

Book Review

Kate Menken and Ofelia García: *Negotiating language policies in schools: educators as policymakers*. London: Routledge, 2010.

This edited volume brings together twenty-seven scholars conducting language education policy research on seven continents. It is an impressive collection of cases from a diverse range of polities: Chile, China, Ethiopia, France, India, Israel, Lebanon, New Zealand, Peru, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Common across all these contexts is cutting edge work that Menken and García characterize as “a newer wave of language education policy research that refocuses our attention from governments to local school administrators, teachers, students, parents and community members” (p. 3). The volume makes a much needed contribution to the field of language planning and policy (LPP) by assembling into a single collection the work of a growing body of researchers who share this orientation. Indeed, it is one of those rare edited collections that is truly greater than the sum of its parts. Accordingly, I focus this review on the insights that emerge from the volume as a whole.

The “newer wave” of LPP research, Menken and García suggest, moves beyond earlier neoclassical and critical approaches to highlight the multilayered nature of language policy systems and the role of individual agents. Yet the contributors to this volume do not leave behind the analysis of major national policies in sociopolitical context or the examination of how policy documents limit or foster educational opportunities for linguistic minority students. Rather, they seek to extend such foci in order to explore how “agents across national, institutional, and interpersonal levels are engaged in a process wherein they interact with and are impacted by one another to enact language policies” (p. 3). In this way, the volume represents the vanguard of the ecology of language policy, a dynamic and multidimensional perspective on LPP (e.g., Hornberger and Hult 2008; Hult 2010; Mühlhäusler 2000; Ricento 2000) that is reflected perhaps most notably by Ricento and Hornberger’s (1996) onion metaphor. While studies have been conducted under this ecological rubric for some time, Menken and García explain that there remains an “urgent need to heed the call for a more multilayered and textured exploration of language education policies” (p. 3).

Central to the challenge of answering this call is a reconceptualization of venerable LPP concepts such as top-down/bottom-up, macro-micro, grassroots and even the centrality of policy documents themselves. Instead of tracing policy flows and pinpointing them along a linear continuum between micro and macro, the contributions to this volume demonstrate the value of investigating the messy, and often nonlinear, ways in which individual agents interpret and implement

language policies in various social and educational contexts. From this perspective, the new wave of LPP research, as represented in this volume, forms part of a growing trend in educational linguistics towards a complexity turn, prominently characterized in Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) *Complex systems and applied linguistics*:

In a complex system, there is connection across activity at different timescales and at different levels of social and human organization. The different levels and scales do not stand in a hierarchical relation to each other. . . . The influence of one level or scale on another can work in any direction, and we may be better to think of them as 'nested'. (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 30)

As a whole, *Negotiating language policies in schools* makes the argument for viewing LPP as a complex system. It offers an orientation to language policy that fully accepts the dynamism and multivocality inherent in the implementation of national or institutional policies in classrooms. Even in contexts that attempt to provide strong national control over educational policy, such as France (Hélot, chapter 4) or Israel (Shohamy, chapter 11), outcomes are guided by the choices of individual educators which, in turn, are mediated by a confluence of social and interpersonal affordances (pp. 257–285). This does not take shape in a simple cause-effect relationship or through clear linear pathways – policy discourses circulate within and across different settings where they are shaped and reshaped through individual actions and then circulated anew.

Each of the contributors takes up this multi-layered, dynamic and non-linear orientation, emphasizing the nature of LPP as ultimately grounded in educational practice. The editors segment the chapters into two major sections, reflecting the core factors that mediate the actions of educators: “internal, individual forces – how teachers’ or school administrators’ prior experiences or personal identity shaped their interpretations and enactment of language policies . . . [and] external forces shaping educators’ language policy negotiations, based on the situation or context (e.g., political, community, region, etc.) within which their school or district is nested” (p. 4). In practice, each chapter attends to both of these dimensions, recognizing that they go hand-in-hand. The division of the contributions along these lines represents mainly a starting point for inquiry.

Still, as the subtitle suggests, it is the “educator as policymaker” who takes center stage. Menken and García proclaim that “what we propose in this book is that educators be given their rightful roles as stirrers of the onion, producing the dynamism that moves the performances of all of the actors” (p. 259). This sentiment reverberates across the chapters, as in the following examples:

- “It is the teachers in the classroom who have to negotiate and/or recreate the language education policy” (Ambatchew, p. 202).
- “The teacher is not just another cog in the policy wheel; she is an active problem solver trying to deal with children’s classroom learning in her own framework and understanding of the reality” (Mohanty, Panda and Pal, p. 212).
- “[A]s policy actors in the field, teachers are fundamental to the design and implementation of any reform” (Valdiviezo, p. 75).
- “Language policy is . . . contested, negotiated, and reconstructed in the classroom to deal with contemporary social, political, and economic conditions that are rooted in a history of sociopolitical struggle” (Zakharia, p. 178).
- “[T]eachers can be key agents in the educational process from the beginning of their career” (Hélot, p. 65).

As complexity theory suggests, the actions of an individual can have a major impact on a broader system (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 231), a notion that resounds powerfully in each contribution’s focus on the central role of educator agency in language policy processes.

In all, Menken and García have succeeded in assembling a stellar volume that will be eminently useful to LPP scholars for both research and teaching. It is required reading for any scholar seeking to conduct research in the “new wave” of language policy, as each chapter provides an illustration of conceptual and methodological issues that are essential for future studies. At the same time, the book serves as a guide for educational linguists who train teachers in TESOL, bilingual education and foreign language teaching. Through each contribution we find new inspiration for how to help pre- and in-service teachers become critically aware of policy as well as empirical evidence for the opportunities and challenges educators face on the ground. Menken and García’s final chapter (“Moving forward: ten guiding principles for teachers”), which distills practical advice from the volume’s contributions, is especially useful in this regard. Thus, *Negotiating language policies in schools* is a timely collection that is sure to capture the interests of veteran LPP scholars, graduate students, and educational practitioners alike.

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