

Jasone Cenoz: Advocate for Multilingual Education

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Why multilingual education?

Education is becoming an integral mechanism for the global exchange of ideas. Multilingual education, within the context of the European Union, calls for educators and students to find a common ground in language. This is not to suggest a rejection of traditional languages: in fact, scholars such as Jasone Cenoz encourage the development of minority languages as a stepping stone to becoming bilingual and ultimately multilingual. Cenoz's research on language acquisition in the Basque Autonomous Community within Spain suggests that the Basque language serves as one of these stepping stones. Minority languages are usually spoken as a secondary language to a majority one. Education using minority languages, such as Basque, offer students unique opportunities to develop what is often their traditional language, while maintaining proficiency in the majority one. According to Cenoz these students are in a unique position to continue to develop their proficiency in other, international languages and ultimately become multilingual. Furthermore, considering the official bilingualism and multicultural makeup of Canada, the impact of her research reaches far beyond the boundaries of Europe.



Jasone Cenoz is currently a professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of Research Methods in Education at the [University of the Basque Country](#) in Donostia/San Sebastian, Basque Country. She is

also a member of the International Association of Applied Linguistics, the International Association of Multilingualism and is on the editorial board of the International Journal of Multilingualism. Her research concentrates on the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic effects on bilingual and multilingual education. In an interview featured on the European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning website, [mercator](#) (2011), Cenoz refers to her most recent research as “focus on multilingualism.” This, she describes, “... is holistic and looks at all the languages in the speaker's linguistic repertoire so as to see the interaction between them and the way multilingual speakers use their languages as a resource in communication.” She has published numerous articles in various linguistic and educational journals and is author of the book, *Toward multilingual education: Basque educational research from a international perspective* (2009).

Basque Region, Language and Culture

The modern Basque language is descendant from a pre Indo-European culture in what is now northeastern

Spain and southwestern France, located southeast of the Bay of Biscay along the western Pyrenees Mountains (Cenoz, 1998). Basque is spoken, as both first and second languages, by a little over half of a million people in this historic region (Cenoz, 2012). Unlike the languages of its neighbours, Basque is neither Latin nor Indo-European. The origin of the



language is a contentious issue, but, according to the Rand McNally Historical Atlas of the World, it is considered an Asianitic language, linked to Caucasian of the Black Sea region in southwestern Asia (Rand McNally, 1997). The principal provinces where the language continues to thrive are Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba and Naffarrea in Spain and Lapurdi, Benafarroa and Zuberoa in France. In 1978, the provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba were established as the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and, in 1982, recognized both Basque and Spanish as the official languages of instruction in education (Cenoz, 2012).

Basque is considered a minority language in Europe, spoken only in its historic region. However, it is eclipsed by two prominent international languages, Spanish and French, and is considered of little practical significance on a global scale (Cenoz, 2009). Consequently, Basque occupies second language status in its own region: Spanish being the language of the majority (Zalbide & Cenoz, 2008). However, the language is of historical significance, closely tied to a unique culture that has survived the influence of more dominant political and cultural powers throughout history (Cenoz, 2009). The most recent challenge to the Basque language came under the Franco regime (1939-1975) in Spain. During these years, the language was banned from education, but survived through the establishment of private language schools in the 1960s (Zalbide & Cenoz, 2008). Today, the majority of people in the Basque region speak Spanish in the home, but many schools and post secondary institutions in the BAC are increasingly using Basque as a medium of instruction. As education becomes increasingly global, advocacy for adding English as a third language to these schools is beginning to emerge as well. The research of Jasone Cenoz, supports this initiative and calls for a continued multilingual approach to education, both locally and internationally ([see video clip](#)).

Basque as Curriculum

The BAC is an interesting case study for linguists and educators. Basque is considered a “unique minority language” in Europe, meaning that it is a language spoken within a state by a minority, but is not the dominant language of any state (Cenoz, 2012). However, Cenoz (2012) argues that the policy implementing Basque as one of the official languages in the BAC has ensured that the language is treated as a majority language, not simply a subject. Students in the BAC are able to receive curricular instruction according to three different models: Model A provides an opportunity for Spanish speakers to be instructed in Basque three to five hours per week; Model B provides Spanish speakers with an immersion model through which the medium of Spanish and Basque share approximately fifty percent of instruction time; and Model D, based on a total immersion model with Basque as the primary medium of instruction with

three to five hours of Spanish instruction per week (Zalbide & Cenoz, 2008; Cenoz, 1998). The availability of Basque as a medium of instruction in schools has created a demand for its instructional use at the adult (Cenoz, 2002) and university levels as well, providing the language with increased academic legitimacy (Cenoz, 2012).

Nevertheless, there are many criticisms of promoting Basque as a primary medium for the instruction of curriculum in schools. As mentioned earlier, Spanish is the majority language in the BAC. The minority that speak Basque as a first language are able to speak Spanish, but many Spanish speakers are unable to speak Basque (Cenoz, 2012), so why speak Basque? Cenoz (2009; 2012) draws attention to a worry among critics that placing too much emphasis on the instructional use of the language in schools will only hinder the academic development of students. Critics feel that because Basque is spoken in only a small region in Europe and typologically different from the major European languages (Cenoz, 2012), the use of the language is limited to that specific region. Also, as research and, especially post-secondary, education becomes increasingly global, the international community will demand out of students a language other than Basque. For critics, learning Basque should be secondary to learning a more practical international language such as English (Zalbide & Cenoz, 2008).

In response to the challenges posed by critics, Cenoz (2009) finds support in the European Commission’s stance on minority languages. According to the commission, “... it is this diversity that makes the European Union... a common home in which diversity is celebrated and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding” (Cenoz, 2009, p. 5). Cenoz cites Basque writer Bernardo Atxagia’s very simple response to an interview question regarding his commitment to the Basque language as an example of the commission’s goal: “I told her [interviewer] that [Basques] were bilingual and that, as a writer, I published in both languages, and that since two languages were better than one I could only see the advantages in that” (Cenoz, 2009, p. 7). Basque speakers also speak Spanish and at the very least, learning Basque ensures its speakers are bilingual. As critics continue to ask the question ‘why learn the language?’ Its supporters simply reply, ‘why not?’

The European Commission also states that European students should possess practical skills in three languages: their mother tongue and two more (Cenoz, 2009). In conjunction with this goal, Cenoz (2003; 2009) argues that learning a minority language as a first language in a society that speaks another, majority language can be beneficial to the cognitive development of students. Evidence suggests that language acquisition is more advantageous to bilingual learners than monolingual learners. Cenoz's (2003) research indicates that the positive effects of bilinguals attaining a third language occur in contexts where a third language is added to the curriculum. The reasons being that bilingual learners possess previously attained literacy skills in other languages and possess a greater linguistic repertoire. Given the dominance of Spanish and the limited size of the BAC, anyone claiming Basque as a first language will also come to speak Spanish. Therefore, bilingual students will be in a strong position to learn a more widely spoken third language such as English. Learning Basque does not pose the problems in education outlined by the critics; rather its continued practice is a step toward the commission's goal for students to become functionally trilingual.

Beyond Europe

Cenoz's research on bilingualism and multilingualism in education in the BAC is applicable to the Canadian context. In accordance with her research, she specifically cites studies demonstrating an ability of students in Canada to develop their awareness of language diversity by interacting with learners from different backgrounds (Cenoz, 2009). French and English immersion programs available in Canadian public schools are very similar to Model B offered in the BAC and provide a context for acquiring multiple languages (Zalbide & Cenoz 2008). Canada's two



official languages are widely spoken across the world and offers its citizens with opportunities to become at least bilingual or, in the case of new Canadians and Aboriginals, multilingual in international languages.

The multicultural make-up of Canada offers unique opportunities for students to become multilingual. Many first generation Canadian students speak minority languages in the home and are educated in either French or English. However, opportunities to develop minority languages are not a universal practice in Canadian schools as of yet. A more formal development of minority languages in public education, coupled with the immersion programs already in place, may increase the opportunity for new or second generation Canadian students to become multilingual (see Tochon, 2009; Landry, Allard & Deveau, 2009).



Aboriginal communities share some important similarities to the Basque context. Considerable efforts are being made to preserve aboriginal languages through education for the purposes of heritage, but also for the maintenance of a national

consciousness (see Perley, 2006). Similar to Basque, many aboriginal people continue to speak their native language in the home or through immersion programs in school (Guevremont & Kohen, 2012), but such languages are threatened because of their limited practical use on a national scale. However, in communities that continue to speak their native tongue, education provided in both the native and majority languages proves to be beneficial in preserving the native language as well as successfully developing the second, majority language (Usborne, Caouette, Qiallak, Qumaaluk & Taylor, 2009). Education in both languages not only assures the survival of traditional, minority languages, but also better prepares students for their development in the more practical, majority language and possibly, additional languages.

Afterthoughts

Considering the research of Cenoz, Canada is in a unique position to provide opportunities to develop a multilingual curriculum for its students. Introducing multilingual curricula especially within bilingual contexts increase student opportunities to acquire a third, internationally spoken language that prepares students for the linguistic challenges posed by an increasingly global society.

Such an endeavour not only requires a change in curriculum, but requires teachers with an ability to effectively sustain minority languages. The concept may be wishful thinking, but active community involvement in education may provide schools with options to develop different languages. Volunteers may be able to provide the instruction needed in a community where there is a demand to maintain language. If there are minority communities with volunteers interested in incorporating minority languages into the curriculum, will multilingual education be an option for Canadians? Or will such initiatives only disadvantage monolingual Canadians and, from a global perspective, monolinguals worldwide?

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