopted for the conduct of research was to opt for a predominantly multimodal means of gathering data. She saw this as a means to facilitate the children’s creative contribution to the project through digital photography and to allow them to draw on a range of semiotic resources in conveying their own perspectives on learning in the new educational setting in the UK. The children were also encouraged to use all the language resources in their communicative repertoire in their group work and, on one occasion, this led to the co-authoring of a multilingual poem, which was written in several different scripts.

The other researchers contributing to the collection did not discuss this particular epistemological and methodological issue explicitly but they clearly created the conditions for the young learners in their studies to intertwine the different language resources in their communicative repertoires as they engaged with the research process. Thus, as we see in the article by Sheena Gardner, the Malaysian primary school students taking part in the
role plays moved in and out of English and Malay, and in Andy Hancock’s article, we see the teacher and the student (Ying Yan) drawing on both Cantonese and English at some points during the think-aloud session in the reading conference.

One distinctive feature of all of the research projects presented in this collection was that they involved the creation of research ‘teams,’ the members of which were able to draw on different linguistic and cultural resources. This was one other means of responding to the challenge posed by the linguistic and cultural asymmetries between the researchers and their research participants. The researcher working on the project described by Sheena Gardner was herself Malaysian and had the same linguistic and cultural background as the children. Andy Hancock collaborated closely with the Chinese teacher around the reading conference activity in his project, and we see that this teacher occasionally used Cantonese as well as English with the students. The research team assembled by Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen included a fluent Gaelic speaker with considerable experience of Gaelic-medium education. Three Gaelic-speaking practitioners also collaborated with this project.

Geri Smyth addresses this challenge in a slightly different way. In her research with adult refugees who were former teachers, in the Refugees into Teaching in Scotland (RITeS) project, she put together a research team that was characterised by considerable linguistic and cultural diversity. The team included three adults who were refugees endeavouring to reconstruct their professional status in Scotland. In this project, it was not possible to match the language resources of the research team to those of the research participants, due to the diversity of the language backgrounds among those participating. However, the perspective of the refugee teachers were taken into account in the design and conduct of the research (e.g. in the design of the research tools).

Creating conditions for dialogue with research participants

Two of the studies with children, in this collection, were designed in ways that maximised opportunities for researcher—researched dialogue. For example, in Andy Hancock’s study, reading conferences took place with six children altogether and each of these research conversations involved detailed consideration of the children’s strategies for developing their reading abilities in Chinese and their own perspectives on their learning. In his final reflections on his experience of adopting the think-aloud approach, Andy Hancock concludes that research in linguistically and culturally diverse settings clearly benefits from the inclusion of some element of dialogue since it is a key means of engaging with difference.

Ethnographic research conducted over an extended period, providing ample opportunities for interaction with research participants, brings additional benefits. Geri Smyth’s CLASP project took place over the whole of a school year, so she was able to have a number of research conversations with the children who participated. Looking back on her research design decision to give a central role to digital photography and to discussion with the students about their photographs, she argues that ‘the extended engagement with research participants allowed for some recalibration of the researcher-researched relationship.’

These observations by Geri Smyth tally with my own experience of research into the bilingual literacy practices of young people in Wales (Martin-Jones 2011). In a two-year
research project, my Welsh colleagues and I worked with forty six 16–19-year-old Welsh speakers who were enrolled in a Welsh-medium vocational education programme. We also employed digital photography as a basis for extended research conversations with these young people about the range of the literacy practices, in Welsh and in English, which they engaged in across different domains of their lives, at home, at college and at work. Two main advantages accrued from this aspect of our research design: first, we achieved a significant shift in our respective positionings as researchers and researched in our conversations with these young people. Our conversations about their photographs, and the captions they had chosen, became more like real conversations than interviews orchestrated by the researcher. Second, by working in this dialogic manner, we were able to glean valuable insights into the young people’s *emic* perspectives on the literacies in their lives. As Cameron et al. (1993: 87) observed, in a landmark publication, ‘the use of non-objectifying methods enable us to gain richer insights into subject’s own understandings of their behaviour and to engage in extended dialogue about these understandings.’

**Critical reflexive research: being prepared to be surprised**

In the study by Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen, dialogue with the practitioners in the Gaelic-medium playrooms was a required starting point because of the established procedures of DBR and because the introduction of the tablet app constituted an educational intervention of the kind anticipated in such research. The final phases of the project also involved discussion with the practitioners and commentary on the draft of the final research report. DBR is represented in the research literature, in somewhat idealised terms, as ‘a collaborative task of both researcher(s) and practitioner(s).’ This literature also puts a premium on researcher—practitioner agreement about the nature of the real-world problem to be addressed in the research and on the possible educational solution.

However, Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen indicate that they found that achieving consensus during the actual research process was actually more complex than this account in the literature. While they — as researchers — were focusing on the potential of the tablet app for increasing the opportunities for the children in the playrooms to use Gaelic, it turned out that the practitioners had rather mixed reactions to the prospect of using the tablet app and had had no prior experience of using tablets in nursery education. There were also differences between practitioners and so achieving agreement in the short term proved to be a challenge. Although the potential of the tablet app for supporting children’s spontaneous talk became apparent during the trials, we see that some of the practitioners showed a strong preference for retaining ‘tried and tested’ pedagogic activities while other were interested in exploring the possibilities opened up by the introduction of the app. The mismatch between the researchers’ views about the potential of the app and the reticence of some of the practitioners was an unexpected outcome. Since this was a pilot project, there were considerable time constraints on opportunities for engagement and dialogue with practitioners. So, Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen were not able to explore with them the tensions between the curriculum goals of early years’ education and the pressing demands of the language revitalisation agenda. As we see in the concluding
section of their article, for reasons that are explained in cogent detail, these researchers eventually opted to concentrate on working towards the development of initial and in-service education for teachers as a strategy for contributing to change and to strengthening the practice in this sector of Gaelic-medium education.

In the article by Sheena Gardner, we also saw some thought-provoking discussion of unexpected research outcomes. Here, the concern is with the ethics of writing for publication about hitherto ‘occluded practices,’ that is classroom management practices and forms of discipline in Malaysia that figured in the children’s role plays but did not occur during the classroom observation phase of the project. Compelling reasons are put forward in this article in favour of giving these practices an ‘airing’ in an academic publication, with a view to promoting educational debate.

Both of these articles provide candid reflections on unexpected research outcomes. They reveal the need — for those of us who wish to do research in a critical vein — to take account of Pennycook’s (2012: 35) reminder that we should ‘expect the unexpected.’ Developing a critical disposition in research and engaging in careful reflection on why particular kinds of languaging, particular classroom practices and particular events are expected can help us to unpack what Pennycook (2012: 35) calls ‘normative visions’ and enables us to commit to serious engagement with difference.

In the concluding comments to her article, Geri Smyth echoes this point about ‘expecting the unexpected’ in ethnographic and qualitative research. In her words:

As researchers working in linguistically diverse situations we must be prepared to be surprised and to have our preconceptions challenged. We must be open to altering our methodologies and analyses in order to respond to these surprises.

Geri Smyth is the only author who explicitly discusses reflexivity and the challenge of developing a reflexive stance in research in linguistically and culturally diverse educational settings. However, there are clear traces of reflexivity across all of the accounts of research projects discussed in the articles in this collection. Take, for example, Andy Hancock’s retrospective reflections on the reading conferences with the children, or Joanna McPake and Christine Stephen’s account of the post-intervention discussion with practitioners or Sheena Gardner’s ponderings on appropriate ethical responses to the revelations of disciplining practice.

Those of us who are committed to critical interpretative approaches to research on language-in-education policy and practice need to adopt a reflexive stance at each stage of the research process, in formulating our research questions, in developing a research design, gathering data, in developing field work relations, in interpreting and analysing different data sources and in writing up the final research narrative. As Creese et al. (2008) have shown, the use of field notes and triangulation of researcher perspectives within diverse research teams fosters reflexivity. Geri Smyth also emphasises the value of field notes. She tells us that, in her CLASP project, ‘field notes provided a crucial space for reflexivity’ and in her account of the primary data sources for that project, she includes reference to her field notes as well as to the corpus of children’s photographs. In research that stretches over an extended period of time, re-reading of early field notes can also provide researchers with a means of taking stock of how their relationships with those participating in their research are developing and how their understandings of the participants’ practices, beliefs and values are developing over time.
Providing glimpses into possible avenues for change and development

In critical qualitative and ethnographic research, of the type exemplified in this collection, there has long been a concern with ways in which research can contribute to change and to working towards what Pennycook (2001: 8) has called ‘preferred futures.’ The wording of the heading for this final section of my Afterword is taken from the end of the article by Constant Leung. While his article focuses on developments in policy and practice in England, with regard to educational provision for learners of English as an Additional Language, his final remarks have powerful resonance for all areas of language-in-education research. He says: ‘We need research that is capable of providing the material for arguments in favour of particular practices of teaching and learning and capable of giving us glimpses into possible avenues for change and development.’ The main thrust of my arguments in this Afterword has been to show that such glimpses are most likely to come from research where the investigative lens focuses on local situated practices of teaching and learning and on the beliefs, values and understandings bound up with those practices.

As Erickson (2010) recently put it, we need to move beyond large scale research endeavours which focus on research outcomes and which are driven by reductionist research questions such as ‘What works?’ We need to ask questions that are ‘richer in educational imagination’, questions such as: ‘What does working mean?’ ‘And for whom?’ in particular places and times and, in particular schools, programmes and classes, with particular cohorts of students. And, at the same time, as Constant Leung reminds us, we need to bear in mind the historical and ideological shifts in thinking about language-in-education policy and practice that have taken place in particular regional and national contexts, along with the broader shifts currently taking place in discourses about education. It is in these ways, in these changing times, that we can provide fuller, critical accounts of language-in-education practices, on the ground, in local schools and classrooms and identify possible pathways to ‘preferred futures.’

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