

Pioneers of language policy

Viktória Lázár

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Medgyes, Péter (2011). *Aranykor. Nyelvoktatásunk két évtizede 1989 – 2009*. [Golden age: Two decades of our language teaching 1989 – 2009]. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó. 160 pages, ISBN 978-963-19-7116-3

Péter Medgyes offers a subjective retrospect of Hungarian language policy by presenting interviews with charismatic figures of language teaching of the past twenty years. The radical shift in the political system and establishment in 1989 was the source of several changes affecting the language policies of Hungarian governments. The twenty eventful years from 1989 to 2009 provide a solid ground for appraising and summarising. The book should attract a wide readership: novice and experienced language teachers and researchers will definitely find this an entertaining and educational volume.

The landmarks of the two formative decades, the golden age, as Medgyes calls the period nostalgically, are organised into twelve chapters. Each chapter begins with an interview with the author himself, in which he expresses his opinion on a central issue of language pedagogy. Then two or three experts of the field, interviewed by Medgyes, give an insider's view on the same issue. Photos of the respondents are attached to each interview. Details from government decrees, statistical data, some additional facts about people mentioned in the interviews provide the background to the interviews. Each chapter has an additional section of references of suggested readings, which is of interest to professionals or researchers.

The twelve chapters are organised around those crucial themes that formed the development of language teaching, and provided significant aspects for emerging language policies. The first chapter deals with the antecedents of the radical changes in language teaching. In the second chapter the private language schools are in the limelight, which were prospering during the period discussed and had a prominent role in influencing foreign language teaching. Three chapters (chapters 3, 7 and 11) discuss aspects of public education: bilingual schools, the national curriculum, and the introduction of a preparatory year in secondary schools for intensive language learning. The problem of the ever widening choice of course books is discussed in chapter 4 in two interviews, one with a Hungarian textbook writer, and one with the owner of an English language book store. Chapters 5 and 6 are dedicated to two uniquely Hungarian developments: the Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT), the three-year-long English teacher training programme to prepare English teachers within a short period of time concentrating on the practicalities of teaching; and also, the re-training of Russian teachers, who outnumbered all the other language teachers at the beginning of the period, into teachers of English – a project that was adopted by several post-socialist countries. Chapter 8 focuses on measuring knowledge and performance; the assessment of language proficiency and the appraisal of teachers' work. Although the main focus of Medgyes's book is admittedly the English language, which is quite acceptable considering the position of the English language among others, a separate chapter is devoted

to the lesser-learned languages (chapter 9). One of the great success stories of the two decades was the programme introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2003: the "World - Language" project – discussed in chapter 10 – had a great impact on the policies and practice of language teaching from primary schools to adult education, and it also left its mark on attitudes to teaching and learning. The last chapter, chapter 12 deals with 'export' teachers concentrating on two different viewpoints: those of native English teachers in Hungary, and Hungarian teachers and teacher trainers working abroad.

The choice of applying interviews, even for expressing the writer's own opinion, lends a dynamic and colloquial style to the book. As usual, Medgyes's book is full of anecdotes, sarcastic remarks, yet he still stays focused. The interviews are emotional and even biased, and Medgyes's self-interviews are no exception to this. However, this is surely one of the most valuable asset of an interview-collection: individuals voicing their opinions passionately about issues affecting their careers and lives. The writer's personal feelings toward the past 'golden age' reflect his not so optimistic feelings or hopes about the present or the future. However, some respondents challenge even the nostalgic concept of 'golden age' (e.g., Nikolov, Enyedi, Bodóczy), they did not see it that glittering. In spite of the individual opinions, due to the fact that the interviews were edited by the author so precisely, the text flows smoothly, to the extent that his voice prevails the whole book.

In the preface of his book Medgyes apologetically accepts the rightful criticism that his book mainly deals with the English language, even though the title promises a broader overview. However, he justifies this approach with the outstanding role of English today. Reading the interviews, the reader has the impression that despite this limitation the volume is a complete whole as it encompasses all major topics related to language teaching. Coherence is also ensured by presenting the author's roles in different projects of language policy discussed in the book. Medgyes's personality provides the organising principle in his selection of the respondents, who are, in many cases, his acquaintances or friends. Most interviewees are emblematic figures of those twenty years, taking part in implementing changes in the field of language teaching nationwide, or maybe within their smaller scope of influence. Their formative role is undeniable.

The book makes such an interesting read that in terms of criticism one can only think of further areas or people that would have added further valuable insights into language teaching. For instance the views of some representatives of language-exam centres would have been welcome, just as some additional data about the plethora of language-exams, as well as some further information about the reasons why the famous Pitman exams vanished from Hungary.

A great asset of Medgyes's book is its qualitative approach: we can see the individuals behind the regulations, innovations. The interviewees were either pioneers or participants of national projects. They truly deserve to have their voices heard, and their work appreciated. Besides presenting the self-evident professional achievements, the book offers another layer of interpretation for pure pleasure: the elating life-stories of intellectuals who could have become victims of unfavourable changes, but who rather chose to be winners.