

abstract

MOTHER TONGUE BASED BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA: A CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL IMPERATIVE

Neville Alexander

Introductory remarks

The “bilingualism controversy”, seen from the perspective of the pedagogy of liberation on the African continent, has to begin by asking the relevant political and strategic questions from which, ultimately, it derives. Psycholinguistic, learning theory and - more generally - epistemological, questions, important as they are in themselves, really only become relevant once the socio-historical context and the political desiderata that determine policy objectives have been defined and agreed upon.

As I understand it, the central issue for people in the North is whether “bilingual education” is a good, or even the best, approach to learning a second language at school with a view to facilitating the integration of the children of immigrant minorities into the target society. For those scholars and other interested parties who accept the importance of maintaining global cultural and linguistic diversity, a corollary issue is the desirability of maintaining the L1 of immigrant minority children.

In Africa, for reasons that I describe below, the cultural-political interests of proponents of mother tongue based bilingual education intersect with those of the second, smaller, group of scholars in the North¹. However, there is also a larger overlap of interests with all those who are genuinely searching for the most effective ways of teaching and learning the L2 in formal school contexts. To that extent, the technical aspects of the debate are of exceptional importance to those of us who work in the “South”.

¹ A significant first attempt at gaining a comparative perspective as between Western Europe and Southern Africa is Cuvelier et al 2003.