

Language rights in Catalonia

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Eurocrisis in the Press

4/22/2014

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Catalonia's independence project has given rise to the most serious constitutional crisis Spain has seen in recent times. The Catalan regional government has called a referendum on independence on November 9 that has no legal status and will be roundly impugned by the Constitutional Court once it is announced in writing. In the midst of this crisis, the High Court of Justice in Catalonia has ordered schools to teach 25% of classes in Spanish. This ruling follows a series of others laid down by this and other courts calling for bilingual education. In this article we will examine the linguistic model that prevails in Catalan schools and discuss whether it is the best model for a bilingual community such as Catalonia.



Could anyone imagine a situation whereby, in Wales or Scotland, pre-school pupils did not receive even one hour of education in English, only two at primary level and three at secondary? Well, that is exactly what is happening in Catalonia – students are only taught in Catalan in their first years of schooling (sometimes they might have an extra hour or so of English, but never Spanish), while for the remaining compulsory education period they are taught in Catalan, except for two or three hours a week in Spanish and English.

According to the government of Catalonia's most recent Survey on Language Uses (2008), 55% of the population have Spanish as their mother

tongue; 31.6% have Catalan and 3.8% both languages, while other languages make up the remaining 9.6%. If we bear in mind that, according to UNESCO, more than 1,500 research studies have stressed the importance of teaching children in their mother tongue (and especially the skills of reading and writing), and that this is a right that is recognised by this organisation, as well as by UNICEF, then it seems quite obvious that children's language rights are not being respected in this region of Spain. In this article we will be highlighting the mechanisms used by those in power to perpetuate a situation that is clearly unfair.

In the first place, the Generalitat (Catalonia's autonomous government) has made a point of airbrushing the concept of "mother tongue" out of the sphere of education. In the 1970s and '80s, supporters of nationalism and left-wing parties in Catalonia called for children's right to study in their mother tongue, given that under most of Franco's rule, Catalan was banned in schools. Thus, in calling for the right to study in Catalan, they adopted the entirely valid argument that use of the mother tongue was important for children's cognitive development. However, this argument was abruptly dropped following the introduction of the language immersion system (the obligatory use of Catalan as the sole medium of instruction for all school subjects, apart from Spanish and foreign languages). The very concept of teaching in the mother tongue was also erased, to the point that it no longer appears on any official form or survey. Thus it is rather surprising that those same people who, some years ago (and quite justifiably) championed the importance of children receiving an education in their mother tongue have not only forgotten about their old arguments, they have even caused the concept itself to disappear.

Secondly, in order to defend the "success" of this monolingual model – in a bilingual society in which, furthermore, the medium of instruction is a regional language that is not even the majority language among the Catalan

population (no similar precedent can be found in any of our neighbouring countries) – the model’s supporters point to a series of different examinations to support their claim that Catalan school children’s level of Spanish is higher than that of the rest of Spain. To begin with, it is rather difficult to believe that Catalan students – who only study two or three hours of Spanish a week – have outstripped all the schoolchildren in the rest of Spain, who receive 20 hours of teaching in Spanish a week. If this were true, it would be an amazing phenomenon – a combination of outstandingly brilliant students and teachers with such superlative didactic and pedagogic abilities that they would be immediately subjected to all manner of studies and research by the international scientific community.

Let us take a look at the reality of these studies that endorse the Catalan “model of success”. Firstly, the Catalan government makes reference to the PISA studies. To begin with, we should point out that as Spain has, in general, obtained fairly poor results in these studies, the idea of Catalonia being slightly above this average does not signify any kind of great success. But the fact is, furthermore, that the former head of PISA, [when speaking at the Catalan parliament](#), acknowledged that in this region the PISA exams had always been done in Catalan, never in Spanish, and that therefore, any students whose level of Catalan was not sufficient for the purpose were excluded from the exams (3.73%).

Catalan politicians also make reference to the General Diagnostic Assessments but, given the fact that in Spain, [educational powers are ceded to the different Autonomous Communities, it is the latter that are responsible for devising these exams](#), as a result of which the exams are not mutually comparable. Furthermore, even if they were, neither the PISA exams nor the ones devised by the Autonomous Communities could be said to effectively evaluate a student’s overall knowledge of a language; instead, they only assess one specific skill – reading comprehension (though the General Diagnostic Assessments do also assess the writing skills of 15 and 16-year-old students, by asking them to produce a short written text of 10-15 lines, for which spelling only represents one point out of 40). You do not need to be a language specialist to realise that a test such as this is entirely insufficient for determining a student’s language level. Any official exam that certifies a student’s mastery of a language will include, in addition to a reading comprehension, a couple of audio listening exercises and an oral interview. That is to say, the aforementioned exams that have been implemented only cover 25% of the necessary evaluation of a language.

Thirdly, it is a matter of concern that a large proportion of Catalan politicians (and specifically those from the parties CiU, ERC, PSC, ICV-EUiA and CUP) describe the system as a “model of success”, when Catalonia is one of the regions of Spain with the highest levels of academic failure (21,8%), [early school-leaving and the absence of post-compulsory educational studies among students](#)(26%). Meanwhile, [the Professor of Sociology Mariano Fernández Enguita](#) claims that students’ academic results depend more on their socio-economic level in Catalonia than in the rest of Spain. As if that were not enough, students whose mother tongue is Spanish (who, as we have mentioned, represent the majority) [obtain worse academic results](#) than those whose mother tongue is Catalan, even if we leave the socio-economic data to one side, a fact which supports the conclusions of the abovementioned studies by UNESCO.

This is, therefore, an educational model which, far from being a “model of success” (as claimed by most of the politicians and commentators who voice their opinions in the public – and generously subsidised – Catalan media), it is producing very poor results. It is, furthermore, the only system to which most people have access. A few parents have tried to achieve a bilingual education for their children (or at least, one that offers a little more balance between Catalan and Spanish), and so they have embarked on lengthy legal proceedings – which they have always won, but which the Catalan government has always appealed against (litigation is no problem when you have public money to cover your costs). Up to now, the Catalan government has always claimed that it would never comply with any of the aforementioned legal decisions, though it appears that things might now be changing in this respect. The families that took these cases to the courts have been rapidly stigmatised, and in some cases, the names and surnames of their children have been published in the press. However, there are some parents who are able to choose another educational model for their children, without any need to put up with legal proceedings or social stigma – the parents who are able to pay anything upwards of €600 a month for an elite school. This was, incidentally, the case with the current President of the Generalitat, Mr Artur Mas (CiU), and the previous President, Mr José Montilla (PSC).

In light of all the above, a number of questions need answering: why do Catalan politicians from so many parties (all of them except for those of C's and PP) support an educational model that denies the majority of the population's rights to education in their mother tongue? Why do they describe it as a "model of success" when in fact it produces high levels of academic failure and early school-leaving? Why do they lie about the exams? Why do many of the politicians who defend the current system of compulsory language immersion choose schools for their children where this system is not applied? Why is it only possible for children to gain a decent level of Spanish in Catalonia if their parents are sufficiently wealthy? Why is Spanish not taught at pre-school level, and only two hours at primary and three at secondary, when it is the third most-spoken language in the world?

In conclusion, therefore, it appears that Catalan politicians are not interested in offering their students the best possible training for the future, but rather that they are using education for the purpose of what they term "constructing the nation"; or rather, as a tool for promoting [nationalism](#). On this subject, we recommend *Nacionalismo y política: el caso de Cataluña* (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid, 2006) by Thomas Jeffrey Miley, Doctor of Sociology and lecturer at Cambridge University, who analyses the way in which Catalan speakers are hyper-represented in Catalonia's parliament, its town halls and its education system. And so, in [Catalonia](#), in terms of respect for bilingualism, monolingualism is being imposed. As for protection of children's rights, we have a nationalist conception of education and language; and in place of pedagogical criteria, there is ideology. In spite of all this, meanwhile, we will continue to express our firm commitment to multilingualism and the rights of children. All children.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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