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Affirming Students' Right to Their Own Language: Bridging Language Policies and Pedagogical Practices		
Author:	Jerrie Cobb Scott, Dolores Y. Straker, Laurie Katz (2008)	
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Confronting educational inequality, the National Council of Teachers of English proposed the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (SRTOL) Act in 1974. This resolution begins: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style...” (p. 9). This resolution was reaffirmed in 2003 due to its contemporary relevance. As an anniversary publication, this book is devoted to examining the results of the resolution, to strengthening the connection between pedagogy and policy, and to drawing attention to language ideologies.

The book consists of 24 chapters divided into four sections. The first section, consisting of two chapters, provides historical context through interviews with educators and linguists. The second section (seven articles) documents the educational policies and attitudes which prevent realization of SRTOL. The third section (eight articles) provides pedagogical examples of SRTOL implementation. The fourth section (seven articles) examines linguistic diversity in other nations. This review will focus on the main themes of the volume: monolingual ideology, possibilities for teacher agency, and opportunity for strengthening SRTOL.

Monolingual ideology, which is currently endemic in U.S. society, makes realization of the SRTOL resolution a distant goal. The influence of monolingual ideology, the volume argues, is manifested in the U.S. covertly through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, the use of high-stakes testing, and overtly in opinion surveys of pre-service teachers. Dorothea Anagnostopoulos (17) provides an analysis of how language learning is affected by high-stakes testing. Examining the issue through a Bakhtinian perspective which emphasizes language “as socially saturated” (p. 263), Anagnostopoulos scrutinizes a high school literature discussion to conclude that standardization of the language arts has resulted in the neglect of developing students’ ability to discuss and understand literature. A broader portrayal of NCLB policy is provided by Dorothy Aguilera and Margaret D. LeCompte (5) who compare the situation of two indigenous languages: Hawaiian and Yup’ik. Despite suppression of the Hawaiian language for a generation, it has become the medium of instruction in “33 schools” (p. 70). In contrast, one Yup’ik school lost its bilingual program funding due to the NCLB Act and is now in jeopardy. The authors go on to sketch a brief history of the systematic oppression of Native American languages, the effects of language legislation, and the methods by which Native American languages could be promoted rather than suppressed.

A third barrier to implementation of SRTOL is a lack of awareness of language diversity. This issue is explored by Laurie Katz, Jerrie Cobb Scott, and Xania Hadjioannou (7). Using the Language Knowledge and Awareness Study (LKAS) the authors surveyed students in two U.S. universities and one in Cyprus to determine their level of language awareness. The results of the survey indicate that survey participants’ viewed language diversity negatively.

Providing a connection between SRTOL and pedagogy, and thereby promoting teacher agency, is another important theme of this volume. Rick Meyer (4) describes the requirement of policy makers to have one official “portrait” (p. 58) to represent students. Most recently, due to the NCLB Act, the portrait emerges from a test which indicates that a student is below, at, or above grade level. However, arguing that such methodology is simplistic and inadequate, Meyer suggests that more holistic “counterportraits” (p. 60) made by teachers should also be considered. Meyer concludes by suggesting that any real educational policy must take local realities into consideration.

Valerie Kinloch (6) asserts that the value of SRTOL is in its political connotations and illustrates this importance through a description of a nineteen year-old student’s understanding of, and appreciation for SRTOL. According to Kinloch, “Quentin’s understanding of the phrase ‘students’ right to their own language’ is foundational in his learning to think critically about language, identity, rights, and choice” (p. 94). Kinloch concludes that teachers can use SRTOL to increase students’ critical awareness of language in their own lives.

A further significant theme of this volume is the opportunity to strengthen SRTOL. The two opportunities articulated for strengthening SRTOL are found in the linguistic practices of other nations, and in the training of future teachers. To foster multilingual ideology it is

necessary to be aware of the range of possibilities. Thus, articles which describe the linguistic practices in education in Cyprus, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, South Africa, and India are included in this volume and provide a counterpoint to the monolingualism currently popular in the U.S. Several articles address the issue of training future teachers who will be aware of dialectical diversity. Nancy Rankie Shelton (8) offers the “positionality project” (p. 121) as a pedagogical method of teaching pre-service teachers about language diversity. This project requires that students collect conversational data using themselves as subjects and analyze it. Shelton offers student writing revealing a greater appreciation for dialectical variation to show the efficacy of this project.

This is an excellent volume in that it provides a concise and insightful introduction to U.S. educational policies from a linguistic point of view. However, one major shortcoming is that the SRTOL resolution itself is not critiqued at any point. In an article describing the process of linguistic prejudice Rosina Lippi-Green (drawing on Foucault) states that, “the educational system may not be the beginning, but it is the heart of the standardization process. Asking children who speak non-mainstream languages to come to schools in order to find validation for themselves, in order to be able to speak their own stories in their own voices, is an unlikely scenario” (p. 294). Yet this is exactly what the contributors to this book intend. This somewhat paradoxical situation is acknowledged by Kinloch (6) who states, “Smitherman’s belief that because the struggle for language rights has always been highly political, and because schools have never truly affirmed and accepted the mother tongue of non-mainstream English speech communities, a redefinition of the significance of SRTOL in relation to language rights, language policies, education, and power is necessary” (p. 87). The authors seem to implicitly acknowledge that the realization of SRTOL is extremely complex and that the schools and teachers may be challenged in achieving the key tenets of the resolution. That said, this book will be especially useful for pre- or in-service teacher education or educational leadership, as it provides a detailed history of language policies in the U.S.A. It will also be useful more generally for graduate students across language and literacy education who, with the authors, are committed to protecting students’ right to their own languages in an era of standardization.

References

Lippi-Green, R. (2004). Language ideology and language prejudice. In E. Finegan and J.R. Rickford (Eds.), *Language in the USA: Themes for the twenty-first century* (pp. 289-304). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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