

Mother Tongue Other Tongue poetry competition: insights for language education

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Abstract: *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* is a poetry competition run by SCILT and which values the diversity of languages spoken and learnt by Scottish pupils today. As part of a PhD in sociolinguistics which aimed to experiment an inclusive approach to languages in a minority situation, fieldwork was conducted on the 2015-2016 edition of MTOT. Interviews were led with groups of participants and poem entries were analysed, shedding light on pupils' experiences as they gradually embraced their plurilingual identities and forged a new social group, the plurilingual community. This paper first provides a summary of this doctoral study before considering implications for language education. MTOT shows how *creative writing across languages* can enhance all pupils' language learning and identity experience, through any language chosen and regardless of their levels of proficiency. This perspective leads us to reflect on the importance of considering a language as a social object and the role of its speakers/learners as agents.

Keywords: 1+2 policy, *Mother Tongue Other Tongue*, translanguaging, mediation, language appropriation

Introduction

The *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* poetry competition (MTOT) was at the centre of my PhD (Pedley, 2018), its edition of 2015-2016 becoming my fieldwork. Led by Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) since 2014, this initiative has been celebrating the diversity of languages learnt and spoken by pupils across the nation¹. My investigations took place at a time when the 1+2 Approach (Scottish Government, 2012) could be explored and tested, leading to educational projects² uncovering languages, language skills and innovative approaches to language education. What lessons can we learn from the *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* experience in light of current educational policies? Drawing from my research, this paper aims to give insights into approaching language education using creative writing activities, redefining the learner's agency, and the primary school teacher's role.

1. An inclusive approach to language diversity in Scotland: MTOT fieldwork

1.1. Context

A critical approach to multilingualism was at the centre of my PhD in sociolinguistics: the aim was to experiment an inclusive approach to languages in a minority situation, that is to consider links between linguistic situations and communities commonly thought of as apart, despite being relevant in common geographical contexts. Specifically in the

¹ SCILT's MTOT webpage : <https://scilt.org.uk/MTOT/tabid/5841/Default.aspx> (viewed on 09/07/21)

² To name a few : Language of the Month by schools, Word Wizard or LinguaChef run by SCILT.

Scottish context, this meant, for instance, listening to the voices of Scots, Polish or Urdu speakers as they recount their stories of living multilingually. Adopting an emic and qualitative approach, I restricted my population sample to children who had participated in SCILT's 2015-2016 edition of *Mother Tongue Other Tongue*.

MTOT invites pupils from Scottish primary and secondary schools to write a poem in a chosen language, along with a commentary in English. The competition is split into two categories: *Mother Tongue* hosts poems in languages known outside Scottish education and *Other Tongue* poems in languages learnt at school. First created by Routes into Languages³, SCILT has been running this competition since 2014 to celebrate language diversity and promote language learning in Scotland. My investigation on 2015-2016 participation aimed to measure the impact of MTOT on children's experience of local multilingualism, the language of the poem and their own plurilingual competence (Council of Europe, 2001). As a collective initiative which requires a high level of personal investment with specific language repertoires, my hypothesis was that MTOT fostered an inclusive vision of languages relevant to the local context.

1.2. Methods of investigation

1.2.1. Corpus

In order to analyse children's experience of MTOT, I collected two types of data⁴. Ninety-six poem entries formed the first corpus: all submissions for the Mother Tongue category and entries in Gaelic (10), British Sign Language (2) and Scots (1) for the Other Tongue category, representing altogether the thirty-six languages showcased that year.

Semi-guided interviews were conducted with groups of participants and their transcription formed the second corpus of investigation. Forty-nine pupils from four primary schools in the Glasgow area were interviewed, representing eighteen languages showcased that year⁵: two groups were pupils from a Gaelic-medium school who had all entered the competition with Gaelic as the language of the poem in P6/P7 (6 pupils in each group). The seven other groups (P3-P4; P5-P6; P6-P7) were run by two English as an Additional Language teachers who work over three schools. Pupils attended their class either because they needed EAL support or because they were willing or encouraged to join the competition. One of the two teachers participated in the interviews.

1.2.2. Analyses

To understand the message children tried to convey from a poem written in any language to a commentary in English, I used the notion of mediation, a language activity

³ A consortium of English and Welsh universities : <https://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/events/mother-tongue-other-tongue> (viewed on 09/07/21) - Today, the competition is still run in England by Manchester Metropolitan University: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mothertongueothertongue/> (viewed on 09/07/21)

⁴ The two corpora are available on the French National PhD archive website: https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02055796/file/These_Malka_PEDLEY_Corpus_annexes.pdf (viewed on 09/07/21)


⁵ The five most represented languages in the interview population sample were: Polish (16 pupils), Gaelic (11), Mandarin (3), Swahili (3), Arabic (3) (Pedley, 2018, p.161).

presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001 ; 2018) and defined as such by Cavalli & Coste (2015, p.26-27):

In the CEFR, the notion of mediation is defined as referring to the language activity of reformulating, orally or in writing, for the attention of one or more third parties, an oral or written text to which those third parties do not have direct access. This may take the form of a record, summary, translation etc. Mediation is therefore the production of a text from a source text for the purpose of transmitting its content (if only in condensed form).

I identified three types of mediation strategies used within the commentary part in English:

- Reformulation: 90% of the entries started with a sentence summarising what was perceived as most important in the poem.
- Narration: children gave contextual details of the poem and personal accounts of it.
- Quotation: some children quoted their favourite part of the poem (in its original version or as a translation) with a short explanation.



"KOLOROWE KREDKI"
 Kolorowe kredki w pudełeczku noszę,
 Kolorowe kredki bardzo lubię mnie,
 Kolorowe kredki, kiedy je pokręcę,
 Namalują wszystko co, co chcę!

Namalują domek,
 I na drzewo kota,
 Wesołe słonko
 Na pochmurnym dniu!
 A gdy w kosmos lecieć
 Przejdą mi oczkoma,
 Przechodzącą rakieta
 namaluje mi!

Kolorowe kredki w pudełeczku noszę,
 Kolorowe kredki bardzo lubię mnie,
 Kolorowe kredki, kiedy je pokręcę,
 Namalują wszystko co, co chcę!


Kredki jestem smutny
 sławisz! może powiesz,
 spadłam, dwa lotki
 I one, i rakieta
 Maluję, maluję,
 Maluję, maluję,
 Stoją na huśtawce
 I w rakieta lina!

This poem is about some crayons that can draw anything for you that you want. My favourite part is when they draw. They draw a house - dom, the sky, the sun - słonko. I like it because the crayons are like rainbows. I like rainbows because they are colourful. I picked this poem because my mum told me lots of different Polish poems. I picked this one because it is my favourite. I use my imagination and think that the crayons are magical and alive. The poem reminds me of a magical forest that has a rainbow. When I see a rainbow I think of this poem.

KA1 Ecole2 Dec2015 P3-P4: poem in Polish and commentary in English (reformulation, quotation, narration).

Some children used other visual or textual elements to make meaning:

- Illustration: a drawing or a photograph gave the reader a visual access to the content of the poem.
- Translation: 30% of the productions included a translation of the poem, mostly in addition to the commentary in English.
- Transliteration: some entries featured the poem in a transliterated version (writing in the original language using English phonetics), as a solution to transcribe (if the author did not have access to the language written code) or as a way of giving the reader access to the sounds of the poem.

<p>স্বাতা গাছে তোতা পাখি</p>	<p>The Parrot is on the Custard-Apple Tree</p>	
<p>Rhyme (Bengali)</p>	<p>Rhyme (English)</p>	
<p>স্বাতা গাছে তোতা পাখি ডালিম গাছে মৌ । এত ডাকি তবুও কেন কওনা কথা বৌ?</p>	<p>The parrot is on the custard-apple tree While on the pomegranate tree is the bee. Calling the bride for so long But why don't you speak out thee?</p>	

M1* Ecole 7 P4 – Extract with the poem written in Bengali (original script), a translation and an illustration

<p><u>Malayalam Poem</u> റോസാപൂവ് റോസാപൂവ് എന്റെ സുന്ദരി പൂവ് നിന്നെ കാണാൻ എന്തു ചന്ത എന്റെ പൂക്കൾ പൂവ് നീയെ വന്നു നിന്നെ കാണാൻ നീ കൂടെ വരണം ?</p>	<p><u>Poem</u> RosaPoove RosaPoove Ente Sundari Poove Ninne Kaanan Enthu Chantha Ente Punnara Poove Njan Vannu Ninne Kaanan Nee Koode Varano ?</p>	<p><u>Meaning</u> Roseflower Roseflower You are my beautiful flower You look so wonderful You are my cutest flower I came to see you always Can you come with me?</p>
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N* Ecole3 P5 - A poem in three versions (original script in Malayalam, transliterated version, translated version)

These mediation strategies give readers some access to the content of the poem and allow children to process their experience, as well as their relationship with the language used.

In addition, the interactional analysis (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1990) of the interviews showed that, despite a highly introspective process, the overall experience was driven by a collective drive, that of the participating group. Children experienced both a personal journey and a collective one, strengthening collective system beliefs on languages and the group dynamic.

1.3. Results

Although children used different languages, at the end of the project participants identified themselves as part of a group, with their MTOT peers, giving rise to a *plurilingual* community: week after week, as they join the group and work on their poems, children express themselves in and about the language they chose, with the confidence that they will be respected and admired by their peers who show interest, solidarity, and empathy. The plurilingual community is a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998) that can grow beyond its first circle, according to the concept of imagined community (Anderson, 1991). This result shows that children can be open to an inclusive approach to languages relevant to the local context. In these extracts, two pupils (interviewed separately) compare their plurilingualism (Edo/English; Gaelic/English) with that of their peers (Polish/English ; French/English) :

M. *How did it feel to talk about and to speak in Edo at school?*

LU. It feels ... just normal (...) like speaking Polish (...) I don't know speaking Polish in school like if you are like Polish is ... it just feels normal to me (...) - [Ecole1 Dec2015 LU-SI]

SO. it's not different at all/ if you're like French for example and you haven't spoken any English and then you come and move here and you speak English like/ in France they'd be like oh is it any different but it's not (...) – [Ecole4 Avr2016 P7-1]

Through MTOT, children became aware of their plurilingual competence (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018) and valued the language showcased by their poem. However, when it came to expressing wishes and motivation for language learning at school, various choices were expressed: some imagined taking up the language of the poem as a subject, some preferred to keep the language outside of school and others expressed a desire to learn a different language at school. Very often, children would justify their choices with economic, work-related and mobility arguments. These statements showed limits to an inclusive approach to language diversity: children are already aware of the symbolic values (Bourdieu, 1982) languages play in today's globalised world and will address their choices according to the capital they associate with a language.

MTOT is an opportunity for children to showcase their skills in languages, whether these are formally taught or not at school. According to the 1+2 policy, through the course of their primary and secondary education, children will learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue. For many reasons, mostly practical, it is unlikely that the 36 languages featured in the 2015-2016 edition of MTOT will be available as formally

taught subjects at school. This was not the ambition behind the MTOT project, and nor was it its goal to teach the languages. Instead, MTOT questions language learning and multilingualism: rather than questioning how to teach languages and which languages to teach, this initiative opened up to the importance of recognising language repertoires and understanding *why* languages can be learnt, from the individual's perspective.

2. Creative writing *across* languages to enhance the language learning experience

Each *MTOT* contribution combines two texts: a poem in a language other than English along with a commentary in English. These two texts complement each other and their combination “makes meaning” as a coherent and complete piece. They also reveal two distinct approaches, the commentary being the result of a reflexive process – in English – following the production of a poem in the other language. We consider “creative writing *across* languages” as creative writing activities involving several languages within the same text or in distinct texts that, when combined, trigger the writer's reflexivity on multilingual practices. In this second part, we reflect on how creative writing across languages may enhance all pupils' experience of language learning. Drawing from the study on MTOT we question learners' agency and relation to languages. Then, we consider pedagogical implications and limits to foster such enhancement.

2.1. The language learner as an agent

2.1.1. Language as something to do

With the ambition to “showcase” language diversity, *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* welcomes all languages. Since there is no guarantee that the judges will understand the language of the poem, the latter cannot be assessed formally in terms of language production and proficiency. This means children have more freedom to experiment sounds, shapes, meanings and, in doing so, explore their creativity beyond the limits of named languages. *Mother Tongue* participants may then act as language experts, as, very often, they have more knowledge of the language used than their teachers or their peers. For *Other Tongue* participants, this space represents a unique opportunity to play and experiment with the language that is usually, whether consciously or not, represented as one that the teacher “masters” and that pupils learn to “acquire”.

This concept of language as something to do and experiment with gives pupils agency in the languages they choose, regardless of their levels of proficiency. This is highlighted in the mediation activity, the first purpose of which is to convey meaning and interact with the *other*. In addition, children are able to reflect on their literacy and language practices.

2.1.2. Language as an entity to relate to

Despite demonstrating an ability to envision more inclusively languages encountered collectively through MTOT, children show that they are aware of the symbolic values of languages in the world today (Bourdieu, 1982), when they express reasons for choosing

specific languages to fit into their curriculum. These values are socially constructed and shared beliefs.

Although the general population recognises the advantages of being plurilingual (Scottish Government Social Research, 2016), language learning uptake and attainment in Scotland (Doughty, 2017 a ; 2017b) are still low. Véronique Castellotti (2017) highlights the need to give space for the learner to connect with the target language and build a tailored project and relationship, as the individual project of the language learner is often left unconsidered. As she defines it, *appropriation*⁶ does not mean people should aim to possess the language but rather engage with the language, each time in their own singular way. Her straightforward question “why do we still learn languages?” in a globalized world, calls for a personal insight into language learning and teaching (Castellotti, 2017, p.51)⁷ :

A person appropriates a new language and experiences a new linguistic and cultural setting in their own way, because appropriation is each time different and depends on the person’s history and projects.

MTOT was the opportunity for children to encounter the language of the poem in a very personal and singular way. Through this experience, children showed, each in their own way, that they relate to languages as social objects. Many aspects come into play to explain the extent to which and the reasons why we relate to, learn and practise languages. This partly explains why children reacted differently to the idea of having the language of the poem taught at school.

Has mother tongue other tongue changed the way you see Tagalog?(...)

Well kind of/ you know/ like I used to see it as just a language that I didn’t really know but now I really see it as a/ my language and some/other people’s language (...) – [Ecole3 Dec2015 P5-P6]

2.1.3. Language to belong

A need or a desire to communicate with specific people can be a driving factor for learning a language. School exchange programmes have helped pupils experience authentic situations in which to practise a language and interact with its speakers. However, language learners are rarely made to feel as language speakers. That is, they are not made to feel that they belong to the target language community.

Danièle Moore (2005) explores the imaginative power of young children engaged in exploring foreign languages. As they produce “Chinese” inspired graphic items and include them in daily creative activities, children start identifying as Chinese speakers. As the author shows, what matters is not whether these children can be considered as legitimate members of the Chinese-speaking community, but rather that through their

⁶ Translation from French in the original text “appropriation”.

⁷ My translation from French.

projection as members of such imagined community, they open their intercultural and plurilingual awareness and potentials.

2.2. Pedagogical implications to foster this approach

For language learning to become meaningful, a pedagogy based on experimenting with languages and developing the learner's agency in the language and within its community should be fostered in education. Does this approach fit with Scotland's 1+2 scheme for language learning? And does it comply with *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*? Here, we consider space for such an approach to be fostered, implications for teachers, and inspirational resources to be used.

2.2.1. What the current educational policies say

In this paper, we have tried to show that each child should be allowed to find their own voice, their own project, their own motivation and aspiration to become a language learner, a language speaker. *CfE* highlights the importance of "empowering" pupils in many ways. Educators, when designing curricula, are encouraged to "listen to learners and be[ing] informed by their motivations and aspirations" as well as "empower [them] to have agency in their learning with opportunities for personalisation". These features are represented through the four capacities promoted by *CfE*⁸.

As it appears in the 1+2 documents – or rather, considering the lack of recommendations given – the L3 constitutes a *radical space* for pedagogical exploration⁹ and, as such, could be the ideal opportunity for such creative and envoicing activities to take place. However, creative writing across languages does not need to be restricted to one language or even one subject area, as it bridges interdisciplinary practices with, for example, expressive arts, health and wellbeing, social studies or technologies (IT).

2.2.2. The teachers' role and pedagogical framework in this approach

As he recounts a multi-literacy experience in a London school, Charmian Kenner shows children's awareness of the boundaries between activities and their specific parameters (2000, p.142):

'Shall I do some more Chinese? We always do Chinese on this table'. She then added to me, in the tone of an order, 'When we do Chinese, you get the glittery pens out!' Thus, she had identified a conjunction of language with place (the writing table), people (me) and writing materials (glittery pen) — the elements of a potential literacy practice involving 'Chinese' at school.

This means it is possible for a teacher to adopt various roles, from being the facilitator of a creative writing workshop, to an instructor as a language teacher. Parameters such as schedule, space, material or even participants (in the event of an artist's visit, for instance) will help the teacher frame the activity within a specific project and following specific targets that pupils need to be aware of. In turn, children will recognise these

⁸ From <https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/> (viewed on 09/07/21)

⁹ This was presented at *TedELL online conference* (Portugal) in November 2020 during the symposium held by Pedley, M. McPake, J. Roxburgh, D. Anderson, L. "The transformative power of local linguistic encounters". A publication of this presentation is due in 2022.

features and boundaries, as they are sensitive to literacy practices and events defining their daily routine at school¹⁰.

Allowing children to experiment with languages beyond limits requires a shift in mentalities towards what it means to be plurilingual and to be a language learner. Although interactions in class mostly remained in English (when English is the language of instruction), MTOT showed that translanguaging practices in creative writing may be allowed (Kleyn & Garcia, 2019, p.79):

A translanguaging pedagogy thus shifts ideologies about language, positioning named languages in their important sociocultural and sociopolitical plane, while expanding the linguistic capacity of learners to make meaning. The focus of teaching is not the language and its structure per se, but the development of the learner's language repertoire as they add new features that become their own, and as they develop understandings of which features are appropriate for communication.

A translanguaging pedagogy relies on *stance*, *shift* and *design*. A teachers' translanguaging *stance* is one that appreciates that learners all have unique repertoires composed of a variety of linguistic features they combine to make meaning in context. Teachers have to be able to *shift* positions with learners, who may, in some respects, have more expertise than them. Finally, translanguaging pedagogy requires teachers to set a *design* which is communicated to learners, so that they know when, where, why and how to practise translanguaging (Kleyn & Garcia, 2019).

2.2.3. Creative writing across languages: legitimacy beyond the realm of school

Scotland is a multilingual nation and has been for centuries (McPake, 2006, p.12-13). Its vibrant culture through storytelling and poetry has shown contacts between languages. The *Curriculum for Excellence* highlights the importance of providing an education that is locally coherent, embedded in Scotland's social, historical and cultural context. It encourages the use of "the outdoors and our built and cultural heritage to support learning"¹¹. In January each year, schools across Scotland celebrate Robert Burns' poetry and, in doing so, celebrate Scots (openly or not) for its vibrant creativity. To introduce creative writing across languages and show that it is a legitimate form of expression, many writers can be celebrated, representing Scotland's multilingual culture, past and present. Jackie Kay, Scots Makar and ambassador for MTOT, expresses her plural selves and plural language identity in her poetry. Her collaborative poem, *Threshold*, recited to open her first Parliamentary session in 2016, is a great example of a powerful and legitimate text incorporating a multitude of languages. Her lines "*It takes more than one language to tell a story, Welcome, One language is never enough, Welcome*" are voiced

¹⁰ In my PhD, I demonstrated that pupils were aware of the specificities of MTOT in terms of literacy practices and events (Street, 2000). It is this awareness and the safe-space it provided that enabled them gradually to engage in the project and nurture their plurilingual identity (Pedley, 2018 : 273-274) . – a paper treating this dimension is under publication.

¹¹ <https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/> (viewed on 09/07/21)

in a dozen languages¹². Her text is still available for readers to contribute to and add a translation on the Scottish Poetry Library website¹³.

Threshold

Find here what you are looking for:

Democracy, in its infancy: guard her

Like you would a small daughter -

And keep the door wide open, not just ajar,

And say, in any language you please, welcome, welcome

To the world's refugees.

(...)

It takes more than one language to tell a story,

Welcome

One language is never enough

Welcome

Conclusion

Based on my doctoral fieldwork on the 2015-2016 edition of MTOT, this paper aimed to present implications for language learning and teaching in primary education. Creative writing across languages activities, such as the MTOT initiative, foster children's reflexivity and empowerment of their literacy and linguistic skills. Although this approach does not aim to replace formal language teaching methods, we argue that it enhances learners' experience of languages triggering appropriation, in other words enabling them to consciously relate to languages and build their own meaningful learning project. To ensure that plurilingualism becomes the norm in the next decade, such an opportunity should be given to all pupils, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds and proficiency in languages.

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¹² Full video available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmLxjUNVtQU> (viewed on 09/07/21)

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