BOOK REVIEW


“Zob? That can’t surely be a recent word, can it?”, so Ms Dujardin asked me at one point in my ethnographic fieldwork at a multi-ethnic secondary school in Antwerp (Belgium). Ms Dujardin taught French there, and had just attended in-service training on trendy language use in French (‘langage branché’). Since she saw me as the language expert at school, she liked quizzing me about language and, quite typically, I didn’t have a clue. Consequently, she decided to ask her 5th grade class (16 year olds and above), where a majority of the pupils were of Moroccan descent and therefore slightly better at French than their classmates. Thus, she asked, “Hé les mecs, est-ce que vous savez le mot zob?”, hoping to hear the word was completely out of fashion. But after looking only briefly stunned, Imran and Jamal started up a local Antwerp drinking song (“Zuipen, zuipen, da kan ik goe, da kan ekik e blindelings en mé m’n ogen toe” [Boozing, boozing, that’s what I’m good at, I can do that blindly and with my eyes closed]), where ‘zuipen’, pronounced in Antwerp dialect, approximates the word ‘zob’. Everybody laughed of course, including Ms Dujardin who, with a look of amazement on her face, called out: “these are real Antwerpians!”.

Obviously, this anecdote illustrates how utterly ‘integrated’ these pupils were, in all the meanings the concept can imply. Linguistically, culturally and in terms of local knowledge, these pupils were all born and bred Antwerpians. Ms Dujardin’s amazement, however, equally well illustrates the fact that this is not these pupils’ regular image. Actually, most ethnic minority youth in Flemish Belgium are quickly suspected of not wanting to integrate, disregarding their school-work and wallowing in victim status at the same time as Flemish Belgium is a European champion of ethnic minority school failure (OECD 2006) and Flemish job recruitment agencies are called to account for their ethnic profiling. So, despite the signs of their indisputable integration into Flemish society, pupils such as Imran and Jamal are still targets for earmarking in a society that dresses up its inability to manage diversity as an inclusion project for diversity’s owners.

Focusing on how schools perceive and respond to the challenge of integrating ethnic minority and foreign students into their schooling system, Luisa Martin Rojo’s book Constructing inequality in multilingual classrooms similarly points out how young people of migrant background in Madrid, even those that speak the language fluently, are successfully failed and effectively hindered to obtain an ‘integrated’ status: they are confronted with low expectations, receive depleted information rather than transferrable knowledge and skills, and they find that, even with good intentions and respect for diversity, their own knowledge, social
background and language competence are time and again constructed as symptoms of incompetence. The schooling system, in other words, is “one of the factors hindering rather than promoting integration” (p. 111); it fosters an illusion of inclusion while it segregates those who are somehow different.

Martin Rojo delicately but relentlessly shows that there are three major processes involved in this: (1) a ‘compensatory logic’ according to which “activity planning, students’ inclusion and content selection are handled in a way that indicates that not much is expected of these students’” (p. 137), an educational slow motion as it were that is especially seen to work in so-called bridging or compensatory classes; (2) a differential valuation of linguistic and cultural resources, in the sense that teachers generally do not regard other languages than Spanish, and other varieties than the Castilian standard, as good enough to support learning or even see them as an impediment to students’ eventual ‘integration’ into Spanish society; and (3) students’ consistent ethnicization or exoticization as representatives of their non-national cultures; a process in which teachers topicalize and often positively value migrant students’ difference, but at the same time help contribute to a “pervasive, underlying comparison between local and non-local students” (p. 305) that eventually excludes migrant students from the nation’s self-image. But Martin Rojo demonstrates that perhaps the most effective way to exclude different students resides in their easy referral to bridge or compensatory classes: although these are recommended as “a way of attaining student progress and subsequent ‘integration’ in common classes” (p. 122), Martin Rojo shows that, if anything, these classes assure students’ definitive segregation from mainstream teaching. After all, they do not focus on academic knowledge, nor do they prepare students for the academic language use necessary to participate in mainstream classes and, as if adding insult to injury, they are taught by teachers without specialized training. Referral to a bridging or compensatory class is, in other words, a one-way ticket to an educational wasteland where profitable labour market skills are hard to grow.

The data for this impressive book were ethnographically collected by a team of researchers (with Martin Rojo as principal investigator) in four different schools in and around Madrid; schools that are different in size, in the extent to which they proclaim respect for diversity, and in their ratio of migrant students vs. white Spanish students. After the theoretical and methodological preliminaries (Chapters 1 to 4) the book consequently focuses on classroom interaction (Chapters 5 to 9), and provides an abundance of interaction fragments, ample discussion and interpretation. This allows us to see, turn-by-turn, minute-by-minute and day-by-day, how activities in compensatory classes (as opposed to mainstream classes) are not designed to generate learning as much as they seem geared to maintaining discipline and providing for non-academic business. Additionally, the data illustrate how the use of home languages in class, shown to be a learning strategy and a sign of investment in school (rather than leisure) activities, is effectively erased and so restricts students’ learning opportunities. Moreover, we see that other (in this case mostly Latin-American) varieties of Spanish are consistently frowned upon and corrected at the same time as they are folklorized as more authentic remnants of an earlier stage of Spanish. And perhaps one of the most painful findings of the book is that Latin American students, in spite of their fluent command of Spanish, fail in large numbers, “confounding the logic that ‘knowing the language’ is the most important entry-ticket to society” (p. 134). Finally, the data show us how also in schools where respect for diversity is high on the agenda, students are easily stereotyped and
tokenized as representatives of their (often identified as less capable, submissive, social hierarchy loving) culture.

Obviously, for all these reasons the importance of this book cannot be underestimated. It exposes an educational system’s inability to manage the increasing diversity that characterizes its student population in a different way than to the detriment of the owners of diversity. It points out that social and linguistic diversity is consistently treated as an individual problem, to be remedied by allowing individuals to re-train or re-socialize themselves in separate tracks before entering mainstream schooling. And it puts a finger on the scale at which students’ linguistic and other skills that could be utilized for academic language learning and teaching, among other things, are completely ignored and distrusted (cf. also, e.g., Blommaert, Creve and Willaert 2005; Cummins and Hornberger 2008). Indeed, as Martín Rojo puts it a bit matter-of-factly: “Spain is just another example of the way language policies have been implemented in Europe” (p. 39), but this book once again gives an idea of the devastating consequences.

On a critical note, it must perhaps be mentioned that the book may give the impression that what goes on in these schools results from what somewhat ‘mean’ teachers do to relatively ‘helpless’ students. This is mainly because, despite the abundance of interaction fragments, the book hardly contains interview fragments with teachers and students to make this simple opposition more ambiguous. Very little attention goes to teachers’ complaints about and despair at their changing and often deteriorating work conditions, their sense of inexperience or inability to respond to students’ needs; even though the book sketches different teaching practices, we never get to know to what extent teachers differ from each other or hold differing opinions on what they do, why, and how they might work against the current educational logic. The image of students similarly is one of a fairly homogeneous group that by and large receives what the educational system does to them, but we barely get to see what students themselves think, feel, how they perceive their schooling or classroom environment, how this influences their participation in class, nor does there seem to be much awareness for how students might work against each other (cf. Jaspers 2011). Granted, attending to this viewpoints could have perhaps diluted the strategic point of the volume under discussion, and with four different schools it may have made it even more difficult to keep the volume’s already challenging size under control, but as it is now there is a risk of reducing teachers to insensitive tyrants and students to the passive objects of our pity.

Next to this, through Chapters 5 to 9, the book seems to create what I think is an unnecessary dichotomy between two association clusters that largely correspond with ‘mainstream’ vs. ‘compensatory’ classes (or a mainstream vs. compensatory logic). The mainstream classes Martín Rojo’s team had access to were more academic, had a faster work-rhythm, there was less asymmetry between teacher and students, a focus on content and little time spent on maintaining the classroom order. Compensatory classes, on the other hand, were less academic, had a slower work-rhythm, were characterized by a pronounced asymmetry between teacher and students, mainly focused on procedures rather than content, and spent much more time on classroom discipline. While these clusters are the unarguable result of description, the question remains if these interactional trends and participant framework types are all to be seen as essential ingredients of one of the abovementioned ‘logics’, if one cluster can be called ‘progressive’ and the other ‘traditional’, let alone if one approach
automatically contributes to inequality while the other doesn’t. My answer to each of these questions would be no. Yet at several points the book holds out that in mainstream classes, more learning goes on owing to the fact that, for example, less time is spent on procedures and classroom discipline, and consequently that more time spent on procedures equals the installation of a compensatory logic and hence ‘constructs students’ inequality’. But without denying that there is more time for learning and teaching in the mainstream classes under discussion, surely it would be off beam to qualify the absence of procedure time as somehow desirable or indicative of a favourable, inequality reducing, classroom spirit. Obviously, the little time spent on procedures in mainstream classes derives from their largely uncontested nature and thus from the fact that those who found difficulty with them or were ignorant of them have already been weeded out and referred to those areas in the educational system where other difficult or slow students assemble, like compensatory classes. To be sure, inasmuch as an academic logic contributes to students’ referral to special or (s)lower tracks, it is this logic that ‘constructs inequality’ rather than another. Similarly, the existence of asymmetrical relations in class or their interactional construction does not necessarily contribute to less learning, deteriorating classroom relations or preventing students from integrating into the Spanish education system as the book appears to suggest (see, for example, p. 170). Or at least the book does not really show that there is a link between these phenomena: describing the construction of asymmetrical relations in class is one thing, but reporting on their long-term negative effects is another (and as said, there are no student perception data reported that could help hinting at this effect). There is little awareness in the book, furthermore, that many ‘good’ schools still work the ‘traditional’ way, with largely asymmetrical relations in class and little room for students’ own views. It may have been more interesting to find out how, for example, asymmetrical classrooms relations help establish a compensation and an academic logic, depending on the context, without seeing these relations as illustrative of one rather than the other logic.

Actually, the book fails to provide an explanation of why, for example, procedures are made explicit that much in bridging classes other than seeing them as the result of teachers’ low expectations. But it isn’t unreasonable to imagine that, for lack of an intellectual or other stimulus in class, procedures are often the only ‘engrossable’ (in Goffman’s words, 1974) for students, or the prime target for dissent. In this sense, the time spent on procedures is not an ingredient of the compensatory logic as much as it is a result of how students respond to this logic, in other words, a result of how this logic is resisted. Approaching things from this angle, it would be possible to demonstrate too how students are active participants in class, how they exasperate their teachers, the well-intentioned ones included, and subsequently co-construct their classroom activities, school identities and trajectories rather than merely receiving everything through what teachers do to them. Unfortunately enough, while the chapter on resistance (Chapter 9) shows how much students are aware of classroom norms (indicating that the time spent on imposing norms does not derive from their ignorance of them), it only describes a number of instances of resistance in class without relating them to the mechanisms discussed in the chapters that went before.

In spite of these cosmetic imperfections, however, this volume is a must-read. Apart from the praise it deserves for its abundant attention to interactional detail in the classroom, it is absolutely exceptional in its comparative ethnographic set up
(with fieldwork in four schools simultaneously), while it also offers newcomers to the field an excellent introduction to discursive-interactional and ethnographic sociolinguistics. To be sure, this book is a great example of what a ‘sociolinguistics of globalization’ could look like, a sociolinguistics that “has the capacity to show, in great detail and with an unparalleled amount of precision, how language reflects the predicaments of people in a globalizing world” (Blommaert 2010: 198). In sum, *Constructing inequality in multilingual classrooms* offers a marvellous albeit, regrettably enough, also a painful picture of daily life in contemporary multicultural schools.

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**Note**
1. It’s French-Arabic slang for ‘penis’.

**References**

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