

AFTERWORD

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May 2004

The First International Symposium on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in Latin America was held in Buenos Aires from 1-3 April, 2004. Participants came from a variety of Latin American countries, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Cuba, and Argentina. There were also people attending from North America (Canada and the United States), as well as from France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, and Namibia. A large number of Argentine teachers and school administrators were present at the five plenary sessions, which for the most part were delivered both in Spanish and in English on different occasions, while teachers, students and researchers presented a variety of papers on different aspects of bilingualism and bilingual education in the individual sessions and in the poster presentations.

At the end of such an event, it is always useful to be able to look back and consider what the goals of the symposium were, and in what ways these have been achieved. The symposium was conceived as a forum for promoting an exchange of knowledge in the fields of research and teaching on bilingualism and bilingual education among those who work in both majority and minority contexts in Latin America. The title of the event gives indications of why the Organising Committee felt it was important to create such a space, and helps to explain its importance in a world already full of similar gatherings.

One of the aims of the members of the Organising Committee was to initiate a development which would take place every two or three years in different parts of Latin America. For this reason, it was termed "the first...symposium". Furthermore, it was postulated as being "international", foregrounding the importance of discussing national concerns within an international perspective to see interrelations and common points of interest and debate on experiences of bilingualism and bilingual education in many different contexts. The term "Latin America" was chosen in preference to South American or American, as it was felt that this was a more inclusive term, referring to a sense of community, rather than to a geographical location.

The idea was to create a series of bridges connecting different worlds: bridges between different areas of Latin America; bridges between minority communities and majority situations; bridges between teachers, researchers and administrators; and perhaps, most important of all, bridges between individuals. This notion underpins the conceptual orientation apparent in many of the symposium presentations, such as the continua of biliteracy (Nancy Hornberger); the coming together of multilingualism in the Americas (Ofelia García); the bridging of the gap between prestigious bilingualism and the bilingualism of minorities (Christine Hélot); the integration of curricula and programmes (Patricia Cornago and José María Gil, Anne-Marie de Mejía, and Flavia Pittella); the bridging of language use at home and school (Eve Gregory), to mention a few.

The Organising Committee was particularly heartened to see the large number of Latin American nations and communities represented at the symposium, as well as

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representatives from North America, Europe and Africa, as noted above. There were several presentations on indigenous bilingual programmes, for example, in Sao Felix do Xingo (Brazil), in El Charco and in Santa Fe (Argentina). The linguistic and cultural situation of minority communities (Paraguayans in Argentina, migrants in Buenos Aires, Latinos in U.S.A.) was represented, as were a large number of majority language contexts (English in Namibia, bilingualism in English and Spanish in Bogotá, German and French as foreign languages in Argentina, among others). We have thus been made even more strongly aware that bilingualism and bilingual education mean different things to different people and that these notions are never neutral. The acquiring of a second or other language may well be seen as a resource, particularly if international languages of wider communication are involved, but all too often bilingualism is perceived as a problem (Ruiz, 1984), especially if the languages concerned are perceived as non-prestigious or of limited use.

The symposium was characterised by the large number of teachers present, both in the plenary sessions which were specially programmed to allow Argentine practitioners to attend, and in the individual presentations. It is often the case that researchers and teachers do not participate in the same type of gatherings. The traditional divide between researchers interested in 'theory' and teachers concerned with day to day classroom practice frequently works against the recognition of the importance of each others' expertise in improving bilingual education programmes. The fact that both teaching and research were focused on in the presentations led to discussion of issues of classroom practice in the light of research findings, which constituted an encouraging development.

In the last instance, however, the Symposium involved individuals talking together and exchanging ideas in the interest of working towards better ways of supporting bilingualism and multilingualism in today's world. The ensuing dialogues have helped to underline the importance of viewing bilingual and multilingual educational provision as embedded in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. Understanding how and why particular developments have come about in particular situations in Latin America has proved enriching, and has encouraged teachers and researchers to undertake investigation into interests and problems arising from their day to day experience.

Thus, we may conclude that *The First International Symposium on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in Latin America* has provided a valuable opportunity for contact and sharing among those involved in bilingualism and bilingual education in ethnic minority communities and those working in majority language contexts in Latin America, which hopefully will lead to a greater understanding and discussion of common points of interest. It has helped participants to appreciate in ways that perhaps they did not before, the truth of the words of Genoveva Iriarte (1997: 79), a Colombian linguist, who states, "*Educación en la diversidad es educación para la tolerancia*" (To educate from the standpoint of diversity is to educate towards tolerance).

References:

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