

Research Paper

“The teachers were just annoyed because I couldn’t say anything”: English language experiences of Polish migrants in UK schools

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Contextualization

The state school system in England is underpinned by a linguistic ideology of monolingualism, whereby English is the dominant language of instruction and interaction. Regardless of their level of proficiency in other languages, bilingual pupils who arrive at school with a lower level of English language competency, are seen as ‘deficient’, and their knowledge of other languages is seldom regarded as advantageous in helping them acquire English. Even when schools may attempt to promote a more positive view of bilingualism, they appear stymied in their efforts. Such an ideology also feeds into the contemporary climate of linguistic xenophobia present in Britain, understood as hostility towards someone who is speaking another language, or English with a ‘foreign’ accent. At the same time, there is an increasing number of minority language pupils in mainstream state education for whom English is not their primary language, and who are directly affected by such a negative approach to their own language practices. This paper explores the experiences of a group of Polish-speaking secondary school pupils, and the effect of the linguistic attitudes they encounter at school.

Abstract: *Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 resulted in an exponential increase in Polish migration to the UK, and a subsequent rise in the number of Polish children in UK schools. As part of my doctoral study investigating ethnic and linguistic identity construction amongst Polish-born adolescents (aged 11-16) living in the UK, I explored the participants’ accounts of their experiences of attending mainstream state schools. This paper sets out findings of the study which suggest that the adolescents’ initial lack of English was often viewed as problematic, with participants recounting accounts of overt hostility from some teachers. The adolescents’ experiences of language learning and language use within school appear to adhere to the monolingual ideology found in UK schools, and to reflect the idea of ‘deficiency’, whereby a lack of English language skills positions the individual as deficient, and a knowledge of other languages is seen as a hindrance to the acquisition of English. The paper also suggests that however a school may endeavour to embrace students’ multilingual identities, it nonetheless appears confined by the wider ideology of monolingualism.*

Introduction

Background and context

The accession of Poland to the European Union (EU) in 2004 led to a marked rise in the number of Poles coming to Britain to work (Gillingham, 2010). Yet while prior to 2004, the demographic had consisted mainly of single young men, post-2004 saw an increase in the number of families coming with children (Ryan et al., 2009). As a result, the number of Polish-born children in UK schools increased: by 2008, Polish speaking children comprised the main group of non-English speaking newly-arrived migrant schoolchildren in England (White, 2017).

However, this period also saw in the UK an increase in hostile attitudes towards EU migrants, amplified by the imminent Referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU. Such sentiment was often voiced in vitriolic political and public discourse (Rzepnikowska, 2013); it was further

manifested in the form of linguistic xenophobia, understood as ‘abuse directed to others who are speaking another language, or speaking with a ‘foreign’ accent’ (TLANG, 2016). As a doctoral researcher in applied linguistics, I wondered how Polish-born adolescents who had come to the UK with their parents were adapting to this environment, and how it had affected their sense of identity. The aim of my PhD study was thus to investigate ethnic and linguistic identity construction amongst these adolescents.

In examining the adolescents’ experiences of living in the UK, part of the study focused on the adolescents’ time at mainstream state schools, in particular their experiences of English language learning. This paper presents one of the main findings relating to these experiences: drawing on Mehmedbegović (2012), I argue that the notion of ‘deficiency’, whereby a lack of English language skills positions the individual as deficient, and a knowledge of other languages is seen as a hindrance to the acquisition of English, remains prevalent in schools. I also suggest that such a mentality can only serve to perpetuate a climate of already heightened linguistic xenophobia.

Questions of identity

The study was situated in the field of applied linguistics, more specifically identity studies, where language and linguistic practices are implicated in the construction of a person’s identity. The aim of such work is to explore the factors which affect the way an individual may choose to display her linguistic identities via the language she speaks, and through this, to construct her ethnic identity (see e.g. Lytra, 2016). In its theoretical framework, the study borrows from other work on identity in applied linguistics in using a post-structuralist perspective, where identity is seen as fluid and shifting, dependent on space and time (Bauman, 2000). The study also draws on the concept of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), whereby subject positions are taken up by individuals, even as they may be positioned differently by those around them. Subject positions are however also seen as contingent; they need to be constantly renegotiated in each new setting (Darvin & Norton, 2014).

In this paper, I focus on school as a site of identity construction, particularly in the way that the adolescents are regarded in relation to their language learning. All the adolescents in my doctoral study had Polish as their first language (L1). Whether they had arrived as younger children or more recently, most of them had come with little or no knowledge of English; this was often seen as problematic. In investigating the narratives recounted by these adolescents, I follow Mehmedbegović (2012), and argue that schools may be underpinned by a monolingual ideology where not to speak English is seen as a ‘deficiency’; and knowledge of other languages is not necessarily regarded as advantageous. This can be understood to underlie the challenges that the adolescents reported having encountered.

A monolingual ideology

Much of the research into the experiences of teenage learners of English suggests that an adherence to a monolingual ideology within state schooling is not unique simply to the UK. In Europe, for example, regardless of the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity of European societies, a monolingual ideology is still found within mainstream schools (Karrebæk, 2013; also see García & Li Wei, 2014). Meanwhile, writing in the context of ‘French-language minority education in Canada’, Heller (1995) defines the ‘ideology of institutional monolingualism’ as the way that institutions such as schools, favour monolingual language practices so as to reinforce power relations.

Borrowing from Heller (1995), Conteh and Brock (2011) argue that even while the UK educational system may ostensibly welcome diversity, at the same time care is taken that this does not interfere with the ethos of monolingualism which they see as endemic in the education system. In terms of educational policy and practices within England, in work on bilingual pupils, Conteh and Brock (2011: 348) note the normalisation of the ‘model of ‘transitional’ rather than

'additive' bilingualism'. That is, students are encouraged to move from their first language(s) to the dominant one, i.e. English.

Conteh and Brock also argue that such attitudes to language use and teaching in the UK are still influenced by the 1985 Swann Report. While the Report appears to support the maintenance of minority languages, it nonetheless maintains that fundamental to 'participation on equal terms as a full member of society, is a good command of English' (Swann, 1985: 426). In their work on language use within classrooms, Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997: 553) refer to the enduring attitude that while 'ethnic and linguistic diversity' is recognised, English is still viewed 'as the universal medium defining the nation-state and as a principal instrument achieving social cohesion'. While this seminal paper was published over 20 years ago, its continuing salience has been reiterated more recently by Temple (2010) in an article discussing the role of Polish in the identity construction of Poles. Across state schooling in the UK, the language used as a medium of instruction remains primarily English. The importance of this is reiterated in more recent National Curriculum guidelines, which state that, 'English has a pre-eminent place in education and society' (Department of Education, 2014).

Highlighted in such studies is the continuing prevalence of the 'deficit' approach (Mehmedbegović, 2008) in English language educational settings. In a later work, Mehmedbegović (2012: 68) emphasises the thinking whereby 'not being able to speak English yet, is a deficiency'. Such an attitude appears endemic not only within the UK, but in other English language settings also. Hence Cummins (2005), writing in a Canadian context, draws attention to the tendency to see students' knowledge of other languages as being of little relevance or even a hindrance to learning. An ideology of monolingualism and monoculturalism may also underpin the US educational system, where rather than students being encouraged to draw on the language(s) of which they already have knowledge, 'institutions pathologize their differences' (Benesch, 2008: 296). Similar work on migrant high school students in America highlights the prevalence of the monolingual, deficit model which characterises the system, and which disadvantages those without a knowledge of English (Gunderson, 2000; Wortham & Rhodes, 2013). As will be illustrated below, the experiences described by the adolescents in this study may indicate that such a model remains a feature of schools in the UK also. Moreover, their stories suggest that even those institutions which appear to embrace linguistic diversity can be seen to remain embedded within a monolingual and English-dominant ideology.

Methodology and data collection

The research was conceived as a qualitative study, drawing primarily on narrative inquiry, through which participants are invited to discuss their experiences, or life stories. The narrative approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to privilege the perspective of the narrator and the way that individual perceives reality (Riessman, 2002; Galasiński & Galasińska, 2007).

Many applied linguistics studies of identity and language use are situated in large urban conurbations, sites of what has been termed linguistic super-diversity (e.g. De Fina & Perrino, 2013); while studies of Poles in the UK have often focused on larger communities such as those found in London (Sales et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan, 2015). In this study, however, I aimed to examine a group of adolescents living in less diverse settlements, and in smaller Polish communities. The towns where the participants live – here given the fictional names of Fieldstone and Steadton – are located in a semi-rural, mainly ethnically homogenous region of South-East England. According to the UK Census of 2011, Fieldstone has a population of around 60,000, with a predominantly white demographic of 85%; while Steadton has a population of 15,000, with a similar white demographic of 89% (ONS, 2011). The definition of white used here follows that used in the 2011 UK census, as 'English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (Persons)' (ONS, 2011).

The participants were eleven teenagers (aged 11-16), all of whom were born in Poland, although they had differing migration trajectories. Participants were recruited through their state and complementary Saturday schools, with interviews conducted on school premises. Again, fictional names are used here. Grovesham School is a non-selective mainstream state school; of the 1300 students at the school, there are around 20 Polish students. St. Ferdinand's Polish School is a complementary school, where students are taught Polish language, alongside lessons on Polish history and culture. Eight sessions of approximately an hour each were held between January and May 2016; these comprised a series of interviews conducted with participants, encompassing group discussions, pair interviews and individual interviews. Interviews were held in English.

Ethical approval was granted by the UCL Institute of Education prior to the research commencing; the study followed BERA (2011) guidelines, especially in relation to conducting research with minors. Gatekeepers, comprising of parents and school directors, and participants were asked to sign a consent form opting into the research. The names of participants and anyone to whom they alluded were anonymised.

Findings

Arrival at school: 'The teachers were just annoyed because I couldn't say anything'

Most of the adolescents in the study had started school in the UK with very limited knowledge of English. The adolescents' reports suggest this was problematic. Several of them noted difficulties with their teachers, who both overtly and implicitly demonstrated a lack of understanding. This appeared especially prevalent in the primary schools the adolescents had attended. Twelve-year-old Tomasz, who had arrived in the UK aged four, had initially hoped to rely on the language skills of another Polish-speaking girl; he describes the loneliness he felt when this did not transpire:

Tomasz: *I just remember that it was very hard for me [...]. Cos it was like, it was just me and a girl who I met. My Dad was like very good friends with her Dad but it's like I was in one class and then she was like in the other class and it's like I couldn't speak Polish to anyone and it's like everyone was just talking to me and I didn't understand them.*

In his story, Tomasz presents himself as an outsider on arrival at the school, someone that speaks a different language from everyone else, apart from his female acquaintance, who is then placed in another class. A similar story of feeling lost is given by fourteen-year-old Anna. Even though Anna spoke a little English when she arrived in England at the age of five, she nonetheless encountered problems with language at her primary school, as illustrated below. Anna explains that it was only thanks to another Polish-speaking girl at the school that she was able to manage.

Anna: *In my class [...] there was like one person who could speak Polish, and then – I'm still friends with her right now. Cos she used to translate everything I say, cos I couldn't speak English and then, [...] I remember the teachers were just annoyed because I couldn't say anything.*

Even though Anna had some rudimentary English language knowledge on arrival in the UK, which she later explains 'wasn't a lot'; she describes herself here as an individual who 'couldn't speak English'. Like Tomasz, Anna depends on a Polish-speaking classmate, the 'one person' who would 'translate everything'. At the same time, she depicts her teachers as displaying less understanding, and as 'just annoyed' by her inability to speak in English.

Both stories presented above reflect the literature which suggests that for most Polish-speaking children, help is often only found from other Poles at school (e.g. Sales et al., 2008;

Devine, 2009; Cline et al., 2010). A similar experience is recounted by thirteen-year-old Janusz, who attended a Catholic primary school. He describes being helped by the only 'two Polish people in the whole school', as well as by the headteacher who was also Polish. This is reinforced by another example given by Tomasz, when, having gained in confidence, he finds himself a couple of years later in the position of being able to help another boy, newly arrived from Poland, thus continuing the practice.

Positive experiences: 'Some of the people are really nice. They actually tried to let me try to understand.'

This is not to say, however, that there is no encouragement from others. Grovesham, for example, appears to take a generally positive approach towards those students for whom English is not their first language.

One way in which the school attempts to embrace new, multilingual students is through display work in the EAL (English as an Additional Language) classroom. Here, heritage languages are acknowledged through posters and writing on identity done by the students, whose work is also available through a link on the school webpage. Students are also encouraged to take heritage language lessons, with Urdu lessons offered as part of the MFL curriculum, and Polish classes offered as an extra-curricular activity. However, the story told by fifteen-year-old Beata gives nuance to this positive approach. Beata had arrived at Grovesham School about eighteen months prior to the study. While her overview is generally optimistic, she also acknowledges that not everyone was so welcoming:

Beata: *There are just – a few people in my form that actually don't care about me, [...] and teachers don't talk even to me. But some of the people are really nice. On the beginning, I just remember I came here, I didn't, I couldn't say a word, I didn't understand anything! And they actually tried, you know, to speak to me, or write, even WRITE, to just let me try to understand what they're trying to say me. And I was, I think it's nice.*

Here, Beata explains how she is aware of a certain resistance to her presence: she notices some students in her class who 'don't care', and teachers who 'don't talk' to her. At the same time, however, she also emphasises what she sees as the kindness of many others in the school, who try and find ways of communicating with her. Beata's account thus suggests that unlike the experiences of Anna and Tomasz, she is not simply left to rely on the support of other Polish-speaking individuals at the school.

That said, however, it is through her Polish teacher, Jo Malinowska, that Beata is helped with her classwork. In addition to holding Polish classes, as part of her role as the designated 'Bilingual Teacher', Jo also provides translation for the Polish students within mainstream lessons. Beata emphasises the value of this; she also talks of the challenges she faces:

Beata: *Our teacher [Jo Malinowska] is coming for some of the lessons, when she is not in, I have to ask the English teacher what is, what the things mean, or check it in a dictionary. It's really hard, because you're losing the time they're doing something – the rest of the students are doing that thing during you're checking just that stupid word cos you can't understand a sentence because of that.*

The arrangement described here by Beata is that of the additional language support which, as in many other schools, is provided at Grovesham. This is where, in addition to EAL classes, extra English language assistance is provided through placing bilingual teachers within mainstream classes; the role of such teachers is to help with translation of the class. This type of bilingual support teaching has been found in UK mainstream education since the 1980s; however, those who provide it are frequently regarded merely in terms of being seen as lower status teaching assistants (Martin-Jones & Saxena, 1996). At the same time, however, with

the focus appearing to be on translation only, the practice may also be seen in terms of replacing one language with another rather than necessarily drawing on the one to help with comprehension of the other (Conteh & Brock, 2011). The implications of this, and how it reflects an underlying thinking about language will be addressed in the following section.

Discussion

Exploring these adolescents' experiences may reveal something of the attitudes towards English language learning and use found within the schools they have attended. The findings suggest that many of the schools described by the participants can indeed be seen as underpinned, or at the very least constrained, by a language ideology of monolingualism, together with a distrust of those who do not speak English.

The stories recounted which describe the participants' arrival at school and their initial inability to speak English illustrate how a lack of English language competency is regarded as problematic. On some occasions, this is met with overt hostility towards the Polish speaking arrivals. In other cases, the problem is tackled by relying on other Polish speakers, a tendency which has already been noted in the literature. In their study of London state schools, Sales et al. (2008) note that amongst the strategies employed by schools is that of encouraging other Polish-speaking children to help newcomers. However, as implied by Tomasz's story as set out above, this is not necessarily common practice. Neither is it an option for those schools with fewer Polish children.

Moreover, as the initial stories told by Anna and Tomasz may suggest, these young arrivals often find themselves up against a prevailing attitude which appears to be that of treating language as 'something to be overcome' (Safford & Drury, 2013) in the goal of learning English. This can be detected in the account given by Beata. From this, it appears that the role of the Bilingual Teacher at Grovesham in regard to helping with English is solely to translate the content of the mainstream lessons. Such language support may be viewed from differing perspectives. On the one hand, this language provision can be understood as one of the ways that a school such as Grovesham may endeavour to help those students with limited English skills. Indeed, Beata sees the presence of the Polish teacher Jo – 'our' teacher – during her mainstream English classes as reassuring. This view appears to reflect the work of Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003), who underline the potential significance of the role such teachers can play.

At the same time, however, as argued by Conteh and Brock (2011), such teaching practices may also be viewed as a way in which 'transitional' bilingualism is privileged over 'additive' bilingualism. That is, these practices are underpinned by the notion that one language must be replaced by another (usually English), rather than taught as an additional competency. On the one hand, in the case of Grovesham, such accusations may be countered by the fact that Grovesham does provide Polish language tuition. That the provision of heritage languages is not always found in mainstream state schools has been highlighted by Mehmedbegović: in her research on approaches to bilingualism within London schools, Mehmedbegović (2008) reports how one respondent felt it was not within the remit of mainstream schools to teach heritage languages. While such an attitude may have changed in more recent years, at a nearby school in Fieldstone which promotes itself as a 'language academy', Polish was not one of the courses offered, despite the school being situated in the same town as Grovesham and attracting a similar student demographic. It is also interesting to note that even at Grovesham, Polish exam preparation classes are offered as an extra-curricular activity rather than as part of the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) syllabus. I was unable to determine why this was the case; although it may have been because Jo Malinowska, despite being a qualified teacher in Poland, did not hold equivalent UK qualifications.

Nonetheless, aside from translation practices, nowhere is there the idea that a knowledge of Polish will actively help students in their English language learning. From Beata's account, it appears that without Jo being in class, Beata is simply left to look words up in a dictionary; there is no thought given to the way in which she might draw on her linguistic resources, that is, her knowledge of Polish, to help her develop her English language skills. Thus knowledge of one language is treated as separate from that of another: they are viewed as two discrete skill sets. This resonates with work on bilingualism by Cummins (2008), who speaks of the 'two solitudes', where an individual is encouraged to keep separate the languages she has at her disposal, and discouraged from using skills acquired from her knowledge of one language when using another. This can be seen to feed into the notion of 'transitional' bilingualism (Conteh & Brock, 2011), through which one language is put aside in the learning of another. As noted by Mehmedbegović (2012), students are not seen as enabled by their knowledge of one language; rather, it is their 'deficiency' in English which must be remedied.

In addition to revealing broader ideologies about language, Beata's narrative of her English language learning experiences has other implications. Even as Beata finds Jo's presence in class invaluable, her account can also be seen to indicate something about the apparently limited nature of language help available. This in turn draws attention to the wider problem of the frequent lack of adequate EAL and other language provision in UK schools. The apparent situation at Grovesham may be seen to echo wider trends highlighted in the literature, which imply that even as the acquisition of English language skills is considered imperative by the Department of Education (2014), those who teach it are held in scant regard. The often inferior positioning given to EAL teachers has been highlighted in earlier work by Creese (2002), while Sales et al. (2008) find teachers and teaching assistants to be frequently poorly paid and 'often over-worked'. The situation of UK state school teachers also links with work by Courtney (2017): writing in the field of general provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) across the UK, she highlights a disparity between the importance attached to the acquisition of English, and the cuts in funding for ESOL provision. While I found no particular evidence in my research at Grovesham that Jo is necessarily regarded in a negative way, Beata's account of her own 'really hard' English language learning experiences when Jo 'is not in' may be seen to suggest limited funding.

When discussing these stories, it must be recognised that the data collected in the study on which this paper is based, rely on self-reporting by the adolescents themselves rather than researcher observations. Yet there is a consistency of accounts across different settings. Moreover, much of what these adolescents describe chimes with the literature on language use in educational settings and attitudes to language learning. Thus, in line with previous research (Conteh & Brock, 2011), their accounts indicate that in the adolescents' state schools, English is either assumed to supplant their L1, as in the cases described by Tomasz and Anna, or else to exist alongside Polish rather than in conjunction with the adolescents' first language. This thus echoes research which maintains that an adherence to monolingualism remains prevalent within UK state school settings (e.g. García & Li Wei, 2014).

The findings here also suggest that even when an individual school is attempting to make its new students feel welcome, such as at Grovesham, there are systemic limits to what such a school can do. As several of the adolescents' stories attest, there are also attitudes of individual teachers to be overcome, where a resistance towards non-English speaking arrivals appears palpable. Drawing on Beata's account of some teachers who 'don't talk even', it appears this may occur even in a school such as Grovesham, which otherwise displays an overarchingly positive approach to language diversity.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to present the accounts given by Polish-born adolescents of their linguistic experiences within UK state schools they have attended. In doing so, the aim is not

to paint a wholly negative view. There are examples of schools, such as Grovesham, which are explicitly encouraging to students coming from different linguistic backgrounds. Nonetheless, the findings presented in this paper do suggest that such attempts can be undermined by a continuing underlying ideology of monolingualism and of a dominance of English which is embedded in the school system.

In presenting these adolescents' experiences, this research paves the way for further investigation into attitudes towards those pupils for whom English is not a first language. While it must be reiterated that this was not designed as a school-based study, its findings may nonetheless help others exploring language teaching practices and the provision of EAL within mainstream school settings.

From further research, it may transpire that findings are different in other locations, such as a more urban environment; moreover, the position of Polish language teaching may differ in settings where the school is located in a more diverse setting, and with a larger Polish-speaking contingent. Given that schools such as Grovesham are now providing Polish language classes (Howe, 2015), the findings of this study could also contribute to research on the teaching of other languages within mainstream schooling. It would be interesting to observe how the provision of Polish language instruction compares with that of other languages offered as part of the MFL curriculum. For now, the current climate in the UK is such that linguistic xenophobia is on the increase, and non-English speakers castigated. It may be argued that to continue this monolingual ideology within the state education system, and positioning non-English speaking students as 'deficient', is to condone implicitly such xenophobia, or at the very least, to do little to challenge it. In such a climate, the need to question such practices remains an imperative.

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