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# Rethinking Language-in-Education Policy in Luxembourg

*The Council of Europe report on Luxembourgish language-in-education policy points to a real social problem which it seems to me has not been much discussed in public discourse: namely, the fact that the Luxembourgish school system forces large numbers of romanophone students to go through a German-language literacy programme which condemns many of them to educational failure. Instead, what has become the focus of public discussion is the question of defining 'competence levels', a worthwhile and necessary undertaking no doubt, but not one which in itself will solve the above-mentioned social problem.*

Let me first of all quote some passages of the report which deal with this key issue concerning educational inequity and linguistic discrimination (Council of Europe, 2005):

*Il serait dommageable, nous semble-t-il, que le trilinguisme, facteur de réussite individuelle et collective pendant des décennies, ne se transforme progressivement en dispositif exclusif, fonctionnant en fait de la même façon que le monolinguisme qui a prévalu longtemps (et qui prévaut encore parfois) dans certains pays. (p. 21)*

*Si le trilinguisme, qui repose pourtant sur un consensus large et avéré de l'ensemble de la population, devait continuer à générer injustice et incohérence, la société luxembourgeoise, dans sa diversité, pourrait rapidement connaître une crise communautaire et identitaire. (p. 23)*

*La ségrégation des élèves d'origine étrangère existe déjà. (p. 31)*

*Il s'agit en somme, grâce à cette valorisation de la formation plurilingue, de passer d'une homogénéité supposée, dont on a vu qu'elle ne correspond pas à la réalité et qu'elle est facteur de frustrations individuelles et col-*

*lectives, à une hétérogénéité consciente, projetée et assumée. (p. 32-3)*

*Les évolutions démographiques du pays, de même que les enjeux de l'internationalisation et de la mondialisation rapides, bouleversent les évidences sur lesquelles reposent*

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**Considering the presence of [an] increasingly large number of children speaking some varieties of French, Portuguese or Italian in the Luxembourgish primary schools during the last few decades, the logical [...] consequence would be the establishment of a two-track literacy system.**

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*la politique linguistique suivie depuis des décennies. Celle-ci devient cause d'échec et d'exclusion pour une partie importante de la population, mettant en péril à la fois l'intégration sociale de tous les habitants et la compétitivité économique du Grand-Duché. (p. 48)*

It would seem to me that if we believe in educational equity and social justice, then we need to do something about this. The Council of Europe authors suggest a number of possible solutions including in particular the introduction of an additional French-language literacy option (p. 37).

Indeed, the demographic changes of the last four decades (referred to in the last quotation above) have led to a dramatic shift in the role of French: as well as being the main language of state administration and of legislation, it used to be the language of culture and prestige widely used – especially in its written form – by the bourgeoisie and upper-class citizens. While this may still be the case to a large extent, French has also increasingly become the lingua franca between Luxembourgers, immigrants and cross-border commuters (cf. Reisdoerfer, 2006).

The consequences for the educational system are enormous; while schools

continue to teach a highly formal use of French (as this used to be the sole social use available for that language in Luxembourg), they are now faced with a major challenge: namely, the presence of a large number of students speaking vernacular and contact varieties of French. Considering the presence of this increasingly large number of children speaking some varieties of French, Portuguese or Italian in the Luxembourgish primary schools during the last few decades, the logical – and long overdue – consequence would be the establishment of a two-track literacy system. A choice between German-language literacy and French-language literacy would seem even more obvious as both German and French are officially recognized in the 1984 language law.

Yet the school-system has failed to respond to this challenge and the basic structure of primary school education has remained unchanged for almost a hundred years: German-language literacy for everybody, rapidly followed by the teaching of French. What has changed in recent years is that there has been a push for more Luxembourgish within the school system, mostly in the area of pre-school education, which consists of one optional year of *précoce* (for children aged three) and two obligatory years of *préscolaire* (from age four upwards). The Ministry of Educa-

tion plans to make the year of *précoce* also part of compulsory education. In this way, it is hoped that the teaching and use of Luxembourgish during three years of pre-school will help migrant children to 'integrate' and prepare them for the German-language literacy programme of the primary school:

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**The new option would build upon the knowledge of vernacular French of the romanophone children, while their learning of Luxembourgish in the *préscolaire* would (still) facilitate their acquisition of German, but now as a foreign language at a slightly later stage of primary school.**

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*Les groupes d'Education précoce comprendront des enfants luxembourgeois et des enfants qui ont appris une autre première langue. Il est clair que l'objectif de l'Education précoce et préscolaire est de faire acquérir une bonne maîtrise de la langue luxembourgeoise, car cet apprentissage est considéré, dans notre système scolaire, comme un tremplin efficace vers l'apprentissage ultérieur de l'allemand, langue de l'alphabétisation à l'école primaire ... Toujours est-il que cette priorité ne doit pas éclipser la prise en compte de la langue*

*d'origine des enfants étrangers.* (Ministère de l'Education nationale, 2000: 20)

In this official policy document, the 'Luxembourgish children' are idealized as being a homogeneous group with one and only one home language – namely Luxembourgish – thus erasing large numbers of children from mixed marriages with more than one home language. The migrant children are similarly homogenized as having 'another L1' (i.e. other than Luxembourgish). In this way, Luxembourgish children are assumed to have Luxembourgish as their L1, otherwise they are categorized as 'foreign'. Here again, a whole group of children are erased in the process: those who have Luxembourgish citizenship but do not use Luxembourgish as home language (this includes for instance a number of luso-descendants, i.e. second or third generation children of transmigrant Portuguese [grand]parents). Moreover, all the children are assumed to have one and only one *langue d'origine* ('language of inheritance'). But this focus upon the element of language inheritance again erases all the other linguistic abilities of many of these children, in particular, in the case of many luso-descendants, their knowledge of and fluency in vernacular French (for confirmation of these points, see Fehlen et al., 1998).

Thus the official *précoce* and *préscolaire* policy is based upon the essentialist assumption that 'foreign' children have one and only one mother-tongue, to which Luxembourgish can then be added at school. In the case of the luso-descendants, they are assumed to have Portuguese as their L1, then they would learn Luxembourgish during their *précoce* and *préscolaire* years, be taught basic literacy in German in the first year of primary school and study (standard) French as a foreign language from the end of the second year of primary school onwards. Two language ideologies can be seen to be at work here: the mother-tongue ideology and the standard language ideology (cf. Milroy & Milroy, 1999); and between the Scylla of the one and the Charybdis of the other, the vernacular French resources of the luso-descendants and many other romanophone children are lost.

The actual language situation of these children is frequently far more complex; luso-descendants in particular



frequently grow up with two (or more) languages: usually Portuguese, sometimes Luxembourgish, and very often also a vernacular French that they acquire in or around the home. This vernacular French is ignored in the Ministry document, so that by implication French is only seen in its standard form as a school subject taught in primary school.

Hence what is needed is a new language-in-education policy which would capitalize on all the students' home resources and, more particularly, would resolve the contradiction between many students' home resources and their in-school practice by adding a French-language literacy option. Such a policy change would be desirable both in terms of educational efficiency and social justice: the new option would build upon the knowledge of vernacular French of the romanophone children, while their learning of Luxembourgish in the préscolaire would (still) facilitate their acquisition of German, but now as a foreign language at a slightly later stage of primary school. Under the present system, on the other hand, the potential literacy bridge between vernacular and standard French is being denied to lusodescendant and other romanophone students.

The existence of parallel streams would bring official policy in line with actual language use, whereas now it is being based upon an essentializing link with language inheritance. Hence also, it would not necessarily lead to a split between ethnic and non-ethnic Luxembourgers since some 'Luxembourgish' children (e.g. those with one francophone parent) might well choose the French-language literacy program, and some 'foreign' children (e.g. those from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, as well as other Central and Eastern European countries) might opt for the German-language one. Both systems could exist alongside each other within the same schools, and they would give each student a better chance of educational as well as later social success. Moreover, students from the two streams could be brought together in mixed language groups to allow for peer teaching and learning, so that the resources of all the students would be valorized.

Thus, the widespread fear that such a two-track system might undermine

social cohesion is misplaced, especially considering that a two-track system already exists at secondary school level (namely, the split between *lycée classique* and *lycée technique*). On the other hand, the advantages would be numerous: apart from the all-important one of no longer psychologically and socially damaging whole generations of romanophone children, they include at least an economic and a pedagogical advantage. Concerning the former, Grin (2003: 54) argues that when students

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get their education 'in a language that they understand well, instead of a language that they understand poorly', this has as an effect 'a decline in the dropout rate' and 'a decline in the repetition rate (children taking the same class twice because of failing grades), which entails a reduction in costs'. In the case of Luxembourg this should be a substantial reduction, as for instance in the *lycées techniques* the repetition rate is as high as 62.6% (Council of Europe, 2005: 17). As for the pedagogical advantage, Lin (1996: 61) suggests that such a change would lead to an elimination of 'the rote-learning syndrome arising from the use of an unfamiliar foreign language as the medium of instruction'. Though Lin is concerned with the use of English in Hong Kong schools, the same applies to the Luxembourgish educational system, where many migrant children have difficulty in understanding German – the main language of instruction in primary school – and many Luxembourgish-origin children have difficulty with French once it takes over as the medium of instruction in secondary school. In this way, both 'foreign' and 'Luxembourgish' children may have something to gain from a structure that would allow them to learn one of the languages as a foreign language.

In conclusion, what is suggested here is not a revival of the old 'classes francophones' but the full implementation of parallel (and interconnected) streams

throughout the primary school system, in one of which German is the language of literacy and French is taught as a foreign language, and in the other, French is the language of literacy and German is taught as a foreign language (see also Georges Erasme Muller, « Ouvrir une filière francophone ? » in *Le Jeudi*, 1<sup>er</sup> février 2007, p. 42 for a similar proposal).

This article is a short version of a much longer paper which is due to appear in the journal *Language and Education* in 2008.

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