

## INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Plurilingualism and using languages to learn languages: a sequential approach to deal effectively with language diversity\*

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### ABSTRACT

After years of controversy and terminological debate, the plurilingual approach is now well accepted by language teaching communities. Still, doubts concerning how the plurilingual approach can shape the way we teach languages remain. The aim of this article is to describe a pedagogical and sequential approach that can be followed by teachers who wish to deal effectively with language diversity in their classrooms. The sequential approach is based on a humanistic and sociocultural teaching perspective, which takes into account the enhancement of learners' identities, the flexibility in language teaching and the visibility of learning. It includes three stages that are described and exemplified in the article: Making languages visible, Using languages effectively and Establishing (explicit) connections among languages. Examples of activities are suggested for each one of the stages and they are followed by a list of issues that may be discussed with learners after doing the activities.

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### KEYWORDS

Plurilingualism; language learning; language diversity; language awareness; translanguaging; pedagogical approach

Using learners' language repertoires in the additional language (AL) classroom is an issue that is no longer controverted in the language teaching arena. It is, by now, clearly required if we are to develop plurilingual and intercultural competences, as well as the communicative competence, and do so from a standpoint which is, first, respectful with learners' backgrounds and, second, pedagogically sound. The question that remains, however, is how to do it in an informed and effective way. Following Weber (2014, 7), we should step away from approaches which are purely 'celebratory' and hence limited, in that they 'fail to address the issues underlying educational underachievement' and the issue here is not only to value or acknowledge language diversity but to offer a way to deal effectively with it in language classes. Informed alternatives which address the key principles of the plurilingual pedagogy should be offered, namely: the recognition of learners' unique language repertoires, the promotion of plurilingual language practices and the transfer of skills between languages (Stille and Cummins 2013, 631).

Several pedagogic proposals have been put forward to attain this aim: the *Éveil aux langues à l'école primaire* (Candelier 2003) and the related projects and frameworks EOLE, ELODIL and CARAP, the European Language Portfolio and the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Pic cardo 2013), the

use of Identity Texts (Stille and Cummins 2013), or the Integrated Plurilingual Approach (Corcoll and González Davies 2016; Esteve and González Davies 2016; Esteve et al. 2017; González Davies 2017), among others.

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#### INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Within this context, the aim of this article is to present a new sequential and classroom-based approach in the form of a developing continuum to promote the use of the learners' language repertoire from a sequential, thus scaffolded, viewpoint. This continuum can be followed in order to promote the plurilingual pedagogy with young learners and older learners, but also as a process to be followed with a specific group of learners. The underlying principles behind the continuum are the following:

- . humanistic and socioconstructivist pedagogical approach based on scaffolding and on the appropriate balance between linguistic and cognitive challenges: an approach where context embedded and cognitively demanding tasks are intertwined (Cummins 2001).

- . enhancement of (linguistic and cultural) identity in tending to the singularities in the pluralities that make up multilingual classrooms (García and Sylvan 2011; Sufrañes and González Davies 2014). Following Cummins (2001), taking the plurilingual perspective in the classroom is not about multilingual education; it is a question of acceptance and individuality.

- . flexible multilingual education, which 'involves the strategic use of multilingual pedagogies such as code-switching, both in order to scaffold students' learning and to make them aware of the differences between the standard variety and their own vernacular varieties' (Weber 2014, 184) and which includes translanguaging, understood as the constant adaptation of linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making (García and Sylvan 2011; Corcoll and González Davies 2016). 'The use of code-switching, bridging and scaffolding strategies, with their reliance on students' home linguistic varieties, is a way of drawing upon students 'funds of knowledge' (...) and thus connecting home and school knowledge. It helps to develop students' bi- or multi literacies' (Weber 2014, 186).

- . making learning visible, which aims at teachers helping learners become aware of their own learning process and thus develop their 'learning to learn' ability (Hattie 2012). In other words, the aim of the teacher should not be so much helping learners learn but helping them become learners.

Based on these underlying principles, the three different stages in the continuum are described and examples of specific tasks that can be carried out at each stage are presented, based on the understanding that these activities are to be taken as examples -not recipes- which need to be adapted and contextualised (situated) by the teachers.

The main aim of this sequential approach is to support teachers in their language teaching as well as make learners, and teachers, aware of the potential of their plurilingual repertoires so that they use their knowledge more effectively (Oliveira and Ança 2009).

## Working with language diversity in the classroom

Based on socioconstructivist premises, according to which the teaching and learning process develops gradually and is scaffolded both by the educator and the co-learners, the proposal described here includes the following stages:

- (1) Making languages visible
- (2) Using languages effectively
- (3) Establishing (explicit) connections among languages

Next, each one of the stages is described in terms of its pedagogical aims and two examples of activities to be done in each one of the stages are described. These activities have been tested for the last eight years in Teacher Training Studies (both in graduate and postgraduate courses). Specifically, they have been presented to student teachers in the Official Master in Teaching and Learning English in Early Childhood and Primary Education, both in the course on Plurilingual Education and

CLIL and in the course on Classroom Language and Talk. Also, at the graduate level, they have been used with student teachers in the courses on Additional (English) Language Didactics in the Primary Education Degree at the Faculty of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences Blanquerna, Universitat Ramon Llull (Barcelona, Spain).

### Stage 1: making languages visible

Learner's previous linguistic and intercultural knowledge needs to be acknowledged and used effectively when learning an AL. To do so, learners' language repertoires need to be made visible and opportunities should be given so that they have the chance to both explain about their language knowledge and find out about that of others. Furthermore, all linguistic resources in this repertoire are to be included and valued, that is, all languages, dialects, registers, styles or accents (Weber 2014) regardless of the level of proficiency in each one of them.

At a socioaffective level, making languages visible can help increase learners' self-esteem as well as support the visibilisation of individual identities (Sugrañes and González Davies 2014), thus teaching singularities in pluralities: 'how teachers' pedagogies and practices that facilitate learning in these complex contexts must build on students' singular language practices as part of the classrooms' pluralities' (García and Sylvan 2011, 386). Also, following Stille and Cummins (2013), affirming learners' identities through instruction has a significant impact not only on their language learning, but also on their self-image, which, in turn, is a goal of education in itself as well as a good basis for any learning process.

Caring for individual identities is crucial in education and especially relevant in additional language teaching as 'learning an L2 involves a struggle to forge a new identity that is true to the self' (Van Lier 2004, 47). Following Cook (2002), the AL learner should not be considered a limited speaker of the AL but an L2 user in his/her own right. That is, with specific needs but also abilities. Next, two different activities that were developed for this stage are described:

#### Activity: one word ... how many languages?

This is an activity to be done in groups and its aim is to make the languages in the classroom visible, discuss and share learners' understanding of aspects that are crucially related to language learning and

teaching, as well as work on socio-affective aspects. It may well be an icebreaking activity in the language class.

Each group of learners needs to think of a word or a chunk of language that they know in as many languages as possible. The activity develops in a competition mode but the didactic aim is to generate awareness and interest in the languages that are present in the classroom. Experience shows that the choice of language is typically related to set phrases such as 'Merry Christmas' or 'Thank you'. Learners' answers are read aloud and a list of the languages present in the group should be somehow displayed in the classroom. This generates a diversity of aspects for discussion, which deal with basic aspects the understanding of which determines the way a language is taught and learnt. Therefore, it is important to reach a consensus or, at least, discuss these issues with one's learners:

- . Conception and misconceptions about proficiency: What do we mean when we ask about a language the learner knows? What do we mean when we say we are proficient in a language? Do we need to be proficient to be able to communicate?
- . Development of communicative competence: Do we communicate with isolated words or with chunks of language? What should be taught in a language class if the aim is to develop the communicative competence?
- . Development of metalinguistic thought: Which are the similarities and differences among the languages listed?
- . Definition of language: Should we include sign language or ICT (information and communications technology) in the list?

Discussing these aspects is a good starting point for the language class as some prejudices can be questioned and learners may feel more relaxed about the language learning process or more aware about what it may entail. The conclusions reached here will be relevant throughout the process as they will probably develop or expand.

Activity: linguistic landscapes

This is an activity to be done individually and its aim is to make learners realise the presence or absence of different languages in the community. It is also a good starting point to introduce concepts such as translanguaging or codeswitching, which will be further developed in stages 2 and 3.

Linguistic landscape was originally defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as 'visibility of languages on objects that mark the public space in a given territory'. Following this understanding of the term, learners are asked to take photos of signposts, advertisements, etc. that can be read in the city and which are characterised by the fact that several languages are used or where there is a play on words, etc. Photos are shared and then classified and discussed.

This generates the following aspects for discussion:

- . Definition of codeswitching: Why is codeswitching used in advertising? What is the function of codeswitching in communication? Which languages are used in advertising? . Feelings related to language uses: What does language mixing involve? Which emotions does it generate? Is my identity as a speaker modified if I use codeswitching?

In stage 1 (Making languages visible), activities are mainly focused on formal aspects, as learners are identifying languages around them. They may start to notice similarities or differences, or the different roles that languages may have, but this is still a spontaneous and not mediated process. The main aim behind these activities is, on the one hand, to discuss openly in the classroom our own understanding of language and language learning and, on the other, to help students reconsider their own plurilingual identities.

## Stage 2: using languages effectively

Following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001, 4) '(...) languages and cultures are not kept in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather build up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experiences of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact'. Following this understanding of plurilingual competence, stage 2 aims at developing both the communicative and the plurilingual competencies.

This is based on the concept of translanguaging as a pedagogical practice which transcends barriers between languages, as it moves beyond the idea of language compartmentalisation, and allows for a view of language and communication where all the knowledge and experience previously acquired by learners may be used to promote learning and to better communicate in plurilingual societies (Corcoll 2013). Translanguaging, then, is understood as a language model and an educational strategy and defined as 'the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system' (Canagarajah 2011, 401).

The cognitive aims involved in stage 2 imply that the 'Noticing Hypothesis' (Schmidt 2001) is relevant. The activities suggested for this stage mainly aim at fostering learners' ability to notice language/s characteristics. The Noticing Hypothesis claims that input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed, that is, consciously registered. This is why this step is basic for the effective development of the language learning process as it is crucial in developing awareness (Corcoll and González Davies 2016).

Pre-existing knowledge for English language learners is encoded in their home languages. Consequently, educators should explicitly teach in a way that fosters transfer of concepts and skills from the learner's home language to English. Research clearly shows the potential for this kind of cross language transfer in school contexts that support biliteracy development (Auger 2008; Cummins 2001). It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that learners leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door.

Following Cummins (2001, 170), 'at an instructional level, we should be asking how we can build on this potential advantage in the classroom by focusing students' attention on language and helping them become more adept at manipulating language in abstract academic situations'. The activities described below aim to be good examples of how Cummins' 'potential advantage' can be promoted.

Activity: head, espatlles, rodillas and toes

In this activity, learners are asked to sing the Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes song while pointing to the part of the body. First, they sing the song in English. Next, they sing it in the other languages they share. In the context where this activity has been tested, these languages are Catalan and Spanish. Finally, they sing the song switching from English to the other languages, while keeping the gestures and the rhythm:

Head, espatlles, rodillas and toes

rodillas and toes.

Head, espatlles, rodillas and toes

rodillas and toes.

And eyes, and orelles, and boca and nose

Head, espatlles, rodillas and toes

rodillas and toes.

The main didactic aim behind this activity is to help learners become aware of the cognitive challenge that translanguaging entails, especially when you are not used to doing it in a spontaneous way. They may also start to notice how words in one language may come more easily to them when they are singing than others, that is, the retrieval speed at which they can recover words may depend on the role that language plays in their lives and also on language typologies involved. At this stage, the role of the teacher is to help students think about these issues by asking the right questions (i.e. Was this activity fun? Was it also hard? Which words came more easily to your mind when you were singing? Why do you think that was?). Noticing these aspects may not be a spontaneous reaction by students, and yet it seems to be key for a more effective, self-regulated language learning process.

As follows, an example of lyrics written by the students for the song 'If you're happy and you know it'. They codeswitch between English, Catalan, Italian, French and Spanish. It is worth mentioning the pragmatic element they include at the end of each verse (i.e. Oh my! pica de peus! mamma mia! oh la la! olé!) to further identify the languages involved (Table 1).

Activity: me gustas tú (Manu Chao)

Music is again the protagonist of the activity, as it is one of the best resources we can use in language classrooms. In this case, based on Manu Chao's song 'Me gustas tú', learners first see an example of a song using codeswitching and are asked to produce something similar following these steps and working in groups. Each group is assigned one part of the song.

(1) Choose a topic (i.e. food, countries, hobbies, etc.). Write down all the words that you can think of related to this topic.

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Table 1. Plurilingual song.

(2) Use the words above to rewrite in English your part of the song and remember that you need to be able to sing it:

. I like ... .. , and I like ... ..

(3) Add some negative sentences:

. I don't like ... .. , but I like ... ..

(4) Now rewrite your new version by mixing different languages:

. I don't like ... .. però m'agrada ... ..

(5) You are now ready to sing.

Below is an example of one of the songs produced by students (in this case, based on animal names). The role of the teacher here implies helping students initiate a plurilingual analysis of the lyrics. On the one hand, they are working on retrieving words related to a topic of their choice (thus cooperating and using their previous knowledge), they are also working on different sentence types (affirmative, negative) thus concentrating on grammar aspects, and finally they are doing so in different languages, which can encourage comparison among languages. Observing and noticing this contrast would be the first step into a more metalinguistic discussion that could be led in stage 3 below and, again, it may not come out spontaneously so it should be promoted by the teacher by asking the right questions (i.e. which differences do you notice between the use of the verbs like and gustar/agradar?). The discussion based on their answers can be quite important as, in the language context of this study, this is a difficulty learners often have (Table 2).

Table 2. Plurilingual lyrics.

In stage 2 (Using languages effectively) activities are primarily focused on meaning, as learners are using effectively the languages around them to produce a text (in this case, a song) that can work by itself. This implies that they may start to make connections in terms of semantic similarities and notice more structural, as well as rhythmic, characteristics. Students' effective use of language entails effective teaching is promoting it, which, following Cummins and Early (2015, 8) 'is not so much a matter of instructional techniques as an individual and collective mindset among educators to enable students to use languages for powerful purposes'.

Stage 3: establishing (explicit) connections among languages

Stage 3 aims at developing learners' language awareness, thus dealing with more abstract and more complex aspects in language learning. The type of work that will be encouraged is reflective contrastive analysis (Kupferberg 1999) which, through the activities, will allow learners to make explicit connections at the lexical and structural levels amongst languages.

This stage also promotes learners' agency, as it aims at developing their ability to learn, create and apply learning strategies thus working at a metacognitive and metalinguistic level. Finally, based on the understanding of intercultural competence as '(...) the knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' (Council of Europe 2001, 103), this type of task can also help bridge the gap between different cultures.

Activity: I am cold. Tinc fred. Tengo frío.

Learners are given this short plurilingual text: 'I am cold today, but no tengo hambre. Yesterday I was tired but no tenía sueño'. They are asked to identify which term/s can be contrasted, that is, which linguistic aspect can be analysed in a text such as the one given.

Quickly, they notice the connection between the verbs To Be in English and Tener in Spanish. To express the same idea, we need to use two different verbs and this is often source of confusion and mistakes. By paying special attention to this, we make the difference explicit and more salient, therefore favouring its intake and favouring its acquisition.

Learners are asked to produce sentences following the structure above and mixing languages (i.e. He is old y ella tiene 40 años). Any other language in the group may be analysed in these terms and added to the activity.

Figure 1. Plurilingual slogan.

Activity: creation of a slogan

Following the linguistic landscape activity described above, learners understand that plurilingual uses are sometimes linked to advertising. In this line, they are asked to create a plurilingual slogan to advertise something. The example below was produced by a group of students to advertise the institution where they study: the Faculty of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences Blanquerna, Universitat Ramon Llull (Barcelona, Spain) (Figure 1).

In stage 3 (Establishing (explicit) connections between languages) activities are especially focused on the analysis and comparison of linguistic structures and on the production of meaningful texts. This is meant to be the last stage in the sequential approach presented in this article as it requires the noticing and effective use of languages promoted in the prior stages. It is also meant to be the most cognitively challenging stage where language awareness, communicative and plurilingual competences are developed fully to engage language learners in a way that makes them creative and autonomous language users.

Concluding remarks

Developing communicative and plurilingual competences in the additional language class and doing it while respecting language diversity is necessary nowadays and generally accepted by all agents involved in the teaching-learning process. However, finding the way to do so may be difficult as there is no single recipe that is good for all contexts. The aim of this article has been to describe a sequential approach that can be followed by teachers to deal with plurilingualism in the classrooms, whilst giving some examples of activities to illustrate what can be done. The sequence is divided into three stages which respond to a pedagogical approach that is based on a humanistic and socioconstructivist understanding of education: where learners' individual needs are acknowledged and the learning process is planned so that it can develop effectively and successfully. Education is language (Van Lier 2004) and language is patterns of patterns, 'patterns that connect'. Therefore, the more we can make out of the language that is used in classrooms, the more efficient learning will take place.

Firstly, classroom interactions need to be analysed (Aeby Daghe and de Pietro 2003) to understand how classroom discourse has been developed and institutionalised and, secondly, affordances (Van Lier 2004) need to be noticed and used. In this article, affordances regarding language diversity and the development of the plurilingual competence are discussed on the basis of activities that may be suggested by the teacher and exploited conversationally thanks to the interaction that can take place after them. Thus, the aim of the questions that may be posed by teachers after the activities is to, on the one hand, welcome and value students' ideas or thoughts and, on the other hand, promote new perspectives by helping students notice aspects that may concern their own linguistic identities as well as their own learning processes.

Future research will delve into the analysis of students' and teachers' perceptions linked to this classroom-based approach.

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