

PARADIGMS OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION: INTRODUCTION

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This edition of *L1* is devoted to discussion of debates around paradigms of mother tongue education. In this special issue we have sampled contributions from Belgium, Brazil, Hong Kong and Australia that each take up the kinds of arguments which we have tried to capture in our own chapter on paradigm conflict. Each contribution deals with the polyparadigmatic character of mother tongue education and answers the main question of this issue: MTE paradigms – common? competing? coexisting? In editing this edition, what struck us was the remarkable consistency of the debates across a range of cultures, nationalities and languages.

We begin with our own discussion of paradigms of mother-tongue education. Following this, Jean-Louis Dufays (Belgium) analyses French as mother-tongue in a number of Francophone regions: firstly France, then Quebec and then the Francophone regions of Belgium and Switzerland. In all these regions literature education as transmission of cultural heritage became threatened in the 1970s by a rationalist and communicative model. Whereas the first model represents a traditional perspective on teaching and learning as knowledge transmission, the second focuses atten-

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tion on skills. Dufays explains how the change from a cultural to a utilitarian model must be seen against the background of a scientific mutation, consisting of the development of new academic subjects like linguistics and the science of texts. Next to this scientific mutation there is the sociological mutation of an exponential growth of the school population. There is also a cultural mutation: the rise of the leisure society, new audiovisual media, new ways of cultural production and new values. He also refers to the industrial conception of work in the business context influencing a task-based approach to both mother tongue and foreign language teaching. Dufays shows a broad scope of societal and other groups and forces which influence mother tongue's paradigmatic debates.

Rildo Cosson analyses, against the background of the short history of Brazilian mother tongue education, the 'crusade' between traditional mother tongue education based on normative grammar, and a mother tongue education based upon a conception of language as human interaction. He depicts the debate between the grammar and the socio-interactionist paradigms as a battle on several fronts: the academic front, the institutional front, the instructional material front and the school front. Whereas most frontiers show a victory for the socio-interactionist paradigm, the school front shows how teachers under the pressure of everyday school life, including measurement and control (and the arguments of parents), are hesitant to accept the new paradigm. Cosson also illustrates how mother tongue education at school shows different 'faces' around different areas of the subject, such as writing, grammar and reading. The position of literature (as the historical canon) appears as a 'casualty of war', rejected in favour of more pragmatic kinds of texts. Interestingly, Cosson shows how a utilitarian conception of the socio-interactionist paradigm gives room for resistance from the point of view of traditional literature.

Unlike the other contributions, Yinbing Leung does not present mother tongue education as a battlefield of opposing paradigms. She describes how in Hong Kong education a functional skills paradigm of mother tongue education has been replaced by a curriculum in which literature education has returned in a context of reassessing values such as cultural heritage and identity. She emphasises, as does Cosson, the central role of textbooks. Her contribution analyses the most used textbooks, showing how the different conceptions of teaching literature are paid attention to differently in the different textbooks. Yinbing Leung re-clarifies for us that 'literature education' is a phenomenon in which different conceptions of literature and, above all, of didactics/pedagogy are often unspoken.

Sawyer gives a brief history of mother-tongue education in Australia, with special reference to his home state and shows that, at every stage in history, the question of the place of grammar has been present. Current Syllabuses, however, are subject to on-going criticism by a range of neoliberal and neoconservative forces in Australia who are against 'critical literacy', which is well developed in Australian Syllabuses. Just as urgently, perhaps, the subject English-as-mother-tongue faces a challenge in Australia, as in England, from 'literacy', usually defined in its most functional forms. As well, there is a trend in Australia towards curriculum frameworks that are cross-curricular and that might, at some future time, marginalise English as a separate discipline in favour of communicative competence.

In addition, this number of the journal contains two essays: by Rui Vieira de Castro, who discusses contemporary processes of reconfiguration of the Portuguese Language Area in secondary education; and by Karl Canvat, who discusses the contemporary place of literature in the French curriculum

The contributions show how in all of these countries mother tongue education is under discussion in terms of paradigms. They show how political, academic, educational and other groups strive to win their definition of mother tongue education. The discussions themselves show strong national characteristics. The main debate is often between mother tongue education as cultural knowledge – embodied in literature and grammar – and a more communicative paradigm in which language abilities, language use and a broad repertoire of texts are seen as the core of the mother tongue curriculum. Cosson points to the history of this discussion.

The different contributions also show that we must be careful when talking about concepts like literature or communication. There appear to be many definitions of ‘literature’, and the concept of ‘communication’ is a pendulum swinging between an interactionist perspective and a utilitarian one. Overlaid onto this complexity is also Cosson’s warning about distinguishing between documents and plans and classroom practice.

The most important conclusion might be that the dominant forces behind the paradigmatic debates are not academics or teachers, but political groups. For us this raises a burning question: who owns mother tongue education?

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