Language practices, agency and identity in mother tongue education: National minority languages in Sweden

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Abstract

In mother tongue education in Sweden, students are expected to learn, use and develop their mother tongues (cf. heritage languages). The aim of the paper is to analyze how mother tongue teachers talk about language practices (including translanguaging), as well as express agency and identity construction/negotiation in relation to their teaching. The particular focus is on a group of teachers working with the three national minority languages Sami, Meänkieli and Finnish in one municipality in Sweden. The research questions are:

- How do teachers express that different languages and other semiotic resources are used in mother tongue education?
    - How do they express that translanguaging is used?
- How do teachers express agency in their everyday work life?
- How is mother tongue education linked to identity construction?

Theoretically the article builds on the notions of translanguaging (García & Li Wei 2014), agency (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson 2017) and identity construction/negotiation (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004).

The data were collected by linguistic ethnographic methods among a group of mother tongue teachers, e.g. observations at meetings, lessons and events, informal conversations, reflection discussions, semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documentation of written and other artifacts. The data of relevance for this particular study are field notes from teacher meetings, and an organized event for students (a mother tongue day).

Preliminary results indicate that the heterogeneity that characterizes mother tongue education leads to specific challenges for the teachers especially in relation to language use. The views expressed by the teachers reveal both individual agency and structural constraints that are not easily altered, highlighting the complex interplay among agency, values, and perceptions. In relation to the construction/negotiation of identities, the teachers work with questions about identities in intricate ways, moving between the demands of the syllabus and their own reality as well as their students'.

This presentation highlights the importance of challenging monolingual norms in education and recognizing linguistic diversity as an epistemic, social, and pedagogical resource. Translingual orientations can contribute to educational equity by expanding whose knowledge, experiences, and voices are valued in education. Such a shift has implications not only for learning outcomes but also for identity formation, agency, and social justice.

The data comes from the 3-year research project 'Mother tongues, minorities and linguistic heterogeneity: Teaching methods and teaching practices in preschools and schools with a focus on literacies' (The Swedish Institute for Educational Research, 2022-2024).

References

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