



## **Building bridges or taking the ferry: Pidgins, Creoles and Language Acquisition in a Multilingual Setting**

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We would like to invite you on a walk into new spaces. One of the most powerful symbols in the field of mobility is the river. We are interested in the different ways of crossing rivers through fords, small boats, ferries and all kinds of bridges.

There will be three parts to our presentation: first, we shall study the geological foundations of the riverside: for example, when trying to establish a good contact with others, it is quite contradictory that both sides should have to consolidate their starting points, within their own diversity. Then we shall evaluate different scenarios for the material bridging of the distance. The last stage – the actual crossing of the river by people - is the most important one, but builders often forget about it. Now, if there is nobody wishing to cross the river, it is useless to think about the different riverbanks and about the ways to bring them closer together. One of the reasons why the Euro bills are generally so unpopular – besides economic factors - might be that they show only bridges from all over Europe, but no people on them.

### **Let us have a look at the geological foundations of the riverside: our data**

The findings presented here are based on personal and team fieldwork of the two authors over the past 15 years:



- on Creole languages spoken in the South Pacific, *Tayo* from New Caledonia and *Palmerston English* from the Cook Islands
- on foreign language **acquisition/learning** observed during 200 French lessons over a four-year-project in several Primary Schools in Saarland, Germany
- on an alternative model of language education **as an approach to anti-racist education**<sup>1</sup>, a **project** implemented in a primary school in Alsace (France) and based on the linguistic and cultural diversity of the pupils and parents.

**Before drawing the architectural sketches of the construction, we have to ask some central questions such as:**

What happens when people with a different linguistic and cultural background come together? What do natural and institutional settings of **language acquisition / learning** have in common?

How can the contact between the different groups be improved and how can misunderstanding, inequality and prejudices be limited or avoided? A failing at the first levels of communication can lead to a spiral of aggression and to a fatal issue if the person addressed in the wrong way feels threatened.<sup>2</sup> This is a central issue for human sciences today, especially in our context of migration and increasing world-wide contacts between different populations. In a larger sense, can the improvement of communication contribute to peace-keeping and can it foster sustainable development and the respect for diversity all over the globe?<sup>3</sup>

What happens in communication between human beings from diverse linguistic and cultural background? Do they adapt to each other in a process of social fine-tuning or do they have independent learning mechanisms which are common to mankind? Are these processes dynamic or static?

Within the perspective of multilingual classroom ecologies one needs to address the central question of the kind of educational approaches that best serve language

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<sup>1</sup> This project is being evaluated by Christine Hélot and Andrea Young. Several articles have been published (see bibliography).

<sup>2</sup> Captain Cook in Hawaii, the first Christian missionaries in Futuna or New Caledonia.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mühlhäusler's recent *UNESCO Report on the state of the world's languages* gives a dynamic description of the speech communities on the globe by following the approach of language ecology (personal communication).



minority and language majority children, in order to make our classrooms more inclusive. Are the FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) models in place at present recognising the fact that many language learners today are no longer monolingual? Thus we must find ways of bridging the gap between languages spoken at home and the languages taught in school, including the national language. And we should also find ways of including parents in the education of their children, of building real educational partnership that will evolve into shared learning experiences between all concerned (pupils, teachers and parents, as well as researchers). Finally how can teachers be encouraged to adopt more global perspectives in their classrooms in order to prepare their pupils for their role as future citizens in a globalised world?

### **Let us look for some orientations that will help us to cross the river**

Our Pacific data represent a more natural setting (creoles born in a situation of intensive language contact), whereas the Saarland data on foreign language learning at primary school provide a more institutional setting for language contact. The Didenheim project on the other hand is an example of a hybrid setting where parents and teachers were involved in the co-construction of knowledge about linguistic and cultural diversity.

Creoles are pidgins that have become a mother tongue for a speech community. They give important cues for a better understanding of language contact situations as they can teach us a lot about language contact and language acquisition in general, especially through their drastic and quick changes, their way of integrating elements of different origins and their capability of providing a common ground for communication in a very short lapse of time between groups with a very different background.

Pidgins and creoles as cultural and linguistic hybrids might very well give us precious hints as to new ways of maintaining traditional linguistic and cultural features despite large movements of migration and world-wide mobility.

We agree with P.M. who says that “*A close study of pidgins as examples of naturally learnt languages may well result in more efficient second-language teaching.*” (Mühlhäusler 1986:24)

Practically speaking, findings in creolistics and pidgin studies can be used to improve teaching practice in the bi- and multilingual classroom whether it is teaching of foreign, minority or regional languages. The effectiveness of language learning can be improved by focussing on mediation and interaction. More recently, foreign language



teaching tries to establish a direct link with the learner's personality and to develop holistic approaches to learning.

There is a myth about very young children learning languages without any effort. This comes from conclusions drawn on the one hand from comparisons between pidgins, creoles and foreign language learning and on the other from comparison of bilingualism in the home context and bilingualism developing in the school context. This myth makes school teachers feel inadequate because of the relatively poor performance of their students in the classroom, especially when only oral production is evaluated.

Rosemary Tracy (1999:23) applies Bickerton's bioprogram to the field of L1-learning, she writes:

*"Children do not acquire their first language only because they are spoken to, but in spite of the fact that they are spoken to."*

Therefore, according to Tracy, children acquire language in spite of contradictory and poor input.

From the point of view of our data, we do not agree with the radical version of restriction because of the poor input. The social situations we observed in New Caledonia are inconsistent with a deprivation scenario where some people might think that children are brought up in a linguistic vacuum, just like some teachers in multilingual classrooms think children from minority background are deprived of a fully developed system in their L1 (mother tongue). They also think their students' L1 as a handicap for the acquisition of the school language.

**The dynamics of contexts must be taken into account.** Diachronically, speakers do not stay the same during their whole life – the distribution of their languages in everyday practice is constantly changing in a kind of biographic fluctuation. Synchronically, there are numerous complex strategies in the interaction between different partners; for instance between members of different generations. In the linguistic field, we have to mention the important role played in the adjustment of meaning through code-switching. There are other systems of communication in the world (especially outside Europe and North America), like dual-linguism, where each speaker keeps to his or her tongue and is understood by his or her partner from the other linguistic group: only comprehension, not production is needed for exchanges to take place in this case (Lincoln 1975).



Depending on the sociolinguistic situation and especially on the importance of code-switching, the shift from one language to the other can take one generation, or more than one. This shift is not abrupt in the cases we are studying in the South Pacific. For some time, the L1 (first language) of the parents becomes the L2 (second language) of the children and vice versa, but this is not a real hindrance for communication. So with the parents' mother tongue or tongues, the children have at least one complete passive model of a linguistic system provided to them and this is an important fact to mention. In the case of pidgins and creoles, the motivation to create a shared language is much higher than in the classroom because of the urgent need to communicate on essential matters of life.

The genesis of Creoles, regional varieties of standard languages and learner varieties follow the same rules: there is no special development for Creoles without relationship with the other contact-induced varieties. Creoles are just extreme cases of contact. In the concluding remarks of his book "From French to Creole", Chris Corne puts it this way (1999:232):

*"The varieties of Creole French, including Tayo, are no more special cases than are the overseas varieties of French or the street French of Abidjan, and any attempt to account for their genesis in terms of a prewired language acquisition/creation device nestling in the brain is great science-fiction, but poor science."*

Our data in the recent corpus in Saarland primary schools with very young learners – school children starting to learn French with native speaker teachers at age 3 or 4 – do not show an immediate action of the bioprogram either.

In the classroom settings we are now observing, with children aged from 6 to 10, there is very little production to be seen, in some cases none, after 3 to 7 years of learning. The data collected in France by Audin (1998) based on French children of the same age, learning Foreign Languages in the primary classroom come to the same conclusion. So when young children are being exposed to a different linguistic and cultural system, their linguistic exchanges do not necessarily follow the bioprogram. Some of them remain silent for years (in all available languages or in the foreign language only); others create different types of interlanguage. This cannot be explained by the bioprogram approach.

At a first look, it is surprising that the classroom data from Saarland are much more of the L2-type, despite the early age at which the learners start (age 3 or age 6). According to the bioprogram or to extreme defenders of the age factor, they should still behave as if they were acquiring their L1. There are several possible reasons for poor



performance in the FL at this early stage of learning: the small number of weekly lessons (only 2 hours), an input in homoeopathic doses, the lack of integration of the teacher within the school and of the subject into the teaching programs (and their progression) and the context the children are living in.

In the Saarland research project, the main difficulty for investigating production in French as a foreign language was the quasi-absence of production, at least during the first years of our observation. We had to adapt our linguistic measuring methods in order to find out what the children had actually learned and we went from production in the foreign language to comprehension shown mainly by non-verbal and paraverbal means.

In the same class with the same pupils and the same teacher tandem – tandem meaning that the German and the French teacher were working together in the classroom - we compared two lessons dealing with almost the same subject and of approximately the same length, with a 15-months- interval: in the field of imitation and shadowing – this is imitation over a distance in the discourse - the imitations grew longer and they tended to be more distant from the initial utterance. Free statements were expressed more often, total physical response and the use of pre-constructed *chunks* remained frequent; the subjects treated in the foreign language became more complex and the strategies of interaction between the teachers and the students more elaborated.

The quantitative research alone was not satisfactory - so we added the qualitative one. We concentrated on the strategy of code-switching and found out that the partners in interaction, teacher and pupil, with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds tended to adapt to each other through a process of social fine-tuning by using small, accurate steps in order to make sure that the message was understood by the partner (Clyne 1986, De Courcy 1999: see the results of the study in Ehrhart 2003a). The results of this way of measuring interaction are highly satisfying and we think that this kind of approach is worth using.

What kind of input do we need on the teachers' side in order to optimize the intake of the target language learner?

The question of the target, on the learner's as well as on the instructor's side, seems to be a crucial point. Baker (2001:43) also emphasizes this point in his description of the formation of a creole language in the context of a missionary boarding school:



*“(...) children appear to have acquired the vocabulary but ignored much of the grammar of the language in which they were educated and this might well reflect a somewhat ambivalent attitude to their medium of instruction. I think it would be fair to suggest that the European language was what their teachers wanted the children’s target to be rather than the children’s own target.”*

In a recent article (Ehrhart & Mühlhäusler, OUP, in press) we show the influence of the target on the final result of the learning process.

The comparison with contact languages like Creoles and Pidgins shows us that a stronger link with real objectives in the life of the learners improves the motivation for intake.

*“For the classroom learner, it is important to find a meaning in what they are learning in the often artificial classroom setting. Using the new language makes sense if the learner has a chance to identify himself or herself with the new language and culture (exchanges, friendships, excursions, testimonies of native speakers, scenic role plays, song- and poetry-writing) and the new linguistic system becomes part of his identity (Claire Kramsch, conference given in Frankfurt/Main, October 2003).*

After the South Pacific and the German Saarland project, let us now have a look at the third pillar of our bridge, the Didenheim project. It shows a very interesting and innovating approach, because it creates close links between the two fields, the more natural of family language and the stronger institutionalized school language.

### **The Didenheim Project**

How can we go beyond the rhetorical objectives of FLT in relation to education to alterity?

*"We have to admit that the fact of teaching FLs is not enough to guarantee either the development of a multilingual identity or other values such as tolerance, understanding of others and the desire for justice as is often proclaimed as a declaration of intent."* (Byram, 2000: 57)

How can we help teachers adopt a more global perspective in their classroom and begin to prepare their pupils for their role as future citizens?

### **History and context of the project (2000-2003)**

Didenheim: small rural school (84 children) near Mulhouse: high percentage of migrant population



- 37% of children are recorded as other than of French origin: Arabic 10,7%, Turkish 9,5%, Polish 4,7%, Portuguese 2,4%, Italian 2,4%, other 4,7%.
- 4.7% of children come from Alsatian speaking homes.

Increase in racist incidents made the teachers aware that they should:

- centre their project on fostering language and cultural diversity within the school.
- raise the profile of all languages (and cultures) in the school particularly "minority languages"
- give all languages the same place, time, and value
- Encourage parents' participation in the project
- Start in the first year of primary school and up to year 3 (age 6 till 9)

### **Objectives of the project:**

*"to bring the children into contact with other languages and to sensitize them to the use of languages, to familiarise the children with other cultures through the presentation of festivals, traditions, costumes, geography..., and last but not least to promote the acceptance of differences, to learn about others and to attempt to break down stereotypical misconceptions."* (School meeting, 7/10/00)

### **Language Awareness vs. Language Learning**

- LA does not mean learning a language but learning ABOUT language and languages
- LA objectives are not the same as those of LL
- LA activities imply:
  - coming into contact with a great variety of languages and cultures including school language
  - metalinguistic reflection
  - integrating these activities across the curriculum
- The concept of LA means developing language education which builds on three aspects: cognitive, affective and social/cultural: *"To challenge pupils to ask questions about language which so many take for granted"* (Hawkins, 1987: 4)

### **The languages encountered** (in order of presentation):

**Alsatian (local dialect), Japanese, Vietnamese, Malay, Mandarin, Spanish, Finnish, Brazilian Portuguese, Serbo-Croat, Polish, Turkish, Italian, Russian, Berber, Arabic, Sign language, English, German.**



The concept of LA is central to the understanding that languages are in contact within a linguistic sphere and can cooperate rather than compete.

Bilingual children can share with their peers and teachers their personal experience of speaking more than 1 language and belonging to more than 1 culture

Teachers begin to understand what it means to hold more than one identity or that identity is composite:

*"We should all be encouraged to assume our own diversity, to conceive of our identity as the sum of the multiplicity of our belongings, instead of seeing our identity as singular and superior to others and raising it as an instrument of exclusion and sometimes as an instrument of wars"*(Maalouf 1998: 17)

The competence needed for LA is a matter of sensitivity and curiosity for languages and their associated cultures whereas FLT means having sufficient confidence in one's linguistic skills:

*"Teachers need to be offered the chance to extend their knowledge and understanding of the world context of the languages they are teaching"*

(Brown & Brown, 1996: 96)

Most teachers in France *for example*

- are not aware of alternative models to FLT such as LA
- have top down language policies imposed on them which favour dominant European languages
- have limited knowledge of what it's like to learn through an L2 and of bilingualism
- still see outside cultural influences as a threat to national identity
- find it difficult to press for changes.

**But teachers do find solutions:**

- The teachers in Didenheim went further than **acknowledging** linguistic and cultural diversity.
- They used this diversity as a **resource** for anti-racist education, based on **acceptance of differences** to educate for **tolerance** and **equality**.
- They acknowledged and legitimised parents' + children's knowledge of languages.
- They did not single out "minority" languages and cultures but **included** them within a wide variety.
- They built an educational partnership with parents.



- They developed a collaborative approach where knowledge was co-constructed between all participants.

(VIDEO)

The children showed they wanted to understand more about language(s) and related cultures.

**Examples of their questions:**

- *"Why is Alsatian a dialect and not a language?"*
- *"Is French a language then?"*
- *"Why do Vietnamese people not have the same skin colour?"*
- *"It's funny how Vietnamese has so many different accents, why is there a dot below and an accent on top?"*
- *"What is the accent of Japanese people?"*
- *"Do all family names in Alsatian have meaning?"*
- *"Is it hard to learn French when you are Chinese?"*
- *"Are there pupils' delegates in Finnish schools?"*
- *"How do you say 'to love' in Russian?"*
- *"Is Russia a beautiful country?"*
- *How do you manage when you are deaf with the phone, the television etc?*
- *Is Sign language the same all over the world?*
- *Does one read Berber from right to left as in Arabic?*

The Didenheim project is an example of innovative practice to combat racism, intolerance and hatred.

Nom del diàleg: Diversitat lingüística, sostenibilitat i pau  
Data: 21 Maig  
Sessió: Balanç de la recerca sociolingüística actual

Ponent: Sabine Ehrhart & Christine Helot



As Moro writes (2002: 181):

*"Racism is not inescapable but it lurches within each one of us, individually and collectively, in a more or less active way. Therefore there is a real need to spot it, to track it down, and to learn to decentre... One does not fight racism with good intentions and crusades invoking the sacred fetishes of human rights, democracy, universalism or of the power of reason could well be hiding the guilt of the western world under the wish to have the last word. What is necessary and a never ending process is to decolonise oneself... Racism is fundamentally a form of violence against people which should be eradicated not with inefficient finer feelings but with audacious ideas, pedagogical innovations, respect of parents' cultures in schools, new modes of prevention and care, .... a reflection which integrates real obstacles rather than denying them."*

## **Conclusions**