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Tackling the Plurilingual Student/Monolingual Classroom Phenomenon

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This article argues for incorporating translation into the additional language (AL) classroom by drawing on the approach *translation in other learning contexts* (TOLC) (González Davies, 2014). Here we present translation-based classroom practices carried out ecologically (i.e., integrated in the AL syllabus) in secondary education, taking examples from an ongoing research project.[1]

Drawing from research on plurilingual language teaching, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13) claims that, when an individual's linguistic repertoire grows, they do "not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather build up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interact." Plurilingual competence, therefore, can be defined as an individual's ability to move between these languages strategically, "negotiating meaning, carrying content messages, giving information about the speaker, his social and cultural identity, the place he occupies in the conversation, or the nature of the exchange" (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009, p. 19).

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Increased migration and the economic situation in recent years has made the chances of finding a monolingual community minimal and developing plurilingual competence has become a sought-after goal, inviting educational policies to be altered. However, how can we develop plurilingual competence?

PLURILINGUAL STUDENTS IN MONOLINGUAL ENVIRONMENTS

The turn of this century saw a shift in the overall attitude toward plurilingual AL teaching and learning, bringing about a reassessment of the dominant monolingual approaches (Scheffler, 2013). The plurilingual paradigm continues to gain momentum and voices are increasingly heard in favour of the use of the students' first language (L1) in informed ways (see among others Byram, 2008; Cenoz & Gorter, 2013; Cummins, 2008), through different manifestations, from translanguaging (García, 2009), to pedagogically based code-switching (Corcoll, 2013), and translation (González Davies, 2014; Källkvist, 2013).

Nonetheless, monolingual language learning contexts are still common, so that, instead of integrating languages and developing students' plurilingual competence, students' linguistic repertoires are not treated as one entity, but are divided according to the languages they know. However, limiting the languages students are encouraged to access means that learning takes place in an unrealistic environment that can be described as the plurilingual student/monolingual classroom (PS/MC) phenomenon. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of this phenomenon in Catalonia, where Catalan and Spanish are the two official languages and an additional language (usually English) is mandatory throughout compulsory education.

This tendency to isolate languages in the curriculum stems from the notion favoured by the reform movement, and subsequent approaches like the direct method, that an AL is better acquired in the same way as the L1 to avoid negative transfer, as opposed to the view that connecting previous knowledge favours efficient learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Scheffler, 2013). However, Cummins's interdependence hypothesis (1984) insists that underlying attributes are common across languages making "possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another" (Cummins, 2008, p. 68). In AL learning, transfer occurs between languages as learners rely on previously learnt languages when trying to access meaning in the AL.
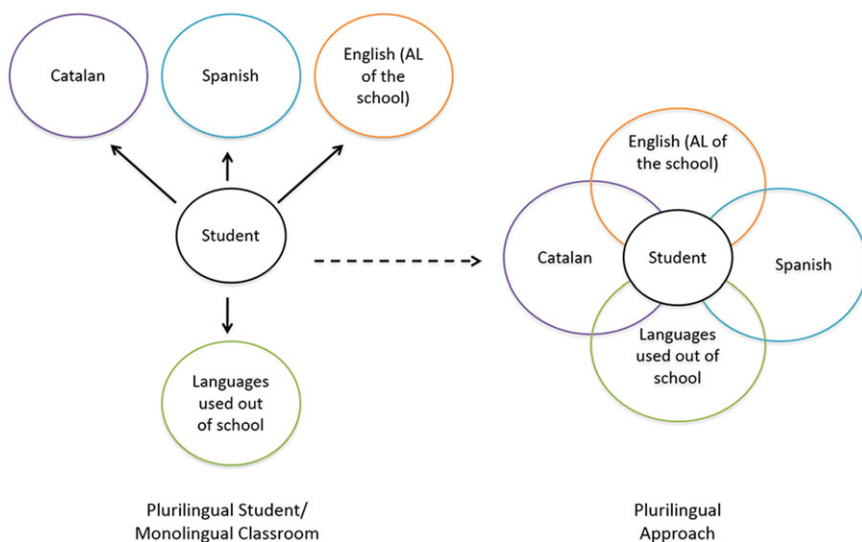
FIGURE 1. The PS/MC phenomenon in Catalonia.

By playing to the PS/MC phenomenon we deny students a valuable, naturally accessible learning resource. From this perspective, one possible way to build students' plurilingual competence in the AL classroom is to implement practices "that are generally ignored at school but are common among plurilinguals" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013, p. 597), like code-switching and translanguaging, or by drawing on approaches such as TOLC (González Davies, 2014).

TRANSLATION IN OTHER LEARNING CONTEXTS (TOLC)

The theoretical framework behind this approach examines learning strategies, educational objectives, and translation competence, questioning monolingual approaches to AL. It takes aspects from educational psychology, pedagogy, linguistics, and translation studies, and favours humanistic and socioconstructivist learning environments.

Drawing on the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1984), TOLC supports connectivism, arguing that all knowledge, including cultures and languages, is connected. TOLC does not deny that language interference exists, but argues that, through an informed use of plurilingual features of speech, the benefits of knowledge transfer

from the L1 can outdo the hindrances caused by potential language interference.

TOLC considers that translation can foster general linguistic competence along with cultural-pragmatic, morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic aspects of language, thus leading to the acquisition of "specific linguistic, encyclopaedic and transferential skills, and specific intra and interpersonal skills" (González Davies, 2014, p. 13) that may be developed to make for effective AL learning. Furthermore, TOLC emphasizes the need to develop intercultural and mediation skills.

Regarding Macaro's (2001, p. 535) three positions on L1 use in AL learning, TOLC adopts the optimal position—that is, "there may be pedagogical value in using L1, and this should be explored" adapting it to include translation. Therefore, the emphasis of TOLC is to focus on the explicit use of translation as a pedagogically advantageous tool rather than a last resort.

Yet many AL teachers remain reluctant to use translation in their AL classrooms and misgivings have been voiced regarding its use (González Davies, 2002). One such misgiving is its association with the grammar translation method and its reputation as a decontextualised, text-centred approach. Teachers often express concerns regarding their ability to teach through translation or their fear of provoking detrimental effects on their students by reducing their exposure to the AL. Confusion also remains as to what translation in AL learning entails, with some teachers considering its use only for checking learning.

The fact that such misgivings remain among teachers calls for a redefinition of what translation-based classroom practices involve and a reinforcement of translation's potential as a learning tool. In fact, many practices deemed "traditional" by advocates of communicative approaches are not necessarily alternatives but, rather, complementary. So, for translation-based classroom activities to contribute positively to the AL classroom, they should make use of authentic material in a collaborative context fostering all four language skills (González Davies, 2002, 2014; Sugranyes & González Davies, 2014). Finally, translation should be considered both as a process and a product, and so its practice should focus both on form and meaning to develop effective plurilingual competence.

CREATING A PLURILINGUAL CLASSROOM

This translation-based project was piloted as part of a quasi-experimental study based on both the exploratory and interpretative research paradigms, in the AL (English) syllabus of a secondary school in Barcelona, Spain, during the academic year 2014–2015. Two groups

took part in the exploratory study, a treatment group (TG) of 25 students and a control group (CG), also of 25, in their third year of compulsory secondary education. All students spoke Catalan and Spanish, while 24% of the TG and 16% of the CG spoke a different language at home or with their family. They all had knowledge of English, having studied it since pre-school.

Five groups of students were formed for AL instruction at the same time three times a week: an advanced level, one for beginners, and three at intermediate level. We worked with two of the intermediate groups given their similar backgrounds. Class observations and interviews showed that in both groups teachers followed a communicative approach. Both groups followed the standard AL syllabus of the school, which only included explicit translation in artificially designed texts to practise a specific grammar point. Throughout our research, the CG continued to dedicate 100% of their time to this syllabus while the TG worked on a translation-based project once a week over two terms, approximately one-third of their AL classes. During the remaining two thirds of their AL classes they followed the same syllabus, covering the same topics, grammar, and vocabulary points, as the CG.

We wanted to see whether carrying out the translation-based syllabus could affect students' acquisition of language and plurilingual competence as well as sounding out their opinion on the use of translation in the AL class. Language tests distributed to both groups before and after the implementation of the syllabus measured the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, the four language skills, and plurilingual competence. We measured the perceptions of students from both groups through semi-structured interviews in small focus groups after the project. Students' perceptions and performance were recorded in a researcher's diary. The preliminary findings from these instruments are detailed later.

Further instruments used throughout the research included pre- and post-project questionnaires measuring both groups' perceptions on the use of TOLC, and class observations at three stages of the project. These identified when and how both groups used translation and whether this changed throughout the project. Last, the TG students' work was gathered to observe their performance in language acquisition and development of plurilingual competence. These results are being processed.

The project was implemented within a collaborative learning context and was divided into three stages, as detailed below.

Stage One

The introductory stage (5 weeks), presented students with translation skills and strategies. Students practised problem solving,

considering common problematic aspects and possible solutions, including false friends and words with multiple meanings, such as *get*, or the use of translation strategies regarding how to translate cultural aspects, such as domestication or foreignization. Students carried out activities that invited them to compare different festivals celebrated on the same day, such as Halloween, *el dia de los muertos*, a day for honouring the dead (Mexico), or *la castanyada*, when roasted chestnuts, sweet potatoes, and almond delicacies called *panellets* are eaten in Catalonia. In other tasks, they considered traditional food from their countries and their translations for English-speaking visitors, before creating a plurilingual menu.

Stage Two

In stage two, students worked on the short project, *Harry's World*, designed around the Harry Potter series (7 weeks). Students researched characters' names and wizarding words, presenting the information in innovative ways, through software like Wordle (Figure 2).

They then worked in groups to translate a Harry Potter video trailer into Catalan or Spanish. After translating, they dubbed the trailer and added English subtitles. In carrying out this project, students were encouraged to develop resourcing, subtitling and dubbing skills, and implement the translation strategies discussed previously.

The final step of this short project was designed to incorporate the other languages spoken in the TG class. However, the number of speakers of each of these languages was low (one Basque speaker); therefore, although encouraged to incorporate their language into the project, they verbalised that the workload involved was excessive, rendering this option impossible.

FIGURE 2. Wizarding words in a plurilingual Wordle.

Stage Three

The final stage was a more complex project, entitled *The Intercultural Storytelling Blog* (12 weeks). Students worked on different activities and tasks to practise updating texts, foster problem-solving and problem-spotting skills, and develop storytelling techniques.

First, students chose their favourite childhood story and carried out online research individually on its different versions from country to country. Second, they presented their findings on an interactive poster using Buncee (Figure 3). In pairs, students chose one of their favourite stories (sometimes, the same story as in the first activity) and updated it so that it took place in a modern time and setting. Here, students considered cultural aspects (e.g., rather than attending a ball and losing a slipper, Cinderella in California attended a beach party and lost a flip-flop). The posters and stories were posted on a blog.

The next step of the project involved students working in groups to choose a traditional Catalan legend and translate it into English, identifying the aspects deemed problematic to translate like idiomatic expressions or cultural references. From their translation, they developed a 2-minute script in English and created a storytelling video. Subtitles were added in English and the script was back-translated to provide subtitles in Catalan and Spanish (Figure 4). Last, students created a listening comprehension quiz to accompany their video and both were published on the blog.

FIGURE 3. Example using Buncee.

FIGURE 4. Example of storytelling video.

Once again, we were somewhat limited here because the school compelled us to focus on Catalan legends, given that the end of our project coincided with the local Catalan Sant Jordi's Day celebrations (23rd April).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We now present the preliminary findings obtained from the interviews, language tests, and researcher's diary to record perceptions and performance.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (SI) were carried out with students from the TG to collect their views on the project. When asked what they had liked about the project, they unanimously agreed that working in teams was motivating; 72% said that the activities had been dynamic and entertaining. They all claimed their English had improved, with 76% highlighting vocabulary acquisition, 28% finding they had used the grammar they had learnt in more authentic ways than when working with their textbook, and 20% claiming that they would change the timing of the project in order to dedicate more time to certain activities.

All students had found the first stage beneficial. One student, when asked if the final translation project would have been more difficult without the initial stage, answered (SI, 29/5/2015) "*hagués sortit igual però la gent l'hagués ficat a Google traductor i ja està* [It would have been the same but people would have just put it on Google Translate and that's it]."

Students from both groups were asked their opinion on translation in the AL classroom. When asked how their use of translation had changed, the entire TG agreed that previously they had only used translation to ensure comprehension or among peers, rarely carrying out informed translation activities and then only to translate artificial sentences based on grammar or vocabulary points. However, they all now associated translation practices with those in the project, considering them collaborative, enjoyable, and fruitful.

The CG students interviewed still associated translation with one-word translations or as a way of ensuring understanding. One student claimed to often translate in class, despite feeling he should not (SI, 5/6/2015): "*no hauriem de fer, però ho fem molt* [we shouldn't do it, but we do it a lot]," thus underlining the absurdity of avoiding a natural practice.

Regarding cultural knowledge, both groups claimed to have learned about another culture, albeit from different perspectives. Within the

CG, this was limited to Britain because during the first term the school had employed an English language assistant who had taught students about aspects of life in the United Kingdom. Students in the TG related cultural aspects with tasks completed as part of the translation-based syllabus—for example, traditions and customs of the United Kingdom and Mexico. Nobody in the CG felt they had learned about their own culture. However, in the TG, one student was unaware that the legend his group translated existed before the project (SI, 29/5/2015): "*fa un més em vaig acabar d'enterar que hi havia un timbaler de Bruc … cada un ha après algo* [a month ago I discovered there was a *timbaler de Bruc* (character from the Catalan legend)] … everyone's learned something." Elsewhere, one student only realized that the *Castanyera* (chestnut seller) was a Catalan referent and not a worldwide concept when he had to translate it.

Language Tests

Regarding performance, TG and CG test results were compared (Table 1) and it was found that both the average mark obtained by both groups was higher in the posttest than in the pretest for

TABLE 1
Preliminary Results From Language Tests

Assessed aspects	Group	Test	Average result	Difference in change in scores between TG and CG *t*-test (*p*-value)*
Listening	TG	Pre	3	.1512
	CG		3.4	
	TG	Post	3.8	
	CG		3.8	
Reading	TG	Pre	3.5	.6645
	CG		3.5	
	TG	Post	3.8	
	CG		3.7	
Speaking	TG	Pre	2.9	.1548
	CG		3.2	
	TG	Post	3.4	
	CG		3.4	
Grammar and vocabulary	TG	Pre	2.4	.3182
	CG		2.9	
	TG	Post	3.2	
	CG		3.3	
Writing	TG	Pre	2.7	.0070
	CG		3.7	
	TG	Post	3.5	
	CG		3.7	

*p < .010.

listening, vocabulary and grammar, reading, and speaking. A *t*-test was carried out and it was found that the change in results for the TG was not significantly greater than those for the CG.

The average results from the writing posttest were higher than those in the pretest. The results obtained by the CG between both tests were unchanged. A *t*-test was run on these results and, in this case, showed the change in mean scores of the TG to be significantly higher than that of the CG. Interestingly, many students in the TG were unable to complete the pre-writing tests (by answering the question incorrectly, or not reaching the required minimum length) whereas the same students completed the writing task in the posttest. Here, we can suggest that participation in the translation-based practices fostered practice and confidence.

Researcher's Diary

Recorded data by the researcher suggest that, as the weeks passed, students began questioning the languages being used and stopped looking for literal translations. For instance, in the first week working on translation, one student translated "I didn't feel like cereal" to the Catalan "*no em sentia com cereals.*" Here she had used the verb *sentir-se* which is the translation of *feel*, when describing emotions rather than being in the mood for something.

However by Stage 2 (Week 6), students' approach and know-how were changing. For instance, one student, when translating "I was just wondering, if maybe, you wanted to go to the ball with me?" said he knew that *ball* could be translated as *pilota* (as in a football) but that in that sentence it must mean something else. Using appropriate resourcing skills he concluded that *ball* was also a formal dance and, given the context, considered this to be the correct translation.

Another example (Week 21) comes from a student who, when translating "*va somriure d'orella a orella*" (literally, "to smile from ear to ear"), recognized there was an idiomatic expression and that a literal translation might not be sufficient. Using an online dictionary, she verbalised that, although *smile from ear to ear* was accepted, so was *grin from ear to ear*. Following an Internet search, she confirmed a higher frequency for *grin* and chose that option.

CONCLUSION

For translation-based activities to prove effective and shake off the negative connotations linked to this practice, they should be informed,

authentic, and collaborative. The translation-based project presented above has aimed to cover these three requirements as follows:

1. Designing multi-competence and multi-skill activities, tasks, and projects.
2. Working on authentic materials to be shared with a wide audience besides the teacher.
3. Encouraging pair and group work while working on collaborative tasks and projects.

This project is an example of how translation can be used in the AL classroom in dynamic ways, incorporating new technologies and project-based group work. By allowing students to translate, we are fostering the use of natural plurilingual learning skills and strategies that can be transferred to other learning contexts. Perhaps most importantly, by working plurilingually in our AL classrooms, we can give students the opportunity to go beyond learning about the target language only, so that they can become plurilingual students learning in a natural plurilingual environment rather than plurilingual students in monolingual classrooms.

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