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Multilingual primary education initiative in French Polynesia

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Abstract

Multilingual education is receiving remarkable attention in language policy planning efforts of many countries, and aiming at providing culturally responsive education. French Polynesia, which is an overseas territory of France, represents a fine example for its efforts towards maintaining and revaluing multilingual education. The foreign and local language teaching initiative in French Polynesian primary education is the extension of the early childhood foreign and regional language education policy started in the 2000s in France. The first part of this paper describes the French Polynesian educational context and the second part provides a succinct review of the research activities conducted on multilingual practices at French Polynesian elementary schools. The final part discusses the forthcoming research activities and further directions in multilingual education projects in French Polynesia.

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1. Introduction

For the last decade, multilingual education has received remarkable attention in Language Policy and Planning (LPP) efforts in numerous countries, notably in the European Union (EU) member states. Today many nations and communities are recognizing the linguistic diversity as cultural heritage and working towards maintaining, revaluing and revitalizing indigenous languages (Ricento, 2009). French Polynesia, which is an overseas collectivity of France

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(COM-- *collectivités d'outre-mer*) with a population of approximately three hundred thousand people, is a good example for its LPP efforts towards maintaining and revaluing multilingualism. Today improving the quality of local language and English language learning practices at schools is one of the educational priorities in French Polynesia. The local and foreign language teaching (i.e. English) initiative in French Polynesian primary education is the extension of the early childhood foreign and regional language education policy started in France in the 2000s, as part of the EU's multilingual education movement. The language education movement is based on the belief that learning languages could contribute to developing a sense of global citizenship and could increase competitiveness of the EU economy (Council conclusions on the European Indicator of Language Competence 2006/C 172/01).

In French Polynesia, struggles to revitalize and gain recognition for the indigenous languages had always subsisted within the local community yet had not received any formal attention from the central government until the 1980s (see the review by Paia & Vernaudeau, 2002). Since the beginning of the early 2000s both regional and foreign language teaching practices have gained a significant impetus in France (Deyrich, 2007; Tardieu, 2006). This revolutionary change in language learning policies in France gave the long awaited impetus to the teaching of local and foreign languages in French Polynesia. From 2005 onwards, the local education department, some researchers at the University of French Polynesia, and the National Research Agency launched several research projects on multilingual-learning in pre-primary and primary education levels (see Gabillon & Ailincăi 2013; Nocus *et al*, 2012a; Nocus *et al*, 2012b; Salaün, 2012).

2. French Polynesian educational context

In French Polynesia, education is under the responsibility of both local authorities and central government. French Polynesian primary and secondary education implement French National Curriculum except for some adjustments to adapt for local needs. The *Vice-Recteur* (Vice Chancellor), who is an appointed government official, represents the Ministry of National Education, Youth, and Sport, (fr: *Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative*), and the Ministry of Higher Education and research. The *Vice-Rectorat* ensures the administration of the national education in French Polynesia and undertakes some key responsibilities such as the financial control of the educational budget, management of the government employees, certification of state examinations (e.g. teacher certification examinations) and organization of competitive state exams (e.g. baccalauréat: the high-school leaving exam taken at the end of the secondary education in France).

Since 2004, the local authorities have gained more independence in issues concerning education. The organic law of 2004, about self-government, (organic law no 2004-192) ordains the transfer of several competences that were previously reserved for the French State to French Polynesia. This law about self-government and some official texts about education [The Charter of Education, 05/09/2011, the state-territory convention on education n° HC 56-07, 04/04/2012] assign responsibility and authority to the local educational institution to tailor the national curriculum to meet the needs of their local community. These official texts recommend that the historical, geographic, social, economic, natural and cultural realities of the country be taken into account when implementing the local school curricula.

French is the only official language and the medium of instruction in French Polynesia. The primary education includes both pre-school and elementary school education and schooling is compulsory from five to sixteen years of age. French Polynesia is comprised of one hundred and eighteen islands and covers an area as large as Europe. Sixty-seven of these islands and atolls are inhabited and almost all have elementary schools. There are a hundred and seventy two elementary schools on five archipelagos and the fact that these schools are spread across huge geographical areas in the Pacific Ocean makes them difficult to manage. In French Polynesia elementary school teachers are generalist teachers and they do not receive specialized primary level foreign language teacher education as part of their qualification. However, it is possible for some elementary school teachers to have a bachelor's degree in modern foreign languages or in Tahitian. In French Polynesia a competitive exam [*Concours de Recrutement de Professeurs des Ecoles (CRPE)*] is used as part of the selection procedure for elementary school teaching positions in both the state and private sectors. A university diploma is a prerequisite in order to qualify to take the *CRPE* exam. All elementary school teachers are expected to have competence level B2 (upper-intermediate level) in English and in Tahitian that corresponds to the Common European Framework of Reference

for Languages (CEFRL). However, not many elementary school teachers have the required level of language competence either in English or in Tahitian. In French Polynesia, the new teacher education system *Ecoles Supérieures du Professorat et de l'Éducation (ESPE)*, which will be put in practice in effect from 2014-2015 (2015-2016 for elementary school teacher education), will require obtainment of a Master degree and will integrate compulsory foreign and local language learning modules in teachers pre-service training. In this new system, the attainment of the level B2 of CEFRL, both in Tahitian and in a foreign language, will be a prerequisite for all primary school to start their teaching profession.

3. Teaching of the local and foreign languages at pre-elementary and elementary levels

3.1. Learning local languages at French Polynesian elementary schools

In 1980, a decision taken by the French Polynesian Council (*L'Assemblée de la Polynésie Française*) acknowledged Tahitian as the second official language (Decision No. 2036 of 28 November 1980 article 1). However, the decision of the French Polynesian Council has never received any legal recognition by the French Government. The legal government documents and official texts recognize the local languages as fundamental elements of cultural identity, a means of daily communication, cultural heritage and wealth of French Polynesia (the Organic Law n° 2004-192 2004 article 57; the State-Territory Convention on Education n° HC 56-07 of the 04/04/2012). Tahitian was introduced in French Polynesian schools pursuant to the decree n° 81-553 about “teaching of languages and dialects” in 1981. With effect from 1982, Tahitian language was incorporated into the local school curricula and from this date onwards all children from pre-elementary through secondary school level received instruction in Tahitian with teaching hours varying from two to two and a half per week (The organic law n° 2004-192 of the 27/02/2004). Since 2005, the teaching hours allocated for Polynesian language practices have been benefiting from the flexibility of reaching up to five hours per week, in experimental settings at elementary school level (e.g. academic research projects or pedagogical school projects). A recent report that has been issued by the management of assessment, forecasting and performance department, (*L'état de l'École Primaire de Polynésie, DEPP, 2013*) announced that at kindergarten level, teaching of the local languages will gradually increase up to 5 hours by the academic year 2015-2016.

French Polynesia has always been a multilingual society where five local languages have co-existed throughout five French Polynesian archipelagos. However, *Reo Mā`ohi (Reo Tahiti)*, the native language of the Society Islands, is the main local language used throughout French Polynesia (Paia & Veraudon 2002). Many French Polynesians speak these five local languages and dialectal variants of these languages, as their main language at home. These languages are Tahitian (*Reo Mā`ohi* or *Reo Tahiti*), spoken in Society Islands; Pa'umotu (*Reo Pa'umotu*), spoken in Tuamotu archipelagos; Marquesan (*Reo Nu'uhiva* or *Reo'enana*), spoken in the Marquesas Islands; Austral, spoken in the Austral Islands; and Mangareva, spoken in the Gambier Islands (Peltzer 2009).

3.2. Learning English as a foreign language at French Polynesian elementary schools

English as a foreign language (EFL) was first introduced in French Polynesian elementary schools in 2006 as part of a pilot project. With effect from 2010, the French Polynesian government incorporated EFL as an integral part of the elementary school curriculum. Currently all elementary schools are involved in the project and all CM2 (10 year-olds) (since 2010), CM1 (9 year-olds) (since 2011), CE2 (8 year-olds) (since 2012), and CE1 (7 year-olds) (since 2013) students have been receiving English classes regularly. The targeted English level of the primary education is to attain A1 level on the scale provided by the CEFRL.

The English Language Unit (*Cellule d'Anglais*) is in charge of the implementation of EFL classes in French Polynesia. The unit comprises a director, two language advisors and fourteen colleague mentors. The French Polynesian Primary Education Department (PED) [*fr. Direction d'Enseignement Primaire (DEP)*] has a group of language advisors and colleague mentors working for the ELU. This unit is responsible for the preparation of pedagogical materials for the classroom use. After the materials are devised, they are tested by the teachers and the teachers are observed while using these materials in class. Then the feedback is obtained both from the class teacher

and the colleague mentor who observed the teacher. This feedback is then utilised to make the necessary adjustments to elaborate the material and the modality of the pedagogical practice. After some adjustments, these materials are re-implemented, observed, and fine-tuned until the materials development unit confirms that they have attained the expected standard. The four members of the ELU are based at the Department of Primary Education headquarters, and they keep a constant contact with the other members. These ELU members are also responsible for student evaluation procedures and in-service training.

4. Research on Bilingualism

4.1. School success and research on child bilingual education

In French Polynesia, majority of the children are bilingual speakers (e.g. a local Polynesian language and French as the language of schooling), and there are many children who are multilingual speakers (i.e. French as the language of schooling, a local Polynesian language, and a heritage language i.e. Chinese *Haka dialect*). Although French is the language of schooling, often a Polynesian language (e.g. *Reo Tahiti, Nu'uhiva or Reo'enana etc.*) is spoken at home and this local language, which is used in the child's immediate environment, remains as the language of socialization. Although, the majority of Polynesian children understand and speak standard French, many among them speak a form of non-standard French, integrating local words and expressions, or alternating linguistic code when communicating.

The French National Education Department employs a national assessment procedure to help ascertain how well pupils are performing. The statistical data supplied by the national educational authorities regularly demonstrate that the school success of the Polynesian elementary school children is significantly lower compared to general school success at national level (i.e. school success in Metropolitan France) (see Pastor & Taetua 2008; Poirine, 1991, 1992 for overall statistical data). This deficiency in school success is considered to be linked to the socio-linguistic context (Nocus *et al* 2012b) and the educational authorities called for research to investigate and provide answers to the problem.

Research on child learning and bilingual education has consistently reported significant advantages offered by bilingual or multilingual education compared to monolingual education (Baker 2007, 2011; Bialystok 2010; Bialystok, Luk & Kwan 2005, Cenoz, 2003; Cummins 1998, 2014; Cummins & Swain 1986) Kovelman, Baker, & Petitto 2008). International research data on bilingualism and bilingual learning methods, which make use of children's native language, indicate positive impact on children's language development and academic success. Numerous studies have suggested that a child who has had a bilingual schooling compared to a child who has had only monolingual schooling benefits from significant pedagogical advantages (see reviews in Baker 2011; Cummins 1978, 1998). Some of these studies have also shown that bilingual children have more advanced cognitive processing abilities than monolingual children who are at about the same developmental stage. This advantage in cognitive processing has been observed on a wide range of cognitive tasks, including both verbal and nonverbal domains (Bialystok 2010; Bialystok, Luk & Kwan 2005). Several studies have also suggested that there is an additive effect of bilingualism on third language acquisition (see reviews in Cenoz, 2003).

4.2. Recent trends and research on child foreign language learning

Recent trends and research on foreign/second language learning advocate use of approaches that enable fostering naturalistic learning environments and developing academic and social skills, as well as, foreign language competence. Content and Language Integrated Learning (hereafter CLIL) is an approach that includes the principal elements which are regarded as requisite for successful language acquisition. CLIL is an approach with two main educational focuses: to develop target language skills and to acquire disciplinary content knowledge. The approach is employed to teach a school subject via a foreign, indigenous, heritage, regional or another official language in bi/multilingual educational contexts (European Commission document, 2002). The term CLIL was introduced to the educational and foreign language learning literature in the early 1990s by a group of linguists and experts in education who collaborated in the bilingual/multilingual education provision prompted by the European Commission (European Commission document, 2002).

Today CLIL is one of the main issues of the Council of Europe's language policy and planning agenda and the EU state schools are encouraged to incorporate CLIL practices into their national school curriculum. The CLIL approach does not only target at teaching language skills and the disciplinary subject content but it also aims at building up academic cognitive skills and learner strategies that learners can transfer and use in other learning contexts. The CLIL practices make use of natural learning situations and target at authentic language use, real-life situations, gestures, and artifacts to facilitate natural foreign/indigenous/regional language acquisition in classroom settings. This type of naturalistic way of learning is particularly considered to be suitable for young language learners (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006). CLIL also aims at enhancing skills (e.g. social, academic, cognitive etc) and learner strategies that learners can transfer and use in other similar learning contexts.

4.3. Research activities and pilot-projects on multilingualism in French Polynesia

The positive research outcomes, which scholars obtained in various bilingual/multilingual educational contexts, prompted the local authorities, some researchers (i.e. experts in education, socio-linguists, psychologists, and sociologists) to conduct parallel research activities in French Polynesian elementary schools. Since the year 2005, several French Polynesian elementary schools have participated in various experimental studies and pilot projects both in bilingual and foreign language education programs.

Between the years 2005-2012, two research projects investigated the effects of bilingual education (French and the Tahitian language) on Polynesian children's speaking, reading and writing skills at French Polynesian elementary school level. These two research projects, ECOLPOM (*Ecole Plurilingue Outre-Mer*), which means 'Multilingual Overseas Schools', were funded by the National Agency for Research (*L'Agence Nationale de la Recherche*) (Nocus, Vernaudon, & Paia, 2014). The first project took place from 2005 to 2008 (Nocus *et al* 2014) and the second phase of the project was implemented between 2009-2012 (Nocus, Vernaudon, & Paia, 2014). The ECOLPOM project is currently undergoing an extension as part of a new research program entitled RéoC3, which focuses exclusively on French Polynesian languages and their teaching at the primary education level.

The aim of the ECOLPOM project was to measure the possible impact of a partial bilingual education (i.e. Tahitian and French) on the psychological development of the participant children, their school success and language learning (Nocus *et al* 2012b). The project primarily examined the effects of this partial bilingual education program on the learners' (6-8 year-olds) oral and reading skill development in both French and Tahitian (Nocus *et al* 2012a). This experimental research activity involved 212 pupils: a) an experimental group with 120 children (60 girls & 60 boys) and b) a control group with 92 children (43 girls & 49 boys) (Nocus *et al*, 2014). The results of this experimental study revealed that this partial bilingual education program (Tahitian/French): a) did not hinder the acquisition of the children's schooling language (French); b) the program had a positive effect on the learners' proficiency in Tahitian but produced neither positive nor a negative effect on the learners' proficiency in French.

The ECOLPOM project coupled the psycholinguistic component with a sociolinguistic research module. This second research module, which took place after obtaining positive results from the first phase, sought to determine whether strengthening the teaching of local languages, had modified the representations and practices of the teachers, educational authorities and the families about the local languages. The sociolinguistic research component used interviews and observations as research instruments that particularly looked into family bilingual language practices and representations and the family and school relationships (Salaün, 2014).

In addition to the research projects that examined bilingual programs (Tahitian/French), French Polynesian elementary schools also participated in other national school projects and experimental and exploratory research activities that focused on learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at the primary education level.

The first pedagogical pilot project in EFL was initiated by the local educational authorities in 2006 in six schools at pre-school level (5 year-olds) and involved seven teachers. During this pedagogical EFL project the same pupils were taught and their EFL performances were observed for three years until they reached the CE1 level (*Cours Élémentaire 1* = 7 year olds) age eight. The pilot phase employed a progressive scheme moving from pre-school level (5 year-olds) in 2007 to a higher-grade to CP level (*Cours Préparatoire* = 6 year-olds) in 2008, CE1-CE2 (7 year-olds and 8 year-olds) in 2009, and finally CM1-CM2 (*Cours Moyenne 1* = 9 year-olds and *Cours Moyenne 2* = 10 year-olds) in 2009. The project ended in 2009. During these three years of experimentation, language-learning

tools were tested and fine-tuned, and the teaching was adjusted to answer the pedagogical needs of the pupils. During this period, many elementary school teachers attended in service-programs and were informed about the recent developments in foreign/second language teaching [interview with the head of the English Language Unit (ELU--*fr Cellule d'Anglais*), May 2011].

Since 2012, as part of the EFL provision, another longitudinal research study has been conducted by the researchers from the EASTCO research laboratory (*Equip d'Accueille Sociétés Traditionnelles et Contemporaines en Océanie*), University of French Polynesia, at the primary education level. The first phase of the study employed the CLIL approach to teach science lessons through the medium of English. The teaching sessions and the activities used for this study were designed considering the following principles:

- select the school subject content taking into account their ability in the L2;
- provide instructional scaffolding to support learning of both the L2 and the disciplinary content;
- support the use of learner strategies and cognitive skills;
- provide the learners with experiential learning and hands-on experience to help them learn by doing;
- provide learners with authentic learning settings[e.g. doing a science experiment using lab equipments and everyday substances];
- enable the learners to learn skills that they can transfer and use in other similar contexts (e.g. know-how skills to complete tasks and solve problems which involve cognitive skills) and practical skills (e.g. employment of manual skills and methods, materials, tools and instruments). (Gabillon & Ailincăi 2013, p. 171)

The preliminary results obtained at the end of the first phase of this longitudinal classroom-based research suggested that the CLIL approach could be effectively implemented with beginner level young foreign language learners. The examined data also indicated that: a) the use of gestures and artifacts facilitate content learning and improve the quality of dialogical exchanges; b) dialogic classroom exchanges (student ↔ student or teacher ↔ students) can be used as both a means for scaffolding content learning and language learning (Gabillon & Ailincăi, 2013). The CLIL project is an ongoing project and at present, the researchers are investigating the role gestures and artifacts play on the length and the quality of classroom exchanges in experiential pedagogical activities (e.g. in CLIL science lessons).

5. Conclusion

For the past decade, the teaching of EFL and Polynesian languages has undergone an enormous expansion in French Polynesian elementary schools. During this period of growth, both multilingual pedagogical tools and modalities of teaching languages have been progressively assessed and reviewed. The research activities conducted in French Polynesian elementary schools have provided the local authorities with useful information on Polynesian children's academic, cognitive, social and conational skills in multilingual elementary school setting.

The future research intends to complement the experimental research projects that particularly invested in partial bilingual education programs (i.e. ECOLPOM) and exploratory and experimental research projects, which investigated the CLIL practices in English as a foreign language setting in French Polynesian elementary schools. Future research projects aim at collecting a representative corpus on existing multilingual educational practices across the five archipelagos of French Polynesia. The future projects also aim to go beyond the school and teaching context and widen their scope to include the family in these multilingual educational programs. In these forthcoming projects both group of researchers; that is, the researchers who work on bilingual education (Tahitian/French), and the researchers who work on CLIL, intend to join their efforts and act in close cooperation.

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