



Publishing for minorities: a civic commitment

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Abstract: Five years ago, as she was collecting information on migrant publics in French library, the author noticed the lack of bilingual books. After conducting an enquiry among 500 libraries, she decided to set up a new kind of publishing house, specializing in plurilingual picture books. The aim is to provide migrants with easy-to-use tools to learn French basic vocabulary on the one hand, on the other hand, to empower migrants' mother tongues and thus to develop a positive attitude toward them.

Keywords: migrants, mother languages, literacy development, multilingual/plurilingual picture books.

The book market in the specific French and Swiss context

If you step into a middle-sized public library in France, you will find few books in foreign languages, one or two shelves at the utmost that include books for adults and children, most of them used and shuffled, and a couple of bilingual books. In and around Paris, as in major French towns, such as the international library in Grenoble for instance, some larger-sized public libraries have developed collections in foreign languages along with activities and strategies to induce foreign communities to visit them. These places remain quite classical in their concept and very far away from what Northern countries or even England have developed, with places conceived to meet the welfare and the needs of migrants people and to provide them with activities, lessons, and up to date collections of books and e-journals and other non book-materials in their mother tongues.

If you step into a middle-sized French bookshop, you will have even less opportunities to dig up books in foreign languages, maybe a couple of novels in English if you are lucky. In Paris, there are some bookshops dedicated to books in foreign languages, whereas in other major French towns, these are mostly devoted to English books. As there are no available statistics about them, it is difficult to quantify them, the French Ministry of Culture – which is more interested in supporting the independent book market and currently copes with e-books copyright – has not commissioned any inquiry in this respect.

The reason for that is certainly to be found in the fact that the French people are not keen on learning foreign languages, even less as far as migrant's languages are concerned. The other reason may lie in the very unique concept of the French Republic where any



migrant or foreign citizen has to be integrated within the society and adopt its way of life, integrate French customs and learn French according to the French academic system.

In Switzerland, the public library landscape has something interesting about it thanks to the creation of some twenty multicultural libraries disseminated throughout the country, be they either in the French, German or in the Italian-speaking part. These libraries buy books in migrants' languages, they develop bilingual books collections, they forge links with migrants by asking them to bring books from their countries – because the local supply is scarce – or to translate picture books into their mother tongue so as to provide children of their communities with books that include both French – the language to be learnt – and their mother tongues. However, the book market is very fragile as the Roman government has not passed law to protect independent libraries as many other European countries did in the late eighties. As a consequence, for the last five years, more than fifty bookshops have closed down. Thus the market is the target of a few diffusion companies that set their own laws among book sellers, that decided on the kind of books they can make money on and that dictate overrated price because of so-called customs fees.

As a rule, the global book market is not so keen on providing books for migrants, be they either in their languages or bilingual books. Some major publishing houses, mostly based in the UK have issued dual languages picture books but the production is quite restricted and not very creative. The main obvious reason is that most migrants cannot afford such an expense and do not step into bookshops. Thus there aren't many opportunities for publishing houses in foreign languages to make money in this area. The more and more stressing conditions booksellers are going through does not plead for developing collections people do not rush to. Thus it is mainly the duty of some public library to try to make books for migrants available with all the difficulties involved – in terms of supply, lack of visibility, scarce representation by diffusion companies etc.

Promoting migrants' mother tongues

Our societies are not prepared nor are they willing to welcome migrants. They have not understood that it is crucial for the social peace and welfare of any citizen to help migrants adapt our way of living while respecting their respective cultures and identities. The academic system tries to do its best to educate migrants' student but at the same time, keeps denying their own linguistic capacities and their cultural background. Many teachers think



well of advising parents not to speak their mother tongues at home in order to help their children grasp more easily the school language.

However, research in education in European and Northern American countries has shown that empowering migrants' mother tongue is one of the best ways to facilitate their settlement in any society. Cummins, in Canada, Perregaux and Dasen in Switzerland, Candelier in France and others have been raising awareness on the importance of language awareness as a way to keep up with changing societies and to improve the school performance of migrant children. According to PISA study dated 2003, school failure is not due to their practising their mother tongue but rather because of identity problems and lack of confidence.

Cummins¹ states that social power relation influence classroom interaction and teacher-student negotiation. If one turns a coercive relation of power into a collaborative relation of power thus equality and dialogue can take place. A way of changing a coercive relation of power – as far as the target tongue is concerned – is to stop forbidding speaking people's mother tongue at home and at school. On the contrary, using it within the class room should be encouraged and referred to. The reason is simple. When you do not understand just one word in a sentence, you miss the whole meaning. If you have the opportunity to translate it, you understand the whole meaning and you improve your command of the target language by gradually learning new words. Cummins states that if teachers allowed students use their mother tongue within the school context, they would grow more confident because they could rely on their identity (the mother tongue is part of one's identity). When you strengthen people's confidence, you improve performance in understanding new concepts, you reduce the academic gap between native children and migrant ones. Thus teachers should allow students to create in their mother tongue, produce texts and artistic productions in order to stimulate their confidence and improve their academic life.

In this respect, is it crucial to provide books that include migrants' mother tongue to encourage them read it and keep in touch with it.

The importance of languages awareness

¹ Conference delivered in Lausanne, July 6th 2010, Edilic Congress.



In 2005, I conducted an inquiry among 500 French public libraries and noticed how few bilingual books existed in France. Results showed that there was a crying need for bilingual books in languages matching with migration waves since the 1960s.

Arabic was much demanded – although 2nd generation of migrants who were born in France and did not speak Arabic but they wanted their children to speak it with their grandparents. Turkish, Chinese, Russian was demanded, and Serbian, Albanese too etc. I noticed that children borrowed the few dual languages books available in public libraries and sometimes brought their mothers back in order to let them find other books they could learn French with. Gradually some libraries were becoming a social platform where mothers could be advised to address French courses for foreigners. Bilingual books and especially children/pictures books are convenient materials to learn a language because one can go back and forward between its own language and the language to be learnt. That is what we all do when we are in a foreign country, we always translate silently in our mind and compare languages.

Except for some bilingual picture books in French and English, or French and German and a couple of English publishers who have felt the need to issue bilingual books in Arabic and a few other typical migration languages, there was hardly any other choice in libraries. Some bilingual Chinese and English books were to be found in the main public library of the Chinese area in Paris, but no Chinese-French dual books at all!

This is the reason why I decided, along with a Vietnamese French librarian, to meet the needs of these communities. My first idea was to issue classical – if I may say – dual lingual picture books. But in the meantime, I met researcher Christiane Perregaux and its team, at Geneva University, who developed the EOLE (*Eveil et Ouverture aux Langues Etrangères*) teaching method that promotes activities in all the languages known or spoken by students in the classroom. I thought it much more interesting to issue plurilingual pictures books that included as many languages as possible. People could use them as dual books in the one hand, and in the other hand, they could develop interest and abilities to get acquainted with other languages. In the school context, that means empowering all the languages of migrants, asking student to show how to pronounce them, understand the structure of languages that have the same roots, such as Roman languages for instance. The sooner one develops abilities in hearing, writing, speaking, comparing languages, the better one develops intellectual capacities as a whole and has a quicker grasp of languages, even one's own, even the mathematic language.



Migrilude's undertaking

Thus Migrilude publishing house was born in Switzerland in 2006 even if I was aware of the hurdles to overcome to make books meet their target. It is a micro publishing house that has issued 9 books aimed at young children and their parents.

There is a current collection of 5 picture books in 10 languages: French, English, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, German, Italian, Turkish, and Russian. Topics covered are: kitchen tools, fruits, Christmas, library materials, animals. We intend to develop much more topics but in the meantime we have proposed schools and libraries to help children make their own dual or plurilingual picture book in order to develop their literacy. Belgium artist Anne Lefebvre helps them work on the graphic design whereas teachers – with the help of students' parents – works on their mother languages. Some of them invent a story. Others make plain picture books. The scope is to use all the linguistic competencies of foreign families into a unique artistic work. This is one way to forge students' identity and to develop literacy activities.

Experiences showed that they are enthusiastic about making their own book and bringing it back home. In the classroom, student can introduce their own book to one another and pronounce the words they have written in their mother tongue. It allows teachers to develop plurilingual activities thus developing appropriate understanding of the richness of differences. It enhances the feeling of proudness and the social recognition migrants are not used to.

It also allows teachers to forge social links with parents by organising once or twice a year a party where books can be read aloud or translated in their mother tongue. This is simple way of empowering people with their own culture, their past, with their home country, with their identity. By forging links with migrant parents in the school context, students develop confidence and feel less ashamed of their migrant condition.

Another target of Migrilude's scope is to promote regional languages that were once forbidden, especially in France, from the 1789 Revolution until recently. Three books were issued in French, German and Alsatian with the support of the Alsatian Region that wants to rehabilitate its long repressed identity and language. One picture books deals with Carnival in Alsatia, the second one deals with Easter, the third one with gardening and the next one – to be issued in 2011 – with farm and animals.



This is a typical cooperative and integrative activity supported by political regional figures engaged in the promotion of German and Alsatian. Teachers, language specialists, students guided by artist Anne Lefebvre are all involved. The result is impressive. You would never think that 4 to 7 year-old children made these books. In the meantime, they develop language and translation activities in the above-mentioned three languages.

Growing interest in our specific plurilingual books

Our collection served as a laboratory for the French Centre for Scientific Research that issued a 160 page picture books with 11 idioms spoken by communities in Guyana. The scope was to provide them with a tool that allowed them to know each other better and also to learn the official language, which is French, thus to learn French as if it were a dual lingual book, each community having the same reference tool.

Our next project is to make a puzzle with 3 kindergarten classrooms based in the centre of Geneva, a multicultural area. Students are asked to create pictures while parents are requested to provide the related vocabulary in 17 different languages, representative of students' nationalities. Parents are recorded so as to provide the sound track of the package. This is a fantastic way to forge links between parents, teachers, students and the whole school communities and to empower parents with their linguistic and cultural background. The final scope is to better settle students in their classroom and strengthen their self esteem because their languages are put at the same level as French.

There is no question of making a flourishing business out of it. The print run of each project and publication varies from 500 to 1000 copies. Because no traditional diffusion companies accept to work with us, we are not much visible (except from our website). However we notice that orders coming from French, Swiss and German libraries are increasing gradually. When we attend workshops at school with students making their own picture book out of their own languages and when we see the eyes of parents glowing when reading them in their language, this is an enormous reward and we have the feeling that we are doing something right for minorities. It is certainly a drop in the ocean. As citizens of the world, that specific drop gives us the guts and the will to continue.

