

Catalan in the Classroom: A Language Under Fire

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Abstract

This paper describes the role of Spain's largest minority language, Catalan, in Spanish society, specifically in the classroom. Throughout its history, Catalan has gone through many cycles of oppression and revival. Currently, despite several decades of positive progress in its official role and a growing number of young speakers, Catalan is facing new challenges once again. Some members of the Spanish government believe that the language of instruction in Catalonia should be Castilian, a development which the citizens of Catalonia feel is an attack on their linguistic rights and identity. Catalan is a well-documented example of the tensions which can arise in a country with a minority language or languages. The Catalan case can also serve as a reminder to English teachers that the politics of language are often more complicated than they seem; teachers must be aware of and sensitive to the cultural and political backgrounds of their students.

Introduction

It is a fact that linguistic boundaries and political borders are not a perfect match; nevertheless, most people associate one language with one country. For example, the name Spain, for many people, brings to mind one language (Spanish). However, Spanish, or Castilian* as it is more specifically called, is not the only language in Spain. There are, in fact, several languages spoken in Spain— one official language and three other co-official* languages, the largest of which is Catalan, spoken as a mother tongue* by approximately nine percent of the population, compared to five percent of the population of Galicia and a mere one percent who speak Basque as a mother tongue (Ethnologue, 2009, p. 344). In fact, 57.7 percent of Spaniards live in regions with more than one official language, and 38 percent of them live in a Catalan-speaking region (Generalitat, n.d.). Catalan is spoken in five of Spain's 17 autonomous communities (Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Valencia where it is called Valencian, Aragon, and Navarre). It is also spoken in three other countries (France, Italy, and Andorra) (Pradilla, 2009, p. 102).

It is difficult to establish the exact number of Catalan speakers in the world, or even just in Spain. According to Ethnologue's seventeenth edition (2009), there are 7.9 million Catalan speakers in Spain and just over four million in the world. However, Ethnologue's

the most speakers, and where it has been the most contentious issue, exacerbated by Catalan's connection to Catalan nationalism. While Catalan is in no apparent danger of becoming endangered in the near future, its status continues to cause tension in Spain, especially in education, and maintaining Catalan in education is important for the language's vitality and continued use.

The Catalan example may initially seem unique to its own country, but it should be a lesson for language teachers anywhere. It is easy to make assumptions about students' first language based on their national origin, but in many countries, the linguistic situation is very complex. While many people assume that linguistic borders and political borders are the same, this view is unrealistic and damaging, as many countries are home to a multitude of minority languages. It behooves language teachers to understand the social context of their students' linguistic backgrounds, because something as simple as "What language did you learn in school?" or "What language do you speak at home?" can be a very loaded question for some students, as the case in Catalonia will demonstrate. For example, "Spanish" should more accurately be called Castilian, and teachers should be aware that while Castilian Spanish is the national language of hundreds of millions of individuals in over 34 countries on both sides of the globe, each of those countries has numerous minority languages. Similarly, language teachers must be aware that terms such as "Chinese" or "Filipino," while they may reflect a student's nationality, may be inaccurate and even offensive when describing a student's language background. Understanding this is an important part of the intercultural sensitivity that is vital to teaching language learners in any context.

Early Catalan: 9th Century to 19th Century

Catalan is a Romance language developed in the Pyrenees mountains between Spain and France during the eighth and ninth centuries. It falls under the Iberian Romance family and is the only Romance language. Its closest relative is not Castilian Spanish but Occitan, a much smaller language spoken in southern France. In 779, the Count of Barcelona married the heiress of Aragon, uniting as the Kingdom of Aragon, where the language of the court was Catalan. Over the next three centuries, the Kingdom of Aragon expanded to the south and east; by the end of the 11th century it reached Mallorca, Valencia, Sicily, and Sardinia. The 11th and 12th centuries were a time of great splendor for Catalan letters, but by the end, Catalan was fading.

In the early 12th century, Castilian and Catalan made contact, as members of the Castilian court came to Barcelona. When the last Catalan king died heirless in 1137, the crown passed to a Castilian family. The king of Aragon, Ferdinand III, married the Queen of Castile, Isabella, unifying Spain. They saw the rise of Castilian literature, and the growth of Castilian in the court, which moved to Castile. By the end of the 12th century, Castilian had grown even stronger. Although many of the common people still used Catalan, Castilian became the language of culture, tied to social and economic progress.

Catalonia retained its own institutions and some amount of autonomy during the 12th century, but Castilianization increased throughout the country, as the Catalan aristocracy and intellectuals increasingly moved in favor of Castilian. The bourgeoisie, the poor, and the rural nobility clung to Catalan, but it did not have the prestige it once held.

16th and 19th centuries saw the growth of Castile's power, and soon the country's literature, military, nobility, and diplomacy were all Castilianized (Pons, 2001, p. 632).

The 14th century delivered the largest blow yet to Catalan. During the War of Spanish Succession from 1701 to 1714, the Catalans supported the losing side (Allured, 2005, p. 82). Felipe V, the new Bourbon king, punished the Catalan territories by stripping away their autonomy and, for the first time ever, banning the use of Catalan in public (Sabater, 2005, p. 742).

In spite of its prohibition and its loss of prestige, however, Catalan did not go away entirely. Whether due to stubbornness or ignorance of the new law, many Catalans did not give up. In the 1750s, visitors to Catalonia remarked on the people's intense memory of their abolished freedoms and their combative attachment to the language (Guerra, 2007, p.

gained back their autonomy and reinstated Catalan, and the media)Catalanized* once more /; nguera, 3447, pp. 81-82. Overall, Catalan seemed to be on its way to a comeback

)minimum Catalanization,* used Castilian as the ?E& and only the minimum obligatory

; controversial court case spanned a similar timeline. In July 2016, three families petitioned a local court for the right to have Castilian as the ?E&. The local court turned down the claim, and the families appealed to the Supreme Court of Catalonia in December 2016. In December 2017, the Supreme Court ruled that the families had the right to instruction in Castilian, and pressured the Generalitat to adopt whatever measures were necessary to provide such instruction, but offered no guidelines. By May 2018, the families complained that the Generalitat had showed no signs of compliance%the Generalitat did not respond, but in July the Education Ministry in Catalonia announced that, due to lack of knowledge of Catalan, it was necessary to educate in Catalan. The courts gave the Ministry two months to comply, but the decree was suspended when the Generalitat appealed. In March of 2019, the appeal was accepted by the Court, and the Catalan immersion model of education was upheld (Lluch, 2019).

This ruling, however, was not the end of the controversy%in February 2018, one of the families appealed the Catalan Supreme Court's decision, taking their appeal to the Spanish Supreme Court. The appeal was rejected, and the Spanish Supreme Court ruled that the Generalitat did not need to change their entire educational model. They simply had to honor petitions on a case-by-case basis by making Castilian the ?E& in the classes of the children whose families petitioned, but only to the extent that it was convenient* to the Generalitat. In the 2018-2019 school year, only 4.43% percent of new families (13 out of 2,944) requested that their children be taught in Castilian, so very few schools were affected by this decision (The Spanish Supreme Court validates* 2019). The Catalan government appealed again, and this was rejected in January 2020 when the Supreme Court ruled that at least 3% percent of core subjects for an entire class must be taught in Castilian when a single family requests Castilian. Catalan Education Minister Irene Rigau publicly announced that the Ministry would appeal that decision as well (Courts request Catalan schools,* 2020). The Ministry was given one month to implement the new policy (Lluch, 2020). In March 2020, the five schools the ruling applied to directly were given permission to join the Ministry of Education in another appeal of the decision (Catalan Education Minister believes,* 2020).

Meanwhile, on a national level, there was an uproar following a pronouncement in October 2019 by Spanish Education Minister José Ignacio Wert that the education ministry's interest in Catalonia is to ' /Hispanici!e? Catalan students, suggesting that pro-independence feelings were encouraged by Catalan in schools (Demonstrations throughout Catalonia,* 2019). Wert stirred further indignation with a law proposed in December 2019 and passed in May 2020, which compels the Generalitat of Catalonia to provide a stipend to parents who wanted to send their children to private schools to be educated in Castilian (Lluch, 2020).

In addition, the reform gave greater curriculum control to the central government, which meant that Catalan history and culture would not appear on standardized tests, which many in Catalonia took to mean that their history and culture were made secondary* (Lluch, 2020). The law produced a great deal of outrage, and was met with resistance by the Catalan Education Ministry. The Spanish government has stated that the law will be implemented in all of Spain- including Catalonia - in September 2020. Catalan Education Minister Rigau refused to attend working group meetings about the reform due to provisions that Castilian be implemented as an

instructional language in Catalan schools /) Catalan Education Minister believes,* 34+52.

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