BOILING WATER, OR THE PROCESS OF SYSTEMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON UNDERSTANDING

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Nowadays, people often ask us the question: Why is it, after so many years of things moving so slowly on Aruba, that suddenly now everyone at all levels is in agreement and everyone is to introduce Papiamento as the language of instruction within a multilingual model of education? What happened? Without pretending to know the answer to this question, as an insider I would like to share my view on this process and I would like to do so by invoking a metaphor: You know when you put water to boil, how you wait and wait and nothing seems to happen? And then suddenly, one little bubble appears. And then another one. And yet another one. And the bubbles start to become bigger and to appear more frequently. This paper is about a similar process of transformation from one state to another. The process of working on a change that you cannot yet see, the results of which never seem to materialize, until you suddenly notice that all that work and energy that you put into it was not in vain. You realize that the flame actually heated the water and that when you almost didn't expect it anymore…. the water started to boil!

In Aruba I grew up hearing the incessant heated discussions about the value of Papiamento, our national language, the injustice done to children who were not allowed to learn in their own language and the many talents we lose for not offering an alternative. At home, at school, at parties, everyone seemed to have an opinion on this topic. What often starts as a statement made by one person, leads to emotional battles about the pros and cons of using Papiamento in the classroom. As a child I felt the energy transmitted by the debaters on both sides, I could sense that this was an important issue but I also experienced a profound emptiness and powerlessness at the end of every discussion, because conclusive solutions to the problem seemed to be elusive and beyond our collective reach.

Without knowing back then the linguistic terminology used to describe this approach to language planning as being a *sentimental approach* emphasizing *language as a*

right, I could implicitly and intuitively feel that this line of argumentation was emotionally very powerful, but that in itself it could not bring about change at the scale required to transform the whole educational system with a completely new language policy. In this initial stage the new language policy itself was not clearly articulated, and there were a variety of *interpretations* about the way Papiamento should or should not be introduced into the education system, ranging from:

(a) the introduction of Papiamento as a subject within the current Dutch educational system, to
(b) the introduction of Papiamento as the language of instruction alongside Dutch during the first years of schooling in a bilingual phase that would last for a variable number of years and then eventually transition into the traditional Dutch monolingual system, to
(c) the introduction of Papiamento as the sole language of instruction, replacing the current monolingual Dutch system, thereby excluding all other languages from the system, including Dutch, except perhaps as foreign language subjects at a later stage.

These various interpretations could lead to heated discussions about non-issues, simply because there was no common understanding regarding what we meant when we said we were for or against the use of Papiamento in the classroom.

While discussions were taking place in public spaces everywhere, the situation in the schools remained the same or became even worse as years passed. Being the daughter of a Belgian teacher and being a student myself in Aruban primary and secondary schools, I could see and hear firsthand how both students and teachers struggled with using a foreign language as the main medium of instruction. It wasn't easy for either the students or the teachers to participate in what seems to me to be the essence of education: an intense dialogue between people to arrive at deeper and deeper levels of understanding until that 'magic' moment when we realize that something new has been shared and learned. Even I, who had the enormous advantage over my classmates of being brought up at home partially in Dutch, couldn't get the answers that I needed from the teachers, because I could see them reaching their own limits to find the Dutch vocabulary required to respond to my questions. I spent many hours sitting outside the classroom for reading too fast, for asking too many questions and for disturbing the structured question-and-answer routine going on inside. I felt frustrated that education wasn't about learning and understanding, that curiosity was not appreciated, that discussions simply couldn't take place, because it was impossible to involve the whole class using a foreign language.

What was passing for 'education' in Aruban classrooms was learning words and texts by heart. This seemed to me to be a very anemic version of real education. The education system had been forced to tie itself in knots in order to adapt as best it could to a thoroughly wrongheaded language policy. Any improvement on this unacceptable situation would be impossible without addressing the language issue, because if we want more active learners, more learning-to-learn, more application of knowledge, more differentiation, more integrated learning, etc. it all depends on effectively mobilizing what the students already know (including their native language) in the process of introducing that which has yet to be learned. The success of any educational reform depends ultimately on whether or not it has a positive impact on the sense-making interactions between the teacher and the pupil, and these interactions depend crucially on a medium (language) for interaction that both pupils and teachers feel comfortable in.

Aruban teachers have therefore been condemned to work every day in a schizophrenic struggle between:

(a) being loyal to the language policy and maintaining a Dutch-only environment in the classroom (and dealing with all the negative consequences for the educational process) or
(b) being loyal to their role as educator and trying to teach the children as much as possible about a given subject in the language that their students feel most comfortable with (and dealing with complaints by administrators and parents that the students are not getting enough exposure to Dutch).

The inevitable and frequent failures which result from teachers being forced to walk this unreasonable tightrope have lead to a collective sense of impotence, paralysis, passivity, and hopelessness regarding possibilities for change.

It wasn't so strange then, that when I decided to study education, I had a dream. I had a purpose in my head and in my heart to break this cycle. I wanted to contribute to the transformation needed to open the doors and windows of the educational prison that we had built for ourselves and to be able to offer our future citizens the stepping stones and bridges necessary for them to reach their full potential. I realized though, that to make such a change possible, determination and hard work would not be the only ingredients we would need. We needed new approaches which could transcend the 'impasses' that typified the endless debates of the past.
Having observed too many empty discussions, I saw the importance of putting in some new ingredients: evidence based data and concrete, creative, and well articulated models for change. These new elements needed to be shared and revised with stakeholders at all levels, with the purpose of reaching a common understanding of the

different factors involved in the introduction of Papiamento in education. In order to construct new arguments and discourses that would really transform the debates, we would need proven theories, realistic solutions and spaces where rational and creative dialogue could take place.

While I was studying in Holland, the first step in closing the gap between the two opposing sides in the Papiamento in education debate, was made by a group who produced a concrete new language model for Aruban education in the form of a policy document entitled, "Pa un enseñansa bilingual" (Directie Onderwijs Aruba, 1988). This policy document proposed a bilingual transitional model for primary education and consciously refrained from speaking about *either* Papiamento *or* Dutch in school, but started instead to explore the many possibilities where *both* Papiamento *and* Dutch could be used and learned in school following sound pedagogical principles. The monolingual either-or discourse was thus transformed into a bilingual one. With this the foundation was laid for further advances. This first version of a bilingual model was later elaborated in several consequent policy documents, but the more detailed the bilingual model became, the more reasons we encountered to propose a new alternative model.

In Dutch there is an expression that says: *Als twee honden vechten om een been, gaat de derde ermee heen* [If two dogs fight for a bone, the third dog will take it]. In the either-Papiamento-or-Dutch and later the how-much-Papiamento-how-much Dutch discussions, English was gradually assuming that "third dog" status. Once the idea became generally accepted that neither Papiamento alone nor Dutch alone was the solution and that the various combinations of both languages could also be problematic, it was suggested that perhaps it would be better to introduce English as an alternative additional language in education. In general, taking English on board was seen as an additive, rather than a subtractive step, transforming the bilingual discourse into a new multilingual discourse. In this way, the idea was born that a multilingual school, where children would learn more than two languages might provide a constructive solution for the problems at hand. It was not long before Spanish was added as a fourth language to the now multilingual conversation. Adding English and Spanish to the equation on the one hand helped to bridge past differences, but on the other hand posed new threats or challenges, since Dutch now had two dominant metropolitan languages and Papiamento now had three dominant metropolitan languages to share the school curriculum with.

The new multilingual discourse united several formerly opposing interest groups in society. For example, in the business sector, where people formerly opposed the use of Papiamento in education, fearing for the loss of Dutch as a language of social mobility

and wider communication, the new multilingual model (including Papiamento) was readily accepted because it added English and Spanish, the two languages of vital importance for the commercial survival of Aruba.
The debate now reached a qualitatively different stage of convergence of interests, in other words, the bubbles were beginning to appear at the bottom of the increasingly heated pot of water. Once it was established that all four of the languages that play an important role in the Aruban society, the Caribbean region and the global marketplace should be included in any reform to language and education policy, the tumultuous discussions about which languages to include or not to include in education calmed down and we entered a new phase. The question then arose as to how these four languages were to be learned.

The first round of discussions which followed focused on which language to adopt (or maintain) as the language of instruction, with arguments on all sides focusing on the need to learn the one particular language or another. These discussions thus focused on the importance of learning each language, assuming or implying that to learn a language it had to be the language of instruction. This assumption was undermined though by two bodies of evidence. One was the fact that our own Aruban students who go to study abroad in the United States or in Latin American countries fairly easily adapt to the use of English or Spanish as the language of instruction without ever having experienced English or Spanish as a language of instruction before. Moreover, Arubans studying in the US or in Latin American countries tend to have a higher success rate than those who study in the Netherlands, undermining further the assumption that in order to learn a language - Dutch in this case - at the academic level required to be able to have success with it as a language of instruction in higher education, Aruban students have to start using it as the language of instruction from as early a stage as the first grade of primary education. The other strong evidence that refuted this assumption was the successful introduction of a specific one-year program for teaching Dutch as a Second Language to a great number of predominantly Latin American pupils entering the Aruban primary education system after grade two. The success of this group in mastering Dutch within a year with a higher level of proficiency than Aruban children who had experienced Dutch as the language of instruction from a much earlier age, proved that in order to learn Dutch, the approach to teaching Dutch and the strength of the foundation already attained in the native language (Spanish in this case) were more important factors than the amount of years Dutch was used as a language of instruction in an artificial context. Even the idea that since higher education in Holland is in Dutch, all education in Aruba should be in Dutch as well in order to offer the best chances to our students to eventually succeed there, has been undermined by the reality that Dutch institutes for higher education are

nowadays shifting towards the use of English as the language of instruction in their top academic programs.
Gradually people have come to realize that in order to learn a given language for higher education purposes, it is not necessary to have used that language before as a language of instruction, and that using a given language as a language of instruction is not necessarily the most effective way of learning that language. This understanding immediately led people to pose the question as to how our students could learn these four languages in such a way that "success in higher education" would be guaranteed for all (as if enrolling in higher education is the only desirable attainment target for all students and the only reason for children to go to school).

Learning languages may not be a topic people contemplate very often. Nevertheless most people have a straightforward idea about the way languages are learned. The most common idea is that if you allocate a larger amount of time for learning the language, the language is learned better. Although this idea seems completely logical at first glance, it is not completely true. What is missing in this equation is the quality of the instruction offered and the context within which it is offered. Languages are learned in a context, and children need to relate the language learned to the language context they recognize in their everyday lives. Learning implies a journey from the known to the unknown. And as on most journeys to a previously unknown location, you cannot reach your destination without a vehicle, a road and a map, or in the case of language learning:

(a) an effective medium (language) of instruction
(b) an appropriate and adaptive didactic approach
(c) clear and explicit targets to attain

Children come to school with an enormous amount of knowledge in their own mother tongue. They invest a lot of time and effort in learning this first language. As mere babies they have to make a connection between what they see, hear, feel and sense to strings of speech sounds, and to understand that all these strings of sounds actually have meaning. Gradually they discover that these sound strings can be split into words and sentences that together form a language, a vehicle that helps human beings to communicate and share their experiences with one another.
When learning a second language, these complicated concepts of how a language is structured do not need to be learned again. The child understands implicitly that the second language also has words and sentences, and that the difference between the first and second languages is limited to some specific sounds, some words and some grammatical topics. Connecting words and meaning is also much easier in a second

language, because oftentimes the meaning or concept a word refers to is already understood in the first language.

The mother tongue therefore provides the foundation upon which new languages can be learned. This point can be illustrated with Cummins' (1980: 36) Iceberg model, so people can visualize the vast amount of knowledge already present in the first language that lays the foundation for all other subsequent languages to be learned. The amount of time invested in learning the mother tongue therefore is not at the expense of time that could have been spent on learning other languages, but is an investment that pays off when attempting to learn other languages. Once this idea is understood, the simple idea that all languages are learned in the same way, that leads to either-or discussions as to the amount of time spent in the curriculum on learning each language, can be replaced by new, more complex, ideas about the interrelationship between languages and the transfer of knowledge from one language to another. This has opened up the possibility of allotting different sequences and time slots to each of the four languages in the curriculum, without necessarily entailing a devaluation or a decline in the attained proficiency of languages allotted less time than others or introduced later than others.

The language of instruction is often seen as a synonym for the most important language a child should learn. This is a natural consequence of the unnatural way that people in monolingual societies experience language and education. Many are not yet familiar with the following ideas:

(a) that a language of instruction is the medium to higher levels of learning and understanding,
(b) that learning words by heart without necessarily understanding anything, (as occurs when we use Dutch as the initial language of instruction in Aruba) can be replaced by an education where students actually interact and understand the meaning of what is taught (as when they use Papiamento as the initial language of instruction instead).
(c) that silent classrooms are not optimal spaces for learning

For Aruban teachers visiting schools abroad where they witness education taking place in a language that both the students and the teachers feel confident in, the first thing that strikes them is the amount of interaction taking place and the sound of the children voicing their questions and thoughts.
This is not to say that Papiamento is the only language in which teachers and students can reach this level of interaction. But in order for a language to be used as a language of instruction both students and teachers need to reach a level of proficiency where

they feel comfortable expressing themselves in that language, and where neither the students nor the teacher feel anxious or scared to make mistakes or stay quiet for loss of words. This is a state that can be attained in any language. It is not an impossibility to use other non-mother-tongues as languages of instruction. But… it takes time and a targeted curriculum, to prepare children to gradually make the transition and expand the number of languages that they feel comfortable with using as languages of instruction.
This new level of understanding led to the general acceptance of the idea that while children are initially introduced to key concepts in the national language Papiamento, they can be prepared to use other languages, and particularly Dutch, in a structured way that enables them to eventually switch comfortably to the use of these other languages as the language of instruction. After years of study a new language policy report for primary education was proposed (PRIEPEB, 2002), which was later approved by the Minister of Education in 2003. After yet more years of discussions on the development of the conditions needed and the best possible implementation model for this new language policy, we are now on the verge of introducing the proposed model in some pilot schools.

Therefore we are now on the threshold of the next phase in developing a common understanding and support for the introduction of Papiamento within a multilingual model in education. We have reached a phase where we now *theoretically* have a common understanding, which has led to a transformation of thinking, a certain level of general support and a situation where people are willing to give us, linguists and educationalists, the benefit of the doubt. The water has started boiling, and now this boiling water will become the source of energy for a subsequent process: to extend this support even further we will now need proof and evidence of the *actual* successes of this new language model in Aruban education and we will need the space to implement several concrete working models and determine what works best. This new phase carries a heavy load of expectations and responsibilities with it. The level of confidence and the spark and energy from the first phase will need to keep the water boiling continuously now, so that the discussion can center itself not on past questions as to whether or not a multilingual language model can be successful, but instead on the various ways in which it can be implemented, the best practices, the practical ingredients and factors which ensure success, and the variations in success from context to context, school to school and one specific classroom situation to another.

At this time in Aruban history we are on the verge of transitioning from a relatively comfortable theoretical discussion on “what in theory would work best” to the more complex, uncomfortable, practical and diversified reality of “what in practice will work best in specific and concrete situations”. The focus on “the one and only best

theoretical model" has to shift now to a menu of possible implementation models where the best working model cannot be guaranteed by theories or experiences in other contexts, but will have to be tried out in the real specific Aruban classrooms. Responsible implementation plans will have to go hand in hand with research plans where targets are set and measured.

Although this new stage brings with it new challenges and feelings of anxiety, I hope that the energy of the previous "boiling water" process can remain a continuous and secure source to tap into when the complexity of this new phase becomes overwhelming. The last word on this topic has not yet been spoken, since this new stage will surely lead to new common understandings and a community learning process where together we are transforming educational practices and creating a new future for education in Aruba. But learning from the past can help us to leap confidently into the future.

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