Assessing the effects of strategic multilingualism in linguistically diverse classrooms – a matter of conflicting evidence or of incompatible paradigms?

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This paper discusses the policy uptake of multilingualism research that has been conducted in an urban educational context with linguistically diverse classrooms. We concentrate on the stage where the researchers reported back to the funders and policy makers, as the fate of the pedagogical implementation whose effects had been assessed had to be decided upon. The research reported on the effects of an intervention that had been set up in four primary schools in Ghent (Flanders) and had been oriented to the creation of a strategically enriched learning environment which exploited pupils’ multilingual resources, as part of the local education authority’s response to increased linguistic diversity. The intervention’s effects on learning achievement were assessed over a period of four years using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative evidence for positive effects was established on the basis of classroom observations and interviews with teachers, whereas no quantitative evidence was found for positive effects on the basis of the pupils’ language tests. This lack of “hard-and-fast” figures was perceived by the stakeholders as indicative of a failed (achievement-neutral) pedagogical intervention.

A number of questions can be raised which pertain both to paradigmatic choices and the course of the research process. One issue is the potential mutual reinforcement of paradigmatic connections between an instructivist view of learning and a positivist orientation to “objective” indicators of learning in quantitative designs. The need to assess the effects on language proficiency channelled researchers in the direction of existing standardized test materials that accord more easily with a view of multilingualism as “separate monolingualisms”. Standardized testing may well unfairly disadvantage certain groups of students, as the need to capture the complexities of learning in a multilingual context arguably requires more sophisticated multi-dimensional designs. Additional issues pertain to the time economies of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Keywords: qualitative and quantitative research methods, language assessment, urban multilingualism.