FOREWORD
Pedagogies of choice: challenging coercive relations of power in classrooms and communities

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The papers in this special issue of International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism edited by Shelley K. Taylor and Mitsuyo Sakamoto cover a wide range of educational contexts and issues and they draw on a variety of disciplinary perspectives to interpret the phenomena they analyze. As the editors point out in their introduction, the common thread linking these analyses is the intersection between language and power. In some contexts, minority communities are the victims of overt violence exercised either by racist groups within society. In other cases, coercive power operates through discourses that position individuals and groups in subordinated relationships. The papers by Lee and Norton, and Morgan all analyze how individuals and/or educators can challenge coercive relations of power operating through these discourses to re-position themselves as agents in their own identity formation. The disciplinary focus shifts in Mayer’s paper to address the psycholinguistic challenges faced by Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in appropriating the academic language competencies (in both first and second languages) necessary for school success. Although the primary focus in these papers is on psycholinguistic and pedagogical issues, societal power relations are never far from the surface. The devaluation of community languages (e.g. American Sign Language in the case of the Deaf community) in the wider society results in ambivalence among parents and educators about whether these languages should be strongly supported in home and school.

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In this foreword, I will attempt to provide a perspective on the varied phenomena discussed in the core papers. This perspective is intended to be dialogical and to fuse theory and practice (Cummins 2000). Practice always embodies theory and theory strives for understanding of practice. Critical approaches to education, understood as both theory and practice, aim to identify and challenge inequitable social structures and policies.

Given the centrality of power relations within all the contexts and social practices discussed in the core papers, we can frame the issues in terms of the question: What options do educators have to resist and challenge the operation of coercive relations of power? The starting point in articulating a pedagogy of resistance is to emphasize that there are options. Although coercive power relations between dominant and subordinated groups may occupy the social space in the wider society and directly influence pedagogical spaces created within classrooms, there are always degrees of

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freedom for educators to exercise choice in how they orchestrate classroom interactions. Choice is always an option, as well as an ethical responsibility and a pedagogical opportunity. Regardless of institutional constraints, educators have individual and collective choices in how they negotiate identities with students and communities. These choices are expressed:

- in how they interact with students;
- in how they engage them cognitively;
- in how they activate their prior knowledge;
- in how they use technology to amplify imagination;
- in how they involve parents in their children’s education; and
- in what they communicate to students regarding home language and culture.

Articulation of choices involves re-examination of the normalized assumptions about curriculum, assessment, and instruction that constrict both the identity options for culturally diverse students and their cognitive and academic engagement. These normalized assumptions include the following beliefs (often implicit and unarticulated):

- ‘Literacy’ refers only to reading and writing in the dominant language (henceforth English); literacy abilities in languages other than English and in modalities other than the written modality are ignored.
- The cultural knowledge and first language (L1) linguistic abilities that bilingual students bring to school have little instructional relevance.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse parents, whose English may be quite limited, do not have the language skills to contribute to their children’s literacy development.

These normalized assumptions find expression in the absence of reference to students’ L1 in most curriculum documents, instructional manuals, and assessment protocols even in contexts where a very significant proportion of students in the school system come from non-English-speaking home backgrounds. Active suppression of students’ language and culture has given way to benign neglect, a less obvious but perhaps equally effective conduit for coercive relations of power.

A first step in challenging the operation of coercive relations of power is to engage critically with our individual and collective assumptions about what constitutes effective education in a culturally and linguistically diverse context. Why, for example, do so many low-income and linguistic minority students fail academically? Why do so many faculties of education prepare new teachers to teach the student population of 40 years ago rather than the students who currently populate urban classrooms? As educators, what power do we have and what choices can we exercise to address the disproportionate failure rates among marginalized groups? This form of critical engagement with the issues leads inevitably to an examination of the ways in which societal power relations influence educational structures and classroom instruction.

The frameworks in Figures 1 and 2 are intended to generate discussion among educators about how coercive power relations express themselves within educational systems and how the operation of these power relations can be challenged. The frameworks integrate sociological and psycholinguistic constructs. The need for
a cross-disciplinary perspective is illustrated in the fact that coercive power relations have often operated by legitimating and normalizing inaccurate assumptions about students’ home language and culture (e.g. L1 use interferes with L2 development). Therefore it is necessary not only to acknowledge the role of societal power relations in determining academic achievement but also to build school-based language policies, and educational policies generally, on a firm foundation of what the empirical research says about the influence of students’ L1 on L2 literacy development.

In the following sections, teacher-student interactions within the school are conceptualized in the context of societal power relations (Figure 1) and concrete directions are articulated for the promotion of students’ academic expertise (Figure 2). Then these frameworks are related to the interdependence hypothesis that posits a common underlying proficiency mediating conceptual and linguistic transfer across languages.

Coercive and collaborative relations of power

The framework presented in Figure 1 proposes that relations of power in the wider society (macro-interactions), ranging from coercive to collaborative in varying degrees, influence both the ways in which educators define their roles and the types of structures that are established in the educational system. Coercive relations of power refer to the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group or country. Collaborative relations of power, by contrast, reflect the sense of the term ‘power’ that refers to ‘being enabled’, or ‘empowered’ to achieve more. Within collaborative relations of power, ‘power’ is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others. The more empowered one individual or group becomes, the more is generated for others to share. Within this context, the term empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power. Students in these empowering classroom contexts know that their voices will be heard and respected. Schooling amplifies rather than silences their power of self-expression.

Role definitions refer to the mindset of expectations, assumptions and goals that educators bring to the task of educating culturally diverse students. Educational structures refer to the organization of schooling in a broad sense that includes policies, programs, curriculum, and assessment. Educational structures, together with educator role definitions, determine the micro-interactions between educators, students, and communities. These micro-interactions form an interpersonal space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity are negotiated. Power is created and shared within this interpersonal space where minds and identities meet. As such, the micro-interactions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or failure.

These micro-interactions between educators, students and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. In the former case, they constrict the interpersonal space of classroom identity negotiation and contribute to the disempowerment of culturally diverse students and communities; in the latter case, the micro-interactions constitute a process of empowerment that enables educators, students and communities to challenge the operation of coercive power structures.
Promoting academic expertise

The Academic Expertise framework (Figure 2) elaborates on the nature of the interpersonal space orchestrated by teachers in their classrooms. It incorporates an emphasis on critical literacy, active learning, deep understanding, and the importance of building on students’ prior knowledge that has been articulated both in various approaches to critical pedagogy (e.g. New London Group 1996; Freire and Macedo 1987) and effective instruction (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 2000). However, the framework also argues for the centrality of identity negotiation and identity investment in the promotion of academic expertise among marginalized group students. As discussed above, teacher-student interactions, and other interactions within the learning community, create an interpersonal space within which knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated. Learning will be optimized when these interactions maximize both cognitive engagement and identity investment (Cummins 2001).

The framework attempts to express in a very concrete way the kinds of instructional emphases and language interactions required to build students’ academic expertise. Optimal instruction will include a Focus on Meaning, a Focus on Language, and a Focus on Use. The focus on meaning entails the development of critical literacy rather than surface-level processing of text. The focus on language involves promoting not just explicit knowledge of how the linguistic code operates but also critical awareness of how language operates within society. If students are to participate effectively within a democratic society they should be able to ‘read’ how language is used to achieve social goals: to elucidate issues, to persuade, to include, to exclude, to deceive, etc. The focus on use component parallels the New London
Group’s (1996) notion of transformed practice but expresses in a more concrete way what this might look like within the classroom context. It argues that optimal instruction will enable students to generate knowledge, create literature and art, and act on social realities.

The Academic Expertise framework also makes explicit the fact that classroom instruction always positions students in particular ways that reflect the implicit (or sometimes explicit) image of the student in the teacher’s mind. How students are positioned either expands or constricts their opportunities for identity investment and cognitive engagement. Historically (and still currently) students from marginalized communities have been positioned as suffering from linguistic and cognitive handicaps. They have been defined by what they lack (e.g. standard English) rather than by what they have (e.g. bilingualism). In the case of Deaf children, for example, very different pedagogical approaches result from positioning or imaging the child as suffering from a medical disability as compared to being an active and fully functioning member of a linguistic community.

A starting point within the framework is that effective pedagogy constructs an image of the student as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented; individual differences in these traits do not diminish the potential of each student to shine in specific ways.

The interdependence of cognitive engagement and identity investment, and their relationship to societal power relations, can be seen in the case of Madiha, a grade 7 student.

![Figure 2. A Framework for Academic Language Learning. (Adapted from Cummins, J. [2001]. Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society. Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education, 125).](image)
student in Michael Cranny Elementary School in the York Region District School Board near Toronto. Madiha had been in Canada for only about four months when she co-authored a 20-page Urdu–English bilingual book, *The new country*, with her friends Kanta and Sulmana who had both been in Canada for about four years (Cummins, Bismilla and Chow et al. 2005; Cummins, Bismilla and Cohen et al. 2005). Madiha was enabled to participate fully in creating this book because her teacher (Lisa Leoni) made the choice to challenge the normalized assumption that the classroom should be an English-only zone. Encouraged by their teacher to use both their languages to discuss and write the story which was based on their experiences of traveling from Pakistan to Canada, the three girls invested their identities and used the full range of their bilingual and biliteracy skills in the project. The story, which is an example of what we have termed an identity text, holds a mirror up to the students in which their intelligence, imagination, and biliteracy skills are reflected back in a positive light. As different audiences (e.g. parents, grandparents, peers, friends and relatives in the country of origin) read the story that is available on the world wide web (www.multiliteracies.ca), the affirmation of identity is further affirmed. This affirmation repudiates the devaluation of identity (e.g. students’ culture, language, and religion) that students and communities frequently experience in schools and the wider society.

Contrast this scenario to what Madiha’s experience would likely have been in a more ‘normal’ grade 7 classroom. Positioned as an ‘ESL’ (English-as-a-second-language) student, she would likely have spent several years trying to break out of this externally-imposed identity cocoon. Her ability to express her intelligence and participate effectively in a social studies activity would have been severely limited by her minimal knowledge of English. She certainly would not have been in a position to write extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. However, when the social structure of the classroom was changed in very simple ways, Madiha was enabled to express herself in ways that few recently-arrived immigrant students experience. Her home language, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning. She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced with the publication of their story.

**Teaching for cross-linguistic transfer**

Madiha’s experience illustrates the potential of employing bilingual instructional strategies to teach for cross-linguistic transfer. In both monolingual and bilingual programs, monolingual instructional strategies are typically used to teach bilingual students. For example, in typical ESL or mainstream classes students’ L1 is ignored as irrelevant to learning while in most bilingual/dual language and second language immersion programs (e.g. French immersion in Canada) a rigid separation of languages is imposed such that there is minimal teaching for transfer across languages. The theoretical rationale for teaching for transfer is based on the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins 1979) that posits a common underlying proficiency that mediates transfer of concepts, language structures, and learning strategies across languages. Extensive research supports the operation of cross-linguistic transfer (see
Cummins 2000, 2001 for reviews) yet monolingual instructional strategies still predominate in both English-only and bilingual programs.

The empirical research suggests that depending on the sociolinguistic situation, five types of transfer are possible:

- Transfer of conceptual knowledge (e.g. understanding the concept of photosynthesis);
- Transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organizers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.);
- Transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (willingness to take risks in communication through L2, ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication, etc.);
- Transfer of specific linguistic elements (knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis); and
- Transfer of phonological awareness—the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds.

The interdependence hypothesis, and the extensive empirical research upon which it rests, provides a foundation for refuting inaccurate claims about the negative influence of students’ L1 in the development of L2 language and literacy skills. It also opens up dialogue on how to implement bilingual instructional strategies that enable students to build on their prior knowledge (encoded in L1), use their L1 as a tool for learning, and invest their identities in the learning process. Incorporation of students’ L1 also challenges the coercive relations of power that devalue the cultural and linguistic capital of marginalized students and communities.

The dynamic intersections of sociological and psycholinguistic research and theory can be illustrated with reference to ongoing debates on the education of Deaf students. Obvious similarities exist between the ways in which the language and identities of the Deaf community have been devalued and excluded from education and the power relations depicted in other papers in this volume. The analysis of policy and practice in Deaf education also highlights the importance in a wide variety of minority educational contexts of integrating sociopolitical and psycholinguistic perspectives in exploring how coercive power relations can be challenged.

**Power relations and linguistic interdependence in the education of Deaf students**

Mayer (this volume) points out that the instructional focus in most Deaf education programs is on drilling Deaf students in discrete language skills rather than promoting dialogue and critical inquiry. She suggests that a ‘fundamental principle of effective classroom practice is that it is through dialogue that children learn to make meaning and sense of the world around them, to think, to question, and to share ideas’. She attributes the poor school performance of many Deaf students to the fact that it is ‘often difficult to involve Deaf learners in this sort of discourse in either L1 or L2, given the constraints they face in using either language as a tool for making meaning and constructing knowledge.’

It is important to point out that these constraints are socially-imposed rather than representing any inherent limitation specific to Deaf students. As outlined below, Deaf students who are given access to the language of the Deaf community at
an early age experience no constraints in using language as a tool for thinking. However, in most North American contexts there has been little political will to ensure that families (parents and siblings) are supported in gaining access to ASL, and as a consequence, many Deaf children of hearing parents experience limited opportunities for extended dialogue in the home.

Similarly, most Deaf children are educated in classroom contexts that lack ASL-fluent adult models who could engage in sharing of ideas and critical dialogue. This again is a function of the lack of political will to dismantle the structural barriers that still exclude Deaf teachers from the classroom.

Mayer’s description raises the obvious question of what options are available to policy-makers and educators to transform this dismal instructional scenario she depicts. What insights and directions for change might be generated from the theoretical constructs discussed above?

The operation of coercive power relations in the education of Deaf students has been extensively documented (e.g. Lane 1992). After the 1880 International Congress of Educators of the Deaf in Milan, Deaf students in North America (and elsewhere) were taught using monolingual auditory/oral approaches with an emphasis on speech reading skills and speech production (Carbin 1996; Gibson, Small and Mason 1997). Deaf teachers were excluded from the education of Deaf students and ASL was eliminated from classroom instruction and discouraged in out-of-classroom contexts. In the 1970s, this extreme (and highly unsuccessful) approach gave way to Total Communication approaches that emphasized the use of Signed English together with auditory/oral communication. Gibson, Small and Mason emphasize that these represent an extension of the monolingual approach to educating Deaf students.

During the 1990s, a number of bilingual bicultural programs involving ASL were implemented in North America. However, there remain formidable barriers to the inclusion of Deaf teachers fluent in ASL in these programs, and the development of appropriate curriculum and instructional approaches in both ASL and English is still a work in progress. Support for bilingual bicultural programs among educational policy-makers (who predominantly view Deafness as either a medical or special educational condition) has tended to be lukewarm.

The North American situation, however, stands in stark contrast to the experience in Sweden and Denmark where full bilingual bicultural programs have operated since the 1980s for Deaf students (Mahshie 1995). Hearing parents of Deaf children are given strong support and encouragement to learn Sign (e.g. paid release time from employment) and both Sign and the national language are emphasized throughout children’s education, from early childhood through high school. Mahshie summarizes the research as follows:

In addition to comparing favourably with hearing graduates, students in the two main experimental classes in each country also tested higher in reading than their Deaf agemates during periodic evaluations throughout their school career, as well as when compared with a sample of Deaf adults from the previous generation. (1995, 18)

Of crucial importance to the success of the bilingual bicultural programs has been the focus on ensuring that all Deaf children are given the opportunity to acquire Sign Language before the start of formal schooling. Under these conditions, students are able to use their conceptual knowledge of the world to engage with the written language and acquire literacy in Danish or Swedish. According to Mahshie:
When the Swedish children start first grade (age 6–7), it is important that they have a strong first language; are comfortable with their identity; already know a great deal about their world; and have the linguistic, cognitive, and social readiness to attend to the lessons being presented. With this competence and plenty of active exposure to written language, many of the children develop an interest in written Swedish well before entering first grade without formal instruction. (1995, 35)

We see in this description the operation of linguistic interdependence and the common underlying proficiency. Although there will be minimal transfer of specifically linguistic elements or phonological awareness, there is likely to be extensive transfer of conceptual knowledge and learning strategies. Because preschool children have a well-developed language (something rare for Deaf children of hearing parents not exposed to Sign Language in their early years), it is possible for parents and teachers to engage them in the kinds of dialogue through which they explore meaning and make sense of the world around them. This conceptual foundation enables children to understand the content of the written texts that are initially signed to them (just as these texts would be orally read to hearing children). Their enjoyment and understanding of the content and concepts in written texts motivates them to become autonomous readers and to invest their identities in learning to decode and comprehend the written language. Students appear to experience little difficulty in going directly from Sign Language to written language when their L1 (Sign) is well-developed and when the instruction focuses explicitly on teaching for conceptual transfer.

Direct transfer from ASL to English literacy is further supported by research that documents a strong positive relationship between proficiency in each language. Strong and Prinz (1997), for example, in a study involving 160 Deaf students demonstrated that students with stronger ASL proficiency developed higher levels of English literacy regardless of age and IQ. They conclude:

‘The implication of this research is straightforward and powerful: Deaf children's learning of English appears to benefit from the acquisition of even a moderate fluency in ASL’ (37).

In short, the implementation of highly successful bilingual and bicultural programs for Deaf children in the Swedish and Danish contexts reflects a societal change from coercive to collaborative relations of power. Strong promotion of the minority language within the school and preschool contexts not only enables children to develop proficiency in that language but also to develop age-appropriate conceptual knowledge and social interaction skills. Language acts as a lifeline to children’s social and conceptual worlds. With this foundation, Deaf children have the tools and motivation to engage cognitively and invest their identities in learning. Teachers are also enabled to shift from an almost exclusive focus on transmitting discrete language skills to a focus on critical inquiry and active language use involving students’ two languages. In this educational context, students are enabled to become, and see themselves becoming, intelligent, imaginative, and academically competent people.

Any conception of human rights would uphold the right of all children both to acquire the language tools necessary to interact with their social environment and to develop these language tools within the context of schooling. The fact that so many young Deaf children come to school in North America (and elsewhere) without a functioning language because they (and their parents) have been denied the opportunity to acquire ASL represents a clear violation of children’s human rights.
The reluctance of educational authorities to strongly promote ASL throughout schooling as a language of literacy and cognition likewise violates the rights of the child.

This brief analysis of issues related to the education of Deaf students highlights the intersection of sociopolitical and psycholinguistic perspectives in ways that may have implications for other contexts discussed in this Special Issue. As noted above, ideological prescriptions that reflect coercive relations of power are frequently expressed in terms of psycholinguistic arguments. However, when we can show that these arguments are clearly refuted by the actual psycholinguistic research, the coercive ideological power relations that motivate these arguments are exposed. Thus, the extensive research supporting the interdependence hypothesis and common underlying proficiency expose the ideological nature of arguments opposing bilingual education and L1 promotion for linguistic minority groups.

**Conclusion**

Power relationships in the broader society express themselves within schools as the negotiation of identity between teachers and students. Policy-makers, school administrators, and individual teachers have choices in the kinds of structures they establish for educating students and in the identity options they orchestrate in classroom interactions. These choices can have profound effects on the academic achievement of marginalized group students, as the example of Deaf children in Sweden and Denmark illustrates.

The theoretical constructs discussed in this paper, and elaborated in much greater detail in the papers of this special issue, provide one possible approach to the dialogue among policy-makers, educators, and communities that is essential for genuine school reform. This dialogue is likely to be very different from the dominant discourses in educational reform movements in most countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The exclusion of constructs such as *power relations* and *identity negotiation* from these dominant discourses virtually guarantees that the structural changes necessary for educational equity will not be made. The challenge for educators and researchers committed to promoting collaborative relations of power within schools is to take discourses of equity out of the pages of academic journals such as *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and inject them into the generation of school-based policies and practices that construct images of students as linguistically talented and intellectually powerful.

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**References**


