Which language does an 'atypical adult' speak? Negotiating what counts as linguistic expertise in the multilingual field

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Researching multilingual settings ethnographically inevitably raises questions of language, power and representation (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). In this paper, I discuss the continuous negotiations of linguistic expertise throughout the research process.

The paper is based on a linguistic ethnography conducted in a multilingual primary school in a suburban area in Denmark in 2010-11 with a focus on language teaching across the curriculum. During fieldwork, I participated in the teaching of Danish and English in a year 2 class and in afternoon lessons in Arabic, Dari, Pashto and Somali. I came to these linguistically diverse classrooms as a linguist and a former teacher educator with high levels of proficiency in Danish and English and a rather rudimentary understanding of Arabic, Dari, Pashto and Somali and as such experienced a range of dilemmas related to language choice, conflicting constructions of linguistic and professional expertise and navigating complex linguistic hierarchies. The dilemmas were intensely present during fieldwork, in the everyday "entanglements, knots, weaves and tissues" between myself and the participants in the field (MacLure 2003); but the intensity of the dilemmas extended beyond the fieldwork and into the analysis and writing process.

Based on these experiences, the paper discusses questions related to negotiation of linguistic expertise throughout the research process: Which languages are used and recognized as appropriate in the interaction between the researcher and the researched in the field? What seems to count as linguistic expertise in the field – how is linguistic expertise demonstrated, claimed, ascribed, denied or challenged? How does perceived linguistic expertise enter into the analyses, and which notions of linguistic expertise are represented in the research writings?

References


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