Rethinking foreign language teaching in the UK: what curriculum for a multi-ethnic society?

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One of the contributions of foreign-language teaching to pupils' education is to introduce them to and help them understand 'otherness'. Whether it be in linguistic or cultural terms, learners are confronted with the language of other people, their culture, and their way of thinking and dealing with the world. This has been articulated most recently in the United Kingdom by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI 1987:4), but has long been a fundamental belief of most language teachers. Since the introduction of 'modern' languages into the curriculum in the nineteenth century, 'other people' has meant 'foreigners' in the simplest sense of the term: people 'born in another country' (Oxford English Dictionary). Today, however, there are many situations where people born in the same country are nonetheless perceived to be ethnically foreign. 'Otherness' is a feature of any society which contains more than one ethnic group and, usually as a consequence, more than one natively spoken language.

The obvious conceptual link between multicultural education – viewed as an attempt to help young people to come to terms with otherness within the society they consider their own – and foreign language teaching, which has always intended to create understanding and tolerance of others, has only recently been forged in Britain. Let it be said immediately that the young people of any Western country who need to come to terms with otherness in their own society are not just 'the majority', but also those who are 'the minorities', those born of relatively recent immigration, whether 'black' or not, whether with roots in former colonies, Eastern Europe or the Mediterranean countries, whether of pre- or post-war immigration.

One reason why the link was not more readily forged is because 'foreign' languages have an established tradition of separate academic respectability untouched by new curricular developments. The study of languages spoken by immigrants, however, is so exotic – conducted in less familar specialized institutes of higher education – and so beyond the horizons of most learners that it has no impact on the views of most people in secondary education, whether pupils or teachers. Furthermore, the study of other languages and people outside the national boundaries has so far been conducted in ways and for purposes which are not susceptible of being immediately turned to this new focus. The conceptual link is not mirrored at the methodological and philosophical level.

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Otherness in people who are by definition 'foreign' to us is not a threat to our identity. It is indeed a means of maintaining our identity, for this is not made up of inherently definable characteristics. It is made up of contrasts with those whom we consider different from us (Barth 1969). Otherness within our national geographical boundaries, however, requires a redefinition of national identity which can be painful, and may therefore be ignored for as long as possible. At another level, the techniques and methods of foreign language learning have been developed on the assumption that the foreign language is spoken in distant parts. In general all exposure to the language has to take place within the classroom; all authentic use of the language has to be imported in the form of written, audio or visual recordings, or at best in the form of a specially imported native speaker – the language assistant.

Where the foreign language is English, however, its status as an international language does mean greater exposure through the news and entertainment media, particularly in small countries such as Denmark and The Netherlands. Yet whatever the language, learners are taken only infrequently, at the expense of effort and money, to visit the foreign country and experience the foreign language in its normal habitat. The learning of a language spoken within national boundaries, by people who live in the same street, or indeed are sitting in the same classroom, requires modification of the foreign language teacher's assumptions and methods, and foreign language teachers are not trained in methods appropriate to second language teaching, that is, where the language to be learned is easily available to the learners outside the classroom. Foreign language teaching is not second language teaching, methodologically speaking, irrespective of whether the educational purposes of both are similar. However, language teachers have been so concerned with methodological problems that they have tended to lose sight of educational purposes, and thus the nature of the link between foreign language teaching and the teaching of 'community' languages and cultures has not been discussed.

That has been the position, too, among those who are charged with making educational policy for foreign language teaching. As recently as 1977 in Britain, Her Majesty's Inspectorate's account of 'the contribution of modern language studies to the curriculum' spoke only of 'the people and culture of another country', of meeting foreigners at home or travelling abroad. In national terms, there is mention only of 'the development of international relationships', and of 'understanding of the unfamiliar', but not within national boundaries (HMI 1977: 68). By 1981, however, the ministers in charge of education in England and Wales began to ask questions about modern language provision, one of which was formulated as follows:

> Far more pupils than in the past now have a first language which is not English or Welsh. This constitutes a valuable resource, for them and for the nation. How should mother tongue teaching for such pupils be accommodated within modern language provision so that this resource does not wither away and the pupils may retain contacts with their own communities? (DES 1981: 16)

This question is yet to be answered by the ministers concerned. In a further consultative document (DES 1984: 1) they have suggested that all varieties of language learning – including 'mother tongue learning' – should 'not be kept separate from each other or from modern language learning in the minds of pupils, nor in the policies of schools and local education authorities'. This negative formulation remains, however, without significance, as does the Inspectorate's more recent statement on the curriculum, where it is claimed that 'the fact that many children from ethnic minority groups speak two languages, English at school and another language at home, can help create a context of reality for work in foreign languages'

(HMI 1985: 23). What 'context of reality' might mean remains unclear. The most recent draft policy statement by the ministers leaves the whole issue still open, saying that it was too complex to deal with in the present statement and that a further consultative document would be published later (DES 1986: 4).

The most decisive recommendation has in fact come, not from those concerned primarily with foreign language teaching, but from the Swann Committee Report – *Education for All* (1985) – concerned with the education of children from ethnic minorities (Swann 1985). Having rejected the introduction of bilingual education as a means of maintaining 'ethnic minority community languages', the Swann Report states quite firmly that mother tongue provision should take place within the foreign language area of the curriculum. The report claims that there is an 'artificial distinction which has been drawn in secondary schools between what are generally termed modern or foreign languages and ethnic minority community languages'. It suggests that the pre-eminence of French and German should be challenged in 'today's interdependent world and within our own multilingual environment' and that two kinds of learner can be identified:

> Within the context of *Education for All*, we believe it is entirely right for a white English speaking pupil to study an ethnic minority community language as a valid and integral part of his education. For a bilingual pupil, we believe it is only reasonable to expect that he should be able to study for a qualification in a language in which he has some facility. (Swann 1985: 409)

This view, based on what is 'right' and 'reasonable', begs nonetheless a large number of questions – from the issues of methodology, through those of a language's status in the linguistic market place, to those arising from teaching both kinds of pupil in the same classroom and with the same educational purposes in mind. The report fails to recognize the crucial distinction between foreign and second languages for the 'white English speaking pupil' and the distinction between mother tongue and second or foreign language teaching for the 'bilingual pupil [who] ... has some facility'. To argue that 'facility, or even a qualification, in a community language should be seen as providing any young person with a skill of direct relevance to work in areas of ethnic minority settlement in fields such as social services, nursing and education' is to turn too quickly to fashionable terms such as skill and relevance, and to talk too easily of the applications before considering some more fundamental issues of purpose and role for minority languages.

The Swann Report was not an official policy document but the report of a committee appointed by the minister responsible for education, the Secretary of State for Education and Science. In presenting the report to parliament the Secretary of State said:

> The Government is firmly committed to the principle that all children, irrespective of race, colour or ethnic origin, should have a good education which develops their abilities and aptitudes to the full and brings about a true sense of belonging to Britain. The Committee's report explores in detail how this principle may be made good, marshalling in the process a mass of evidence. (Swann 1985: Foreword)

In the British education system this is the nearest thing to a formal policy statement on curriculum as yet available and the Swann Report thus represents the current policy approach in a highly decentralized system. Discussion of the whole range of foreign language teaching in the British context has currently to take this as the base line.

In order to clarify what the nature of this policy is, it is helpful to look at international comparisons. Churchill (1986) has described and analysed policy-

making for linguistic and cultural minorities in OECD countries. He suggests there is a gradation of increasingly sophisticated responses, as the complexity of the relationship between language, other socio-cultural factors and the nature of education provision is recognized. In Stage 1 'Learning deficit', learning problems associated with minority languages are said to be comparable with those created by mental retardation or similar learning handicaps. Having a different mother tongue is a 'deficiency'. This deficit approach becomes more refined in the following three stages identified by Churchill, as links with social status, affective consequences and cultural differences are recognized. Essentially the policy response is nonetheless the same: to provide instruction in the majority language, perhaps accompanied by 'multicultural' programmes to sensitize majority language speakers to the culture of the minority and to provide minority language speakers with some formal education in their own culture. Further, minority language instruction is provided, in Stage 4, as a subject in the school curriculum – and occasionally as a medium of instruction – because the loss of the language may be a cause of learning problems, for cognitive or affective reasons. The purpose is, however, still to treat individuals as deficient and to make up the deficiency by whatever means are deemed necessary, including minority language instruction.

There is a sharp distinction between these kinds of policy response and those in Churchill's Stages 5 and 6. The essential difference in these stages is the recognition of the right of the minority to long-term survival; moreover, the weaker position of minority members in education is recognized and support for the minority group provided. In this case the minority language is used as a medium of instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling, and the majority language introduced in late primary education. Only in Stage 6 is the minority language assumed to have equal rights in all spheres of public life, with extra support provided for the minority language where necessary. Stages 5 and 6 have been attained in the Western world only by politically powerful groups sometimes prepared to use violence in their struggle: in Britain the Welsh, in Finland Swedish speakers, in Italy the Germans, and so on. These are defined by Churchill as 'established' minorities.

The Swann Report and the Secretary of State's statement are quite firmly within the continuum of the first four stages, for, although the Swann Report speaks in favour of the maintenance of minority languages, it sees this as 'best achieved within the ethnic minority communities themselves rather than within mainstream schools' (Swann 1985: 406), an approach which is supported by teaching the languages as subjects in secondary schools. Secondly, the report equates the language needs of minority language speakers with those of all pupils whose learning is at risk because of other kinds of linguistic problem: 'In many respects, ethnic minority children's language needs serve to highlight the need for positive action to be taken to enhance the quality of the language education provided for all pupils' (Swann 1985: 385). Although there is no explicit use of the terminology of deficit, the assumptions identified by Churchill are clear enough. The 'language outlook', as Churchill puts it, for the minority language as a consequence of deficit policies is that the language will be lost, with minority speakers transferring their allegiance to the majority language as soon as possible, and at the most within one or two generations.

There is, however, a further complicating factor. The implication of the Swann Report's recommendations is that a deficit transitional approach can be operated within the education system whilst a maintenance policy is carried out by each minority in some form of supplementary primary schooling crowned with a

qualification obtained in the foreign language department in secondary school. This combination of transition with maintenance policy does not fit neatly into Churchill's scheme and is unique among OECD countries. It is a policy which is nonetheless essentially transitional because it leads to the replacement of the minority language by the majority language.

What the Swann Report fails to do is to give adequate consideration to the role language plays in ethnic identity. The committee says they are '"for" mother tongue in the value which we attach to fostering the linguistic, religious and cultural identities of ethnic minority communities'. By like token 'we applaud the way in which schools in our three National Regions – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – have helped preserve a national identity within a United Kingdom' (Swann 1985: 406). Yet they dismiss the possible linguistic comparison with Wales at an earlier point in their argument and say that the provision of Welsh through bilingual education in Wales is irrelevant to new minorities. Despite this statement, the example of Wales demonstrates precisely how much an ethnic group does require a linguistic identity to fulfil and mark its ethnic identity. As Churchill points out, it is widely recognized that minority languages need more support than majority languages within the education system if they are to survive. To give them less support is equivalent to encouraging their demise, and thereby undermining one of the most important dimensions of ethnic identity. In so far as the Swann Report offers little general support for 'ethnic identity' (put in quotation marks by the report), this attitude to language is not surprising. For although the report acknowledges the significance of ethnic identity, it implies that this has to be subordinated to 'corporate identity', a concept which the report appears to recognize as its own invention by putting it in quotation marks. On the one hand the report says: 'Membership of a particular ethnic group is...one of the most important aspects of an individual's identity – in how he or she perceives him or herself and in how he or she is perceived by others.' On the other hand it goes on to play down the importance of ethnic identity to the self and shift emphasis to the other: 'It would nevertheless be...naive in our opinion to deny the crucial role which ethnicity, *perhaps particularly in the 'eye of the beholder'*, can play in determining an individual's place in society' (emphasis added). And having made that shift, the next stage is to emphasize the importance of 'corporate identity' over all others: 'Whilst individuals may belong to different groups of various kinds they are in addition also part of the wider national society by virtue of a range of common shared characteristics, such as a common language and a common political and legal system, which, taken together, give that society a degree of unity and its members a form of "corporate membership"' (Swann 1985: 3–4). It is thus evident that language is to be used to unify the nation, and minority languages and ethnic identities are deemed a threat to national unity, not to be encouraged and supported by the education system.

However, this implicitly assimilationist policy will not necessarily succeed in eliminating languages and identities in the time span suggested by Churchill, that is one or two generations. As Edwards (1977: 262) points out, language no longer used for communicative purposes on a daily basis in a minority can survive much longer through symbolic usage, often connected with religious institutions. Furthermore, Haarmann argues that though language is a basic criterion of ethnicity it is not decisive: there are settings (e.g. some Jewish communities) where the ethnic minority has been assimilated linguistically to the majority and where ethnic identity is marked by religious and other cultural patterns (Haarmann 1986: 261). The

strength and diversity of religious beliefs among many British minorities may well be sufficient to sustain their ethnic identity without linguistic support – or at best with the language used only symbolically and maintained symbolically in supplementary schools.

However, whatever the future may hold, it is evident that minority languages have a particular relationship to ethnic identity in a way not adequately recognized by the Swann Report. It is not surprising, therefore, that the only kind of formal curriculum recognition of minority languages suggested by the report is to equate them inappropriately and without discrimination with foreign languages. Indeed, as quoted above, the report suggests that any distinction is 'artificial', that white English-speaking pupils should study a minority language on the same basis as a foreign language, that a bilingual pupil should acquire a qualification in his/her language on the same basis, and that the ultimate justification for all this should be 'providing any young person with a skill of direct relevance to work in areas of ethnic minority settlement in fields such as social services, nursing and education'. Thus the Swann Report wants to assimilate minority languages to the instrumental, utilitarian view of foreign language teaching.

The objections to this position can be summarized as follows. The instrumental, skill-oriented view of minority languages completely distorts the meaning of the language for a member of the minority; it is divorced from the issue of identity. Second, the instrumental view of foreign language teaching in general is narrow and, as a sole justification, indefensible; it does not take account of the educational purposes of the teaching of languages spoken outside the national frontiers. Third, the meanings and purposes of minority languages for their speakers and of foreign languages for monolingual British pupils are quite different. Therefore, to place the two kinds of pupil in the same language-learning setting creates problems because of this clash of purposes, even if the minority language could serve the same purpose as a foreign language for the monolingual pupil. As a consequence, there would be a clash of methods, too, and Tosi (1986) argues that to transfer foreign language teaching methods to minority language teaching for bilingual pupils is quite misguided.

The question which now arises is whether a minority language could in fact have the same position and purpose as a foreign language in the curriculum of monolingual pupils, assuming that the clash just mentioned is overcome. If not, the second question would be what other and new role there might be for minority language teaching for monolingual English speakers and how that might relate both to foreign language teaching and to minority language teaching for bilingual pupils.

The choice of which minority language should be offered to English mono-linguals would be determined by the social context. The reason for choosing a minority language rather than a foreign language is based on the argument that by so doing there will be greater recognition of the role of minority languages within the national identity. It would therefore be unreasonable to choose a minority language spoken elsewhere in Britain but not in the vicinity of the school, for this would defeat the purpose of bringing pupils into closer contact with their own linguistic environment. To teach modern Greek in the north-west of England would be to teach a foreign, not a minority language, even though there are Greek communities in London.

Let us now consider our first question. In linguistic terms, a local minority language can serve the same educational purposes as a foreign language. The

experience of speaking a different language, of experiencing familiar concepts in different linguistic terms and thereby gaining some new linguistic insight, is in principle the same. The realization that language is arbitrary, that others speak different languages and not simply different codes of English, may even be more profound when the language differences are greater between English and non-European minority languages than they are between English and the closely related and commonly taught languages such as French or German. Similarly, where the experience of what appear to be familiar concepts is made more strange by cultural differences, the minority language would be at least as appropriate as a foreign language. It is through the realization that the foreign language does not embody an exactly identical concept, and that the concept has to be understood within a web of cultural meanings, that learners begin to gain linguistic and cultural insight.

If, therefore, the minority language were taught in the context of the culture of origin, with reference to the country of emigration – for example Greece or Pakistan – then the function would be comparable to that of introducing pupils to a different European culture. Moreover, the more exotic, in English eyes, the culture and country, the more effective the learning might be, in terms of creating linguistic and cultural contrasts from which to relativize the learner's own language and culture. On the other hand it may be that a too 'distant' culture creates insurmountable barriers for pupils in secondary schools, particularly given the practical difficulties of bringing them into direct contact with geographically distant countries. Furthermore, this approach would also be contrary to the main argument for replacing foreign by minority languages, that is to create greater understanding of minority cultures in the learners' immediate experience, for the culture – and increasingly also the language – of the country of origin is not the same as that of the minority living in Britain. The culture imported by a generation of immigrants is gradually adapted and modified through their experience of the new culture. As a new generation is born they acquire a cultural identity which is a consequence of modification and a language which reflects and articulates the immigrant minority culture. The minority language and culture differ from those of the country of origin, which can be properly described as 'foreign'. They also differ in kind from other foreign languages and cultures.

The nature of that difference is rooted in the modifications which have to be made as a culture becomes a minority culture. Barth's (1969) analysis of minority situations suggests that the most significant factor is that within any social system activities significant for the whole society are organized in terms of status positions open to members of the majority, whereas status positions open to members of the minority are significant only in terms of minority activities. Although there are status positions in majority institutions which are valued by members of majority and minority alike, they are not available to members of the minority except on majority-defined terms: interaction between minority and majority members 'takes place entirely within the framework of the dominant majority group's statuses and institutions, where identity as a minority member gives no basis for action' (Barth 1969: 31). Thus those areas of social activity where the minority member does have a role to play do not impinge upon the total social system, upon the life of the majority. They happen, as Barth says, 'backstage', out of sight and hidden from criticism by the majority, for example behind the closed doors of the home, the mosque or the sports and social club. Minority languages are thus part of 'backstage' cultures, except in those rare cases where they are given equal status with majority languages,

as described by Churchill's Stage 6. Given that British minority languages are unlikely to attain equal status, it follows that to teach a minority language and culture is different from teaching a foreign majority language and culture. It is in a sense a 'reduced' culture and the language is similarly 'reduced' because it does not articulate all the sectors of societal activity as a foreign language in its own society does. Thus it would not be possible to expose learners to a complete and identifiably separate societal culture in the way that this is possible by taking them to a foreign country. This is not to say that introducing them to those backstage sectors which are articulated in a minority language is not worthwhile, but rather that it is different in nature.

Furthermore, this conceptual difference is easier to make practically visible and comprehensible to learners because of the geographical separation of a foreign culture from the learners' own, for, although conceptually and in practice the boundaries which separate minority from majority sectors of social life are real enough, they are not always apparent to those involved and not easily visible to learners. It is, for example, easier to give pupils recognizable experience of French culture by taking them to France than it is to expose them to a minority culture, for even though the geographical distance is much greater, the fact that a minority culture is 'backstage' makes it less accessible to majority learners.

There is, however, a weakness in Barth's analysis, and this lies in the impression he gives that minorities cannot acquire statuses and institutions valued by all members of a society irrespective of majority or minority membership. Churchill points out that 'established' minorities can do so, particularly where legal support is given. In practice, immigrant minorities may also establish their own institutions. When a minority does break through to be 'frontstage', to establish parallel statuses and institutions to those of the majority, then the language situation begins to be comparable with that of a majority foreign language. However, without legal support and public recognition, the standing of minority cultures and languages remains low. Indeed, the whole argument for or against teaching minority languages to English monolinguals has at some point to encompass the issue of public attitudes to low-status languages, an issue which the Swann Report ignores and which has here been put in abeyance whilst clarifying the nature of the relationship between 'minority' and 'foreign' language and culture. That issue has now to be met in the discussion of what other purposes there might be in minority language teaching, if they cannot replace foreign languages.

Were majority pupils to learn a local minority language, they would begin to experience the concepts of a different culture, as in foreign language learning, but it would be a culture which influences and contributes to the individual identity of their bilingual friends and neighbours. They would thereby be obliged to notice the 'backstage' culture and to begin to experience it in its own language in a way which is fundamentally different from simply being told about it in a 'multicultural' lesson. The learning of a minority language would therefore differ from foreign language learning by virtue of the different relationship of the minority culture to the learners' own culture. The minority culture is not of a different 'people', in the sense of 'nation', but of a different subgroup of the same 'people' to which learners belong by national identity. Although national identity is strongly reinforced by contemporary forces in state-wide institutions, it must be remembered that the nation-state is a modern concept in Europe and the West which has gained its dominant position in determining group identity through the suppression of regional, linguistic and other

ethnic characteristics. The resurgence of these repressed ethnic identities among indigenous groups, evident throughout Europe (Esman 1977; Gras and Gras 1982; Allardt 1979), is also evident in Britain (Welsh and Gaelic revivals), but it is even more striking in other countries. One of the consequences for the individual is the development of 'multiple identities' (Allardt 1979: 39):

> Modern man does not only have multiple group membership and multiple identities, but individuals are also permitted by most social groups to be members of other associations ... It seems reasonable to assert that patterns of multiple identities will stimulate the maintenance of ethnic loyalties on the one hand, but also weaken conflicts on the other.

This is more an idealization of possible developments than a description of actual states of affairs in industrialized societies. Allardt (1979: 40) goes on to point out that it would be simplistic to assert that this would occur under all circumstances: 'If a cultural division of labour prevails together with a system of multiple identities the minority group is likely to be repressed and alienated.'

The significance of Allardt's argument for the present discussion is that it indicates that the notion of one *national* identiy can give way in an acceptable and peaceful manner to the notion of multiple identities. Indigenous, established minorities are demonstrating this and opening up the possibility for new, immigrant minorities, too. Against this background, minority language-learning by members of the majority will create propitious attitudes for acceptance of multiple identities at an individual level. At a state level this would mean acceptance of 'hyphenated' national identity, for example Greek–British or West Indian–British. Allardt's argument, however, also reminds us that there are powerful economic forces at work which can undermine any attempts through education to create awareness and acceptance, and in the late 1980s his warning that a cultural division of labour can repress and alienate is only too appropriate throughout industrialized Europe.

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