

# A “REVERSE MISSION” PERSPECTIVE ON SECOND-LANGUAGE CLASSES AS PART OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

## UNA PERSPECTIVA DE “MISIÓN INVERTIDA” PARA CLASES DE SEGUNDA LENGUA COMO PARTE DE LOS PROGRAMAS EDUCATIVOS DE TRABAJO SOCIAL

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### RESUMEN

El artículo afronta la necesidad de que la educación en trabajo social incluya módulos de lengua extranjera. El documento demuestra que, a pesar de la existencia de cursos en los programas de trabajo social en algunos países, la literatura académica relevante en este terreno aún presenta un déficit. Seguidamente se discuten los diversos resultados de aprendizaje que cabe esperar de tal práctica educativa, incluyendo ejemplos de prácticas en clases de idioma. Se afirma que las clases de idioma extranjero pueden constituir un suplemento útil para un currículo educativo en materia de trabajo social, no sólo porque las competencias prácticas adquiridas son útiles como tal, sino también porque dichas clases contienen una poderosa versión de juego de rol. La fuente de inspiración es la perspectiva de “misión invertida” utilizada en los estudios de teología, puesto que se destacan los efectos secundarios inesperados de la enseñanza de un idioma extranjero en el marco de un programa de trabajo social.

### ABSTRACT

This article addresses the need for social work education to include foreign language modules. It shows that the relevant academic literature is still deficient in this field, although courses do exist on social work programmes in some countries. It goes on to discuss the different learning outcomes that can be expected from such teaching practice, and includes examples of classroom practice. It is argued that foreign language classes may be a useful supplement to a social work curriculum, not only because the instrumental competences acquired are useful as such, but also because such classes involve a powerful role-play version. A “reverse mission” perspective from theology and mission studies is drawn upon, as it highlights more unexpected side-effects of foreign language teaching within a social work programme.

<sup>1</sup> Opinions expressed in this paper are those of its author and not those of the European Commission.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Integración social e idiomas, Segundas lenguas y trabajo social, Pluralismo, Inmigración e idioma.

KEYWORDS: Language and social integration, Second language and social work, Pluralism, language & immigration.

#### WHY TEACH FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS?

The addition of new topics to an already diverse academic and professional discourse calls for arguing one's case well; this case is sustained by the necessities of day-to-day practice. The addition of foreign language competence-building (preferably in a profession-specific form) is a project of more than mere "academic" interest. In the USA, "the growing number of organizations serving non-English speaking populations has increased the demand for social workers who speak a second language" (Simmons College, 2003), and this development should not come as a surprise. Language being one of the most constitutive elements of the human condition, it is hardly surprising that it also shapes and determines social work in both intellectual and practical terms (Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Pugh & Williams, 2006; Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996; Sarangi, Slembrouck & Hall, 2006). Apart from its more universal relevance, language is instrumental in determining relationships between professionals and service users, not only in social work but also in allied human services (Heffernan, 2006; Pugh, 1996). In the contemporary situation, various factors are at work which may be grouped under two headings, state intrinsic and state extrinsic.

*State intrinsic mechanisms* have to do with the presence of more diverse populations, including immigrants with other mother tongues than official languages through which social work is expected to service people. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ambition of Western nation states for cultural and linguistic homogeneity has been a major factor shaping public life and determining relationships between citizens and authorities yet in today's context this continued aspiration contrasts starkly with sociological studies of diversity and inequality. Insisting on the use of official languages may be seen by some as a legitimate agenda to preserve a specific tradition, but in relation to education, health and social services, it amounts to de-facto (or even deliberate) exclusion from service provision. Social work needs to take this tension better into account and to familiarise itself with basic knowledge and theoretical models from linguistics (Pugh, 1996) and foreign language didactics (Kornbeck, 2003). Bilingualism or plurilingualism seems to be more natural and more prevalent among human beings than monolingualism (Batley, et al., 1993); yet monolingualism is the rule in highly developed nation states with powerful economic systems – hence it has come to represent development and sophistication to many.

Migration phenomena at an unprecedented rate have given rise to new training needs in social services (Hernández-Plaza, et al., 2006). Whether this has been realised, and/or responded to, varies from one country to another. Yet this should not detract attention from the all-too-obvious fact that social services' ability to provide adequate support to migrant populations will in part reflect their linguistic capacity. Much that applies to migrant populations also holds true for traditional national minorities (the Welsh in the UK, Bretons in France, etc), except that such minorities today almost invariably have a command of the relevant official languages. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that they "all speak English anyway" (Davies, 1994), as many erroneously assume in the Welsh

context. Wales is the only region known to have a systematic policy of bilingual social work education (John & Pugh, 2003), although it is known that some regional languages are being, or have been taught for professional purposes in some social work schools or departments in other countries (e.g., Slovenian in Austria) (Kornbeck, 2001 a).

*State extrinsic mechanisms* are essentially linked to globalisation and Europeanisation. Challenges caused by the influx of migrants have been treated above as state intrinsic mechanisms, but they may also be conceptualised as state extrinsic as their root causes lie abroad. Globalisation and an increased pressure on the higher education sector, coupled with a drive in many countries to bring social work education up to graduate or even post-graduate level, has increased the need for literacy in the major international languages used for academic communication. This effectively tends to be limited to English which, according to one Anglophone sociolinguist, has made English a parasite – a “cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages” (Philipsson, 2006). While the author of the (controversial) theory of “linguistic imperialism” (Philipsson, 1992) is rightly pointing to mechanisms whereby English may effectively repel languages from their “own” (traditional) territory, the instrumental value of English proficiency cannot be denied, and the explanatory model of “linguistic domains” (where the same person may successfully use a variety of languages for different purposes and remain very much in power) may also present mitigating circumstances in connection with the charges raised against English. This model was already discussed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Valdés, [1535] 2003).

Although transnational recruitment of social work professionals is growing (at least when the receiving country is an English-speaking one) (Lyons & Littlechild, 2006), language may both act as a facilitating medium and as a barrier, determining who is and who is not be let in. Evidence from the records of the British and Irish authorities in charge of the accreditation of non-national social work qualifications demonstrates cogently that the single most determining factor for success in finding employment as a social work professional in one of these countries is the language of instruction at the institution where the relevant qualification was earned (Kornbeck, 2004). Those with social work qualifications from English-speaking schools are the most frequently rewarded with accreditation - meaning acceptance for employment - though, it must be noted, they are probably also overrepresented among applicants. In this sense, social work professional mobility may be rendered more difficult by being a profession educated at the tertiary level. At least, one survey of geographic mobility in Europe suggests that unskilled workers are often more mobile than skilled workers (Peixoto, 2001), which may be explained with reference to a reflex whereby every society seeks to keep the most prestigious and most rewarding jobs for its own citizens (possibly including long-term residents). Going beyond this explanation, we may also assume that the higher the level of the training, particularly in the professions, the greater the control exercised by the peers over entry into the ranks will be. Finally, it should also be recognised that higher levels of specialisation may put limitations on mobility, as the portability of qualifications reflects the transferability of skills.

Under these circumstances (which present challenges as well as opportunities), social work education experiments with cross-fertilisation between different languages and cultures, for instance, when academics engage in activities abroad (Blake, 1971; Bridge, 2003; Hazel, et al., 1983; IASSW, 1963; Rumsey, 2000). It responds to the qualification needs of the profession, as when service users in rich Western societies come from linguistic minorities,

be they indigenous (Davies, 1994; Pugh & Jones, 1999) or immigrated ones (Bowes & Dar, 2000; Chand, 2005; Hernández-Plaza, et al., 2006; Modood, et al., 1997). According to one scholar, however, there is no standard set of specific “newcomer” problems (George & Tsang, 2000), so that, consequently generalisations should be avoided. Whether minorities are based on immigration or not, people who are not fluent in the dominant language of service provision may experience subjective or objective exclusion. In some cases, having a satisfactory command of the dominant language may not suffice if prejudice against the less powerful group is strong. This is what French-speaking Belgians may experience as employees in big corporations: even if they know Dutch and are prepared to use it, they may still be perceived as French monoglots (Dardenne & Eraly, 1995). But the relative power of a language may shift over time. French used to be dominant in Belgium, and still attracts some interest on social work courses in Flanders, since many immigrants still use French rather than Dutch (Vanmarcke & Robesyn, 2003). The gate-keeping status of that language has risen considerably to the extent that it is the only language in which applications for services can be introduced (failure to know Dutch may also impact on eligibility for some benefits). Yet many of the most needy people do not know it, or their command of the language is grossly insufficient, while their French (formerly the language of the educated, the rich and the powerful Belgians, including in Flanders) will not help them. Likewise, Spanish may today be a low-status language in the South-Western USA; yet in the very same region it once used to hold high status and be dominant, not only over indigenous languages but also over English (Martínez-Brawley & Zorita, 2006). In any case, in this scenario of flux, bilingual services should aim to enhance minorities’ access to and actual use of public services in general (Purser, 2000).

Power inequalities between languages are strong factors in shaping and upholding power relationships, as can be seen from the role of English as a global language and a formerly colonial language (Harrison, 2003, 2005; 2007a). Yet these power inequalities are not insurmountable – “multilingualism isn’t a problem, it is a fact. It is only becomes a problem when you don’t do anything about it” (Davies, 1994, p. 35, quoted by Pugh, 2003, p. 34) – or it becomes a problem if individuals or groups wish it to be one. In many contexts, those who do not have the respective dominant language as their mother tongue tend to feel inferior because dominant languages are associated with higher socio-economic status (Martínez-Brawley and Zorita, 2006). Yet active policies to support multilingualism and secure specific socio-cultural rights for linguistic minorities may build and sustain a positive environment that enables speakers of various languages to feel empowered and preserve their tongues. While in areas where languages are numerous, language policies may not be able to address all groups, it is still true that languages may be perceived and treated either as problems, rights or resources (Harrison, 2007 b). Bilingual and plurilingual persons may actually constitute an asset to their societies of residence, yet this is often overlooked, as one survey with Australian bilingual practitioners has shown (Harrison, 2007 b). Surprisingly for social workers, these practitioners often supported and perpetuated ideas about a dominant language (English) being “better” and more sophisticated.

The consequence of all this is that social work education may be called upon to develop specific new courses that will provide future social workers with skills in foreign languages. A situation with unprecedented levels of immigrants certainly makes such skills valuable, if not indispensable (Rebollosa Pacheco, et al., 2003). While it is true that professionals

may work with the help of interpreters (Sanders, 2003), just like they may teach courses abroad with interpretation help (Bridge, 2003; Kornbeck, 2005), it is equally true that these interpreters need to be specialised within the field, and that the professionals working with them need to know how to work with an interpreter to make optimal use of their services (Sanders, 2003). Likewise, social work academics planning to teach a course abroad may need to learn how this is done (Tunney, 2002).

#### A DEFICIT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION LITERATURE

Social work education literature is surprisingly silent about second language acquisition in social work curricula (Kornbeck, 2001b). This is already a reflection of the fact that literature has tended to recognise the significance of language in counselling and therapy situations (Mayer & Timms, 1970) without taking a closer look at the exact competence needs of the workforce. One book attempts to address this issue systematically (Pugh, 1996). “Language experience” may simply be “the forgotten dimension in cross-cultural social work” (Ruzzene, 1998), which is why social work discourses should be enlarged to also include linguistic issues (Harrison, 2005; Kornbeck, 2001 b; Pugh, 2003).

Foreign language teaching in social work education remains under-researched. While language issues are not totally absent from social work literature, and while there is some focus on the need of future professionals to be competent communicators, foreign language skills have until recently not been identified by social work scholars as worthy of discussion in literature (Kornbeck, 2001b). Relevant courses do exist in social work schools and departments around Europe, although Poland seems to be the only country to have made it mandatory for all social work programmes to include a foreign language module (Laskowska, 2003). The absence of a discourse on didactic issues persists (which presumably means that every teacher must reinvent the wheel) (Kornbeck, 2003). There are, nevertheless, case studies with examples of classroom practice from various European countries (Bridge, 2003; John & Pugh, 2003; Laskowska, 2003; Panhuys, 2003; Vanmarcke & Robesyn, 2003). One textbook now on the market (Keuning, 1995) is designed to teach professional English (going beyond what students may have learned in secondary education) and though it was published in 1995, it appeared in 2007 still to be available from the publisher.

Relevant academic literature still shows a deficit in this field, although courses do exist on social work programmes in some countries. This is in itself intriguing, as it suggests that a fair amount of teaching is practised without support from those who usually develop theoretical models on the field of didactics.

#### 3. EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

The potential benefits of second language teaching are numerous and diverse, yet students need something to motivate them and learning outcomes are by definition bound to materialise in the future, while the present may be marked by difficulties in achieving these outcomes. The number of drop-outs from bilingual courses in Wales seems to have presented a problem at a certain stage (John & Pugh, 2003). (It would however be necessary to know the exact figures. Dropping-out is considered entirely normal in Continental higher education systems with little or no limitation on student intake, while it tends to be treated as a problem in the UK and Scandinavia with a more tightly managed study

culture.) In this perspective, we should try to define exactly which learning outcomes may be expected from social work foreign language courses.

A distinction needs to be made between communication training in general (including rhetoric, interviewing techniques, etc.), first-language training and second-language training, of which only the latter type of courses is the subject of this paper. First-language training textbooks for social workers or social pedagogues are known to exist in both English (Hopkins, 1998a, 1998b; O’Rourke, 2002) and in French (Rouzel, 2000). In Europe, second-language training – teaching modern languages other than the official language of instruction at the place of study – is lacking in published teaching materials, with one possible exception (Keuning, 1995). Within this category of second language training, different learning outcomes may be envisaged, depending on the needs of learners and the possibilities of the teaching institution. While a variety of competencies may be taught (Kornbeck, 2006), we may limit this discussion to the following two general headings:

1. *Competencies relevant to social work studies (theory):*

- a. competencies can be developed through reading academic and professional literature;
- b. they may be acquired on a spin-off basis going abroad on academic exchange programmes or international placements;
- c. or they may be the result of placements at home with service users whose language is not the language of instruction.

2. *Competencies relevant to social work practice:* These include:

- a. oral and written competencies in service users’ languages, or a relevant *lingua franca*;
- b. as well as oral and written competencies needed for employment abroad.

4. THE “REVERSE MISSION” PERSPECTIVE – SPIN-OFF FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

While the learning outcomes listed above are generally related to the instrumental competencies of communication, information gathering, observation, advocacy, etc., the usefulness of foreign language classes (as part of a social work programme) is by no means limited to these. Foreign language instruction is more akin to learning to ride a bike or learning to swim, than to learning maths (or studying theoretical social work modules.) When foreign language instruction is successful (and this cannot always be assumed since many people can attest to having attended foreign language classes without achieving noticeable advances in terms of actual competencies), the learner will experience a transformation. With each new language learned, the person takes on like an additional persona who perceives the world differently and communicates and interacts with it on different premises. Classroom practice (if it is not based on classic, analytical methods, constantly referring to grammar and syntax) involves a powerful version of role play where learners experience a strange state of helplessness which is usually not imposed in adults studying on higher education programmes. As such, foreign language classes may become an original supplement to a social work curriculum, where personal development should always be welcomed.

One way of conceptualising this function is by drawing on the so-called “reverse mission” perspective. “Reverse mission” is a concept from theology and mission studies where it implies a role reversal between the missionary and the target group. This may be the case in work with people in a wealthy country, raising their awareness around the problems faced by people in less wealthy countries (Smith, 1979; Smutko (1979), quoted by Abram & Cruce, 2007), or it may denote a teaching or preaching style where clergy or lay preachers “can and should learn from the people ministered to [...]. The people are the ‘teachers’ and the minister/missionary is the ‘reacher’” (Barbour, 1984, p. 304, quoted by Abram & Cruce, 2007).

As we have seen above, social work literature is generally good at recognising that service users may find it difficult to express themselves, but less prepared to recognise the same problem in social workers. This is in itself a significant finding in that it points to some central aspects of the identity of social work, both as an academic discipline and as a profession. Despite having debates about being reflective and accepting the perspectives of service users, social work (but less so social pedagogy in the Continental European tradition) tends to take an assumption of technical competency and objective understanding as its point of departure. The discipline and the profession need sometimes to be pushed into a reverted role play, and foreign language courses may provide such an opportunity. In this connection, it is worth reflecting on the option that such courses might be relevant, not only on an undergraduate programme but also as post-qualifying training. The “reverse mission” perspective was introduced into social work by two US educators (Abram & Cruce, 2007) and should be considered in relation to language courses also, as it prompts a fundamental question – who should actually be in a learning role, the student or the lecturer, the user or the professional?

Academic teachers are often learners themselves, or at least they should be. Social work academics teaching abroad may – even if they hold the privilege of teaching in their own language – go through important formative experiences, whereby the intellectual and cultural resources of their students may make positive contributions (Bridge, 2003; Rumsey, 2000). Indeed, even going to academic conferences may have this effect, because it imposes other codes and styles of collegiate communication than those practised in academics’ home institution (Dominelli, 2004). Obviously, if stubbornness does not take the upper hand, the result should normally be one of learning and personal development via a situation of immersion and enforced role-play. As long as embarrassment is not caused to the travelling academic, the experience should normally be useful and open their minds to new perceptions and readings of the world, and of the academic discourse to which they are accustomed.

At the very best, discussing a familiar topic with foreign colleagues in another language than the one normally used for teaching or research should provide academics with new conceptual insights. Monoglots from big languages (English and French in particular) are too often exempt from this exercise, while colleagues from smaller language communities routinely engage in with considerable benefits. This is certainly the ideal that higher education in the research-based tradition has been holding high for many years. The Humboldtian model of the academic as a teacher-educator implies sharing research work with students, making teaching activities a formative experience for the lecturer, and generating new ideas and knowledge together with the students (Kornbeck, 2007).

A feature that makes language classes stand out, as compared with mathematics classes, is the feeling of immersion and sometimes even helplessness experienced by learner. Students have engaged in more than an exclusively cognitive process or a controlled – or indeed controllable – one. Anybody who has been on a language course with a strong communicative emphasis will know that it may feel like being on a running train with no possibility to get off. Self-confident adults may feel lightly shaken in the process, yet the sole objective should not be to shake learners, but rather to create an environment of mutual learning. Lecturers with superior communication skills in the target language need to be careful not to provide their students with a feeling of powerlessness. If lecturers are not themselves native speakers of the target language (this is likely to be the case with many social work lecturers, especially if the target language is that of a minority), they may choose to invite native speakers to join the discourse. The exercise will then act like putting students in the place of imaginary service users (a classic role-play scheme) and teachers in the place of students.

This type of immersion is illustrated in the case study presented by Wilfing (2003): Turkish women living in Vienna (all with a working class background) were invited to participate in a Turkish course for Austrian social work students (all white and female, predominantly with a middle-class background). In this course, it was not the lecturer (who preferred to maintain a facilitator role) but the invited Turkish women took over a teaching role (although they may not have been fully conscious of this), especially when discussions went beyond purely linguistic issues and started to focus on lifestyle and values in connection on such issues as sexuality and reproduction. The Austrian social work students were pushed to review some of their typically liberal ideas, and their immersion was no doubt facilitated by the helplessness of having to communicate in Turkish. The experience showed that “cultural codes differ within national populations: students from urban areas communicate more easily with Turkish women from the big cities in Turkey. First of all, ‘restricted’ code and ‘elaborated’ codes, in the sense of Bernstein’s famous socio-linguistic approach, may be found also among these Turkish women. Meeting the Austrian students, however, a certain paradox appeared: The Austrian students, although belonging to an educated, ‘higher’ social class, showed a restricted language code like beginners in studying the language – they met the ‘lower class’ Turkish women on their own linguistic level as ‘language-counterparts’. This was an important experience on both sides: A language is not ‘worse’, just because of different syntax. The goal of learning languages is communication!” (Wilfing, 2003, p. 148).

The exercise may provoke a re-examination about taken-for-granted “truths” about one’s own class, ethnicity, socio-economic and indeed educational status, and this should preferably happen not only to students, but also to lecturers. According to one Indian scholar with far-reaching experience in providing distance-learning courses to the most diverse student audiences (including via India’s Indira Gandhi Open University), Western people are often poor communicators whose efforts may even be hampered by their learning (Rao, interviewed by Kornbeck, 1997). If this perspective is accepted as a useful one and as a basis for examining one’s own cultural capital, the process should affect the lecturer as much as the students, since the lecturer would have accumulated more cultural capital during a longer life in practice and academia a capital which is questioned during the challenging classroom experience.



Monolingualism is the norm in highly developed Western societies, while many developing countries thrive linguistically with several languages and individuals (in many cases without being literate) use two or more languages without difficulty. “In 1990 out of hundred and seventy-seven sovereign states over thirty had two official languages, and ten or so had more than two. Statistics show that, in reality, bi- or multilingualism is the ‘normal’ human condition” (Batley, et al., 1993, p. 1). If such facts can be brought to social work students’ consciousness via a second-language course, this could have considerable effect in terms of “reverse mission”. Committed persons with an attachment to humanistic values will often enrol on a social work course with a strong desire to help other people, but they may also unwittingly impose a very specific set of values on other people. If confronted with people from linguistic minorities, they may easily, despite good intentions and a strong commitment, take on a patronising tone which the interaction of role play may help avoid. Role play in a usual social work education setting will most likely follow some pre-established Western norms that are known within the academia and the profession. To those well-versed in the subculture of social work, psychology or education, such exercises may not always provide big surprises but will sometimes even confirm something familiar.

If students – and hopefully their lecturers – embark on a journey like the one described by Wilfing (2003), then the students are more likely as future professionals to meet service users with different backgrounds-- not limited to language and ethnicity-- with a minimum of prejudice. Likewise, if lecturers accept the exercise the way it is suggested in the case study, then they may expect to develop a more humble attitude than academic teachers usually show, including those teaching social work courses.

##### 5. CONCLUSION (AND WIDER IMPLICATIONS)

There is presently a growing concern that social work education, as promoted via international social work bodies, may in fact represent the cultural hegemony of Western models, including Western languages and discourses, in particular English (Askeland & Payne, 2006). This realisation has often been made in connection with exchange activities between social work schools within Europe (Kornbeck, 2005). It seems imperative to prevent teaching practices from establishing new hegemonic structures, and second-language classes – if understood and practised from a “reverse mission” perspective – may make a contribution in the right direction. They will have effects far beyond the simple transmission of instrumental knowledge and competencies related to communication.

The discussion developed in this paper also points to the different types of knowledge and expertise in social work and in other professions. The absence of language teaching in social work education, coupled with the existence of works focusing only on the communication problems of service users, point to several items of reflection:

- (1) A lack of interest in the topic, which may reflect a cultural bias in the academy (The foundation of social work training being mostly in psychology/sociology/law, not in education and humanities) or simply intellectual neglect (the training focusing on specific tasks and problems).
- (2) A perception of professionals as self-confident and sufficiently prepared for professional practice by their initial professional education via university

programmes, whereas some evidence from some countries suggests this is frequently far from true.

- (3) A technocratic understanding of social work knowledge which excludes aspects of human interaction (quasi-positivism, reductionism).

While this paper has not attempted to provide all the answers to the many questions it raised, readers will hopefully continue meaningful discussions of the "reverse mission" perspective applied to social work education – including, but certainly not limited to, second-language classes.

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