

LANGUAGES AND SCHOOLS IN CATALONIA

by Joaquim Arnau*

Catalonia is a country with two official languages (Catalan and Spanish) and with two dominant language groups: Catalan speakers (31.6% of the population have Catalan as their primary family language) and Spanish speakers (55% have Spanish as their primary family language). The former are speakers of a minoritized language and the latter of a dominant language. Some 3.8% are bilingual (Catalan-Spanish), and some 9.7% are speakers of other languages. In the 2001–2008 period Catalonia's population witnessed one of the greatest growths in its history (16.7%) as a consequence of immigration from abroad. Most of the immigrants are from the Third World, many of whom come from South America and are therefore Spanish speakers (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2009).

In 1978 Catalan was incorporated into the education system. Until then, it had been essentially banned in the public sphere for over 250 years, with the school system operating entirely in Spanish. The consequences for the generations that had passed through the school system during those years were evident: the Catalan-speakers were the only bilingual individuals, in spite of not having competence in writing in their own language; the majority of Spanish-speakers continued to be monolingual due to not having received any instruction in Catalan and from having few opportunities to use it in the social realm. Their language dominated and still dominates to this day, thus decreasing opportunities for learning Catalan.

From 1978 onwards an educational policy that seeks consensus was developed that had as its most important principles the following points:

- Not creating separate schools or classrooms for Catalan speakers and Spanish speakers.
- The establishment of an initial, minimum period of time for the study of languages (4 hours), leaving the school community to decide as to the greater or lesser presence

of each language in the curriculum, according to the human resources available and the decisions of parents and teachers.

- The establishment of early total immersion programmes in institutions with a minimum of 75% Spanish-speakers. There was a belief in the beneficial effects of this model created in Canada. It is a system of additional bilingualism, providing the maximum competence in the L2 without a loss of competency in the L1.
- To stimulate the presence of Catalan in the curriculum, taking into account the fewer chances open to Spanish speakers to use Catalan in the social sphere.
- To raise awareness in the educational community, particularly among parents of Spanish speakers, in order that they believe in the benefits of the new educational proposals, particularly the immersion model.
- To develop resources and programmes in order to train teachers who are competent in teaching Catalan.

Immersion programmes: expectations and results

The policy brought about a complete change in the educational model. While in 1978 only 3% of primary schools were considered to be of 'maximum Catalanisation' (schools where Catalan was the main language of instruction), by 1993, 88.8% of schools were of this type.

In 1983 the first Catalan immersion programme was started in Santa Coloma de Gramanet, a city in Barcelona's industrial belt where more than 90% of the population is Spanish-speaking.

Ten years later, in 1993, more than two hundred thousand pupils were enrolled in the programme (Artigal, 1995).

In contrast to immersion programmes operated in Canada and other places, the immersion programme in Catalonia is not an enrichment programme that is offered to pupils as one option among many. It is a model that was planned and developed by the educational administration based on evidence that other school models directed at Spanish speakers are not as effective as the immersion model (Alsina et al. 1983; Arnau, 1985).

It is the most important educational experience of its kind in the world, taking into account the number of pupils involved and the national objectives that are proposed: ensuring that the entire school population of Spanish-speaking origin are fluent in the two official languages, Catalan and Spanish, in a school

rooted in the Catalan cultural reality (Arenas and Muset, 2007).

The results obtained have lived up to the predictions that were made. Two studies conducted on a wide sample of school pupils (Ribes, 1993; Serra, 1997) confirmed the expected results.

IN CONTRAST TO IMMERSION PROGRAMMES OPERATED IN CANADA AND OTHER PLACES, THE IMMERSION PROGRAMME IN CATALONIA HAS BEEN PLANNED AND DEVELOPED BY THE EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

When compared with pupils of the same linguistic group who attended a programme where Spanish predominated, Spanish-speakers that participated in the immersion programme had a much better written and spoken competence in Catalan in all subjects (from the second to the fifth year at primary level). The results as to their competence in Spanish show that the participants in the immersion programme had a similar level of competence in their language that was on a par with pupils of their linguistic group that had not followed the programme. The study by Ribes (1993, ob. cit.) further demonstrated that the pupils who were less cognitively competent were those that made the best progress. The explanation is that immersion is a method that offers many opportunities for the natural acquisition of a language, far removed from those that propose teaching that is excessively focussed on its formal aspects.

These same evaluations indicated that the Spanish-speaking pupils had a favourable 'attitude' to Catalan and also Spanish, whichever programme was followed.

A study as to the degree in which the programme promoted the 'spontaneous usage' of the language (Vila, 1998), showed that both Spanish and Catalan speaking students systematically addressed the teachers in Catalan both inside and outside the classroom. In contrast, the Spanish-speaking pupils' use of Catalan with their classmates (Catalan and Spanish speakers) was very rare, occurring only in very ritualised activities, such as a class debate. The Catalan speakers persisted in maintaining this language, not only with the teacher, but also with a certain number of classmates.

The study concluded that, in relation to the community's predominant uses, the programme provided opportunities to practice Catalan with the teachers and sometimes with their classmates. If this had not occurred at school, the pupils of these contexts would have missed all possibility of using Catalan.

The specific, long-term effects of the programme on language competency, usage and people's attitudes towards the languages are unknown. A small-scale study of this kind (Morera and Teberosky, 1998) was conducted on third-year secondary school pupils from a working-class background who had followed a primary immersion programme. They were attending a school located on the outskirts of Barcelona where their schooling was predominantly in Catalan. The study required the pupils to write two essays based on their experiences in reading. The rubric for the tasks was in Catalan and the researcher always used this language with the pupils, but without a specific requirement that the pupils wrote in Catalan. Some 52% of the pupils wrote

the essay in Spanish and some 48% in Catalan. The dominant usage of Spanish in communication with classmates and in extracurricular context, were favourable to its usage in situations in which restrictions were in favour of Catalan. In order for immersion to be more effective it should include, 'the need to live immersed in a social context that operates in this language' (Navarro, 1998: 405).

The situation is different if one speaks of linguistic competencies. Educational policy has had a decisive effect on the development of the population's competencies in Catalan, thanks to the creation of immersion programmes as one of its more important instruments.

As we have seen, in 1978 the majority of the Spanish-speaking population was monolingual and the Catalan speakers themselves were only competent in Catalan in its spoken form. Nowadays, the generations born after '78 are competent in both languages. The results of the 2008 Study on Linguistic Usage (*Generalitat de Catalunya*, 2009, ob. cit.) indicate that the population over fifteen years old can understand (99.9%), speak (78.3%), read (81.7%) and write (62.3%) Catalan. These results would undoubtedly be higher if the study only included those generations who had attended school.

The competencies of this population in Spanish are above 95% in all four skills.

From the immersion model towards a school entirely run in Catalan

It was previously mentioned that in 1993 some 88% of schools were of 'maximum *Catalanisation*', which is to say, schools where Catalan was the major language of instruction, including those schools following the immersion programme.

For some years the *Llei de Normalització Lingüística* (Linguistic Normalisation Law) (Law/1, 1998) has established that Catalan is the sole language of instruction at all educational levels below university level. Subsequent decrees have reserved Spanish and a foreign language a space of three hours per week for each.

Catalonia's teaching model is often referred to as 'monolingual', by which we mean a school where all non-linguistic subjects related to the curriculum (maths, sciences, humanities and so on) is taught in Catalan.

The existing educational legislation has made official a situation that was already in existence, since many schools already followed this model, thanks to moves by the administration.

During this period, immersion programmes have fallen from sight in terms of specific projects. Nevertheless, teachers have employed immersive techniques in those schools where the majority of pupils are Spanish-speakers.

As a consequence of these changes, the options parents have of choosing a particular school model have been restricted, but this has not created any particular conflict. Only a handful of Spanish-speaking parents who are pre-occupied by the situation have taken a case to the Spanish Constitutional Court, which has ruled that the Catalan educational model is constitutional. The court has reminded parents that they have the right for their children to receive special support in their language in the initial period of schooling, as stated in the *Llei de Normalització Lingüística*. This right has been exercised by very few parents (some fifteen in the 2009/2010 academic year), since the majority trust the model offered by the school.

The right-wing political party, both in Spain and Catalonia (the *Partido Popular*, or People's Party) have criticised the current educational policy as they see it as limiting a knowledge of Spanish. They propose the creation of educational models with bilingual teaching in order to give parents the option of choosing a school model. They also argue that at least four hours a week should be dedicated to Spanish in order to improve the pupils' competence in this language.

The studies that have been carried out do not support this viewpoint. Two statewide studies on written knowledge of Spanish indicate that pupils in Catalonia have an average of basic competencies in Spanish that are equivalent to pupils in the rest of the state (INCE, 1999, 2000). The study was carried out on pupils at the end of primary school and compulsory secondary education and was conducted on a very large sample. An international evaluation of reading comprehension on fifteen year-old school pupils from thirty-two countries (28 of which belong to the OECD), carried out here in Spanish, indicate that Catalonia occupies a position slightly above Spain. Nevertheless, the results are not encouraging as Catalonia and Spain occupy positions 17 and 19 respectively in the rankings, according to the study (OECD, 2001).

Some research carried out in Catalonia has compared linguistic competence in Catalan and Spanish according to the languages of the pupils' families (Catalan or Spanish), the socio-professional position of the family and schooling model being followed, when still applicable (schooling completely in Catalan, immersion or bilingual) (SEDEC, 1998).

This study shows that Catalan speakers are significantly more competent in Catalan in nine out of the four-

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IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE CURRENT SCHOOL SYSTEM DOES NOT PRODUCE A LARGE IMBALANCE IN THE COMPETENCIES OF PUPILS OF EITHER LANGUAGE

Morera, M and Teberosky, A. (1998). 'Les experiències lletrades a secundària en un context bilingüe' (The Experiences of Arts in Secondary Education in a Bilingual Context). A: J. Arnau and J. M. Artigal (eds.). *Els programes d'immersió: una perspectiva europea* (Immersion Programs: a European perspective) (pp. 238-250). Barcelona: Edicions Universitat de Barcelona.

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teen tests undertaken, when compared to Spanish speakers. The comparison as to the level of Spanish indicates that the former group are also significantly better in three tests that refer to written text and are only inferior in terms of spoken accuracy. The study confirmed earlier studies (Alsina et al., ob. cit.; Arnau, 1985, ob. cit.; Arnau et al., 1994), that indicated that the social level of Catalan speakers (who are more represented in the middle and higher socio-professional classes) and the environmental presence of Spanish can influence fluency in this language especially in terms of academic knowledge (reading and writing). Neither the model of schooling, nor the family language decisively influences the knowledge of Spanish. On the other hand, the model of schooling (predominantly in Catalan) is a decisive factor of linguistic competence in Catalan of Spanish speakers, given the low public profile of Catalan outside of school.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the current school system does not produce a large imbalance in the competencies of pupils of either language.

The results represent general tendencies among the school population and one can always find subjects that are exceptions and, for whatever reasons, have a lower level of competency in their second language.

A new immersion

As I have mentioned, in recent years, Catalonia has witnessed an increase in immigrants from different cultural and

linguistic backgrounds unlike another other country in the world and in a very short period of time. The number of immigrants in the classrooms has gone from 0.58% in 1999 to 12.5% in 2008. The pupils have joined the schools at any stage of the academic year, which has created serious problems in educational terms.

The *Generalitat de Catalunya* developed its Plan for Language, Interculturality and Social Cohesion (2004) in order to serve the immigrant population. The Plan defines the aims and objectives, area of operation and predicted resources. So-called *aules d'acollida* ('reception classrooms') are essentially places where students who are late in joining the education system learn Catalan. For the remaining time they are integrated into the ordinary classroom, following a transition programme that begins with attending subjects with a more comprehensible input (physical education, music, art, workshops), to go on to subjects that require a more complex linguistic input (social and natural sciences and so on).

During the 2008/2009 academic year there were a total of 24,505 pupils attending 2,236 *aules d'acollida* (Department of Education, 2008) in compulsory schooling.

An important part of the Plan are the so-called *Plans d'Entorn* ('Surrounding Plan'), support networks in the educational community (municipal services, organisations in the cultural, social and sporting sphere). They are a space where schoolchildren and their families can socialise in a different way from at school. It is a very important and necessary initiative in a context in which Catalan is barely present in the places where immigrants live.

An evaluation of the definition of the principles and actions of the *Pla per a la Llengua, la Interculturalitat i la Cohesió* So-

cial (Plan for the Language, Interculturality and Social Cohesion) (Arnau, 2005) indicates that it incorporates many indices of quality, in keeping with the 'standards' proposed by an education system that is truly inclusive (Coelho, 2005).

The *Generalitat* has assigned a lot of resources and effort to the assessment and training of teaching staff, particularly the tutors in the *ales d'acollida*. While the plan has still not been fully appraised, it is necessary to see what its effects and results are.

The accumulated experience throughout so many years of teaching in a second language via immersion programmes should make attending to the needs of the immigrant population in a more effective way.

Perspectives for the future

The profound transformation that has occurred in Catalonia's schools in terms of the incorporation of Catalan has been investigated.

The current situation is of schools that operate entirely in Catalan and face two important challenges, among others:

- Provide quality multilingual competence to the entire school population. This is something that is very necessary in a global society.
- Create inclusive schools that achieve the necessary integration of new arrivals.

The first objective can be achieved by:

- Planning a school model that takes Catalan as the basic language of instruction, while progressively incorporating the teaching of the other two languages (Spanish and a foreign language). This is done via the offer of attractive content (of the conventional curriculum or another), completely rejecting the teaching of sterile versions of the languages, based on a formal, exclusively grammatical teaching, which limits the possibilities for participation and communication.

- Integrating the teaching of the three languages, such that the teachers of each share optimal teaching principles and strategies.

- The development of a certain linguistic conscience based on a reflection on the similarities and differences between various linguistic systems.

As for the second goal, it is evident that it is necessary to safeguard the attention to the diversity represented by immigrants and to consider this diversity as a possibility to understand one another.

The key to confronting these two challenges is to be found in adequate teacher training and in spreading and valuing the experiences that are already emerging in the current context.

Obviously we are speaking of competencies in the school context. The weight given to the use of languages by the different social actors in the future is another issue entirely.

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