

LANGUAGE AWARENESS: A PLURILINGUAL APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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RESUMO: o presente trabalho pretende relatar o desenvolvimento e resultados de um projeto de ensino plurilíngüe desenvolvido no Colégio de Aplicação (UFSC). O principal objetivo desenvolvido no projeto foi o de fomentar a consciência lingüística nos alunos, antes que esses começassem seus estudos de línguas estrangeiras. Com esse propósito, uma série de atividades foi conduzida, para trabalhar com os alunos a inter-compreensão, através da descoberta e do confronto com aspectos das línguas Românicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: plurilingüismo, consciência lingüística, línguas românicas, línguas estrangeiras.

ABSTRACT: this article intends to report on the development and results of a plurilingual teaching project developed at Colégio de Aplicação (UFSC). The main objective developed in this project is to arouse students' language awareness before they start studying foreign languages. For this purpose, a series of activities was conducted, in order to develop students' intercomprehension competence through the discovery and confrontation of aspects of the Romance languages.

KEYWORDS: plurilingual education, language awareness, Romance languages, foreign languages.

0. Introduction

The Plurilinguistic project was offered to the students of a public school in the south of Brazil that due to a strike in the end of 2005 could not start fifth grade in the following year. As the students from the 1st and 4th grades had their classes regularly during the strike, they had finished the school year by the end of the year. However the 5th grade students did not.

These students would only finish their school year in April 2006. The alternative found to keep students coming to school for a 2 month period while their classes had not started was to develop a series of projects long wanted by several teachers of several subjects. Among these projects was the plurilinguistic project which had as its main objective to awaken students' language awareness. The aim was to develop in students the capacity to reflect about how languages function consequently preparing them to live and work in a world that is multilingual, multicultural and globalized.

The project was implemented from March 15th to April 19th 2006. The students were divided in two groups of 33 students each but as presence was not mandatory not all the students came to all the meetings. The teacher Dr Josalba Ramalho Vieira conducted the meetings together with her maters advisees Camila Araújo de Lucena e Giana Targanki Steffen.

The meetings were held every Wednesday mornings for a period of one and a half hour. After the end of the project the English classes were observed until the end of July as a way of trying to identify if the implementation of the project had an impact on FL acquisition.

1. Review of literature

The French linguist Louis-Jean Calvet (1999) uses the metaphor of a gravitational system to explain how languages are structured in relation to each other. In the center of this system would be what he calls a "hyper central" language. "Hyper central" languages vary according to the historical moment, and at present, English is in the center of Calvet's gravitational system. Speakers of this language tend to be monolingual.

In the second sphere of this system are "super central" languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese and Russian, whose speakers tend to be monolingual or bilingual in relation to the "hyper central" language. The third sphere holds "central" languages as Japanese, German and Guarani and in the fourth and least dense sphere there are the "peripheral" languages that include the Indian languages. Speakers

of "peripheral" languages tend to be plurilingual with languages of any other sphere.

In Calvet's system, speakers always tend to be bilingual with a denser language, and the languages are related through these bilingual speakers. Plurilingual situations are represented as the gravitation of "peripheral" languages around a "central" language, "central" languages around a "super central" one and "super central" languages around the "hyper central" language.

The valuing of languages proposed by this system does not depend on the nature of the language, but on its place within the system. As the positioning of languages is not steady, it is important to understand that there are situations in which languages other than the "hyper central" are fundamental.

The belief that languages are more or less important or complex depending on their nature still exists, though. Moura and Vieira (2002) recognize this attitude towards languages as linguistic prejudice. Based on official documents, such as the Universal Linguistic Declaration, The United Nations' Rights of Men, and the Brazilian laws of education, they state that the use of foreign languages is a right of every citizen, not a privilege.

Four types of prejudicial attitudes are listed: the proud speaker of an only language, the provincial cosmopolitan, the snobby polyglot and the ignorant polyglot. When the concept of mother tongue is related to the idea of nation, attitudes can range from simple denial to complete acceptance.

Sometimes foreign languages are seen as inferior, and the authors report, based on their own English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching experience, that some students during oral exercises, as a sign of denial may reproduce the sound of a dog, as if they were learning an animal language, instead of learning a foreign language.

A speaker of a dominant mother tongue usually does not feel the need to speak another language, attitude that leads to a mostly monolingual community and reveal another type of denial. On the other hand, there are those who speak various languages but underrate them, mainly because they are not considered important by the community. Finally, there are those who believe speaking a valorized language is a sign of superior intellect or higher social position (Moura and Vieira, op.cit.).

It has been suggested (Noguerol, 2001; Masats, 2006) that to fight linguistic prejudice, it is important to lead children to experience language diversity as a phenomenon that shapes their identity as individuals that belong to a particular cultural group. Children, in order not to lose their identities, cannot lose their origins (Masats, op.cit.). Giving attention to language diversity in school, we are both "deepening

into the construction of the self" (Masats, op.cit.) and opening up to tolerance and integration in society.

According to Hawkins (1999:128), we need to see "language difference as interesting and not threatening." Language Awareness (LA) explores how language works in society (Hawkins, op.cit; Van Lier, 1995; Stern, 1992) and relates language to a speech community by providing insights into languages and cultures (Stern, op.cit; Van Lier, op.cit.), thus promoting positive attitudes towards languages and cultures (Stern, op.cit.).

LA refers to conscious attention to language, since the observation of languages promote linguistic reflection and fosters acquisition of metalinguistic competence (Hawkins, 1987). It can be applied to both Mother tongue (MT) and FL, but the strongest trend is to see it as a linking subject in the educational curriculum (Hawkins, 1974; Stern, 1992; Van Lier, 1995). As a bridging between MT and FL, LA programs should have educational goals that go beyond proficiency objectives (Stern, op.cit.).

It can enhance the acquisition of learning techniques (Hawkins, 1987; Stern, op.cit.), while exposing pupils to FL it can provide positive feedback on MT (Hawkins, 1999), and while promoting reflection on the process of acquisition of the MT, it can aid the FL learning process. Besides, it can also help students, especially adolescents, to gain confidence in the use of the mathetic¹ function of language – generally suppressed by the insecurity that is common at this age (Hawkins, 1999).

2. Students' profile

All the students involved with the Project had finished the fourth grade of elementary school and were being prepared to start fifth grade. An average of five students per class had already studied a FL before and in all cases this foreign language was English. The other students had their first contact with a FL in an educational context during the implementation of this Project.

The previous contacts these students had had with a FL were established through the movies, songs, video games and the Internet. It seemed that all the students were interested in the activities, however due to the great number of students in each group there were moments when the activities were not fully explored, which has consequently restricted some of the objectives to be achieved.

¹ Halliday's mathetic function of language refers to the use of language to learn about reality.

3. Content

As already mentioned before, the main objective of this Project was awakening language awareness as a way of developing in students the capacity to reflect about languages functioning and consequently preparing them to live and work in a world which is multilingual, multicultural and globalized.

To be more specific, the main objective was to develop inter-comprehension competence among the FL dealt with during the project and Portuguese, the competence of comparing and treating new verbal data and giving value to the linguistic and repertoire of the students through the feeling of belonging to linguistic family.

As a way of achieving these objectives, seven meetings were carried out with the students. In these meetings students experimented materials conceived aiming at developing inter-comprehension competence.

These materials used in the classroom were an adaptation to Brazilian Portuguese of the Project Ja-ling – A door to Languages of the European Education Committee (Universidade de Aveiro, de Graz, de Lemans, 2002) and consisted of contextualizing the need to know FLs and explaining the origin of languages, the latin languages and language families.

In the sequence, the activities familiarized students with FL and provoked a comparison between Portuguese and the other languages dealt with in the project. This comparison happened through written language, through spoken language and songs. Finally, students had to write the end of the story presented in the second meeting to contextualize the need to know FLs and consequently to conclude what students had developed so far.

4. Metodology

In each of the meetings the students had to perform activities that aimed at developing their inter-comprehension competence. The activities were explained to the whole group and in the sequence the students started doing the exercises. Some of these exercises were carried out in big or small groups and some were done individually. When necessary the activity was explained once again as a way of clearing all doubts.

In the end, the exercises were checked with the whole group in order to correct them and to diagnose students' progress. In some sessions, informal discussions were carried out with the students, who were randomly chosen, to check what their opinion was regarding the

activity, what they had understood and how they had felt during the execution of a specific task.

5. Evaluation

An evaluation was carried out in the last meeting to discover what students had understood about the importance of the inter-comprehension competence and the knowledge of various languages. For the purpose of this evaluation, a self evaluation form was completed by the students in which they could talk about what they had learned about languages, what they had liked the most and what they had liked the least as well as suggestions they might have for the project.

Besides that, in some of the meetings a few students were asked to give their opinion on the activities performed in class and notes were taken of spontaneous comments which emerged in the classroom.

6. Project's Development

The aim of the first meeting with the students was to explain what the Ja-ling project was and to hear from them about their expectations regarding the project. The first step taken in accomplishing the aim of the meeting was having an informal talk with the children about the activities planed for the two months we would be working together. It was explained that they would not be learning a foreign language.

Instead, they would be in contact with four FL in the process (Italian, French, Spanish and Romanian) and that by the end of the project they would know a little about how these languages sounded, what a text in these languages looked like and that these languages have a system and words that are sometimes very similar to our mother tongue, because we were going to work with languages from the same family of Portuguese.

Notwithstanding it was not explained that we would be developing their language awareness because this is a concept we wanted to elaborate during the activities. By the end of the project it would be evaluated if they seemed to have grasped this meaning.

From this first meeting it could be noticed that only a few students (an average of five students per class) are studying a FL and in all cases this language is English. However the students mentioned they would like to study English or another FL and seemed enthusiastic about the idea of learning and speaking foreign languages on the fifth grade.

The aim of the second meeting was working with a text about a boy who does not want to be friends with other children because they are foreigners and speak languages he cannot understand as a way of

presenting a problematic situation and checking their reactions to this situation.

What could be inferred by their comments on the text is that it is important to know about other languages in order to make an attempt to communicate with others and be able to engage in different social activities. With the idea of the importance of knowing FL in mind, we explained that they would start having contact with different languages by listening to some songs and that they would have to say in what language they were and what title they thought the song had.

After this, they were given the lyrics² of the songs and listened to them again while reading along. The main objective of this task was recognizing and identifying the Romance languages family and comparing verbal data in these Romance languages in oral and written comprehension situations.

The next activity was matching words in Portuguese with their translations in French, Italian and Spanish. All of the words in the exercise were present in the songs they had worked with in the previous meeting. The aim of this exercise was identifying the origin and the specific characteristics of the Romance languages (sounds, words, syntactic structure) and relating them to each other.

Another important aim was arousing their self-confidence in their linguistic capacity and it was possible to see this stimulation by the fact that little by little they stopped coming to check if their answers were correct and started following their instincts in order to solve the exercise. They started noticing that in this way they could also get correct answers.

After they had cut out all the words in Italian, French and Spanish and pasted them beside the corresponding word in Portuguese, these words had to be transcribed in another sheet of paper³. In this sheet they had to distribute the words in columns according to the language they were in. There were some mistakes, however it was possible to notice that the children are already able to identify what word is in what language.

In the fourth meeting they were supposed to put the words of a sentence in French in the correct order using criteria defined by themselves. The second step was translating this sentence into Portuguese and to draw a picture to illustrate the sentence discovered by them.

To conclude, both the sentence in French and the translation in Portuguese would be corrected. The intention of the exercise was to develop intercomprehension competence by the discovery and

²The lyrics of the songs are the second, third and fourth pages of their Language Book.

³These two exercises are the sixth and seventh page of the Language Book.

confrontation of aspects of the functioning of the Romance languages and to establish a relation between Portuguese and other Romance languages.

The children seemed to find this task more complicated than the previous ones and took a longer time to perform it. Notwithstanding, most of them were able to find the correct answers to it⁴, showing that they could find a path to connect Portuguese and French and through this path they were able to understand the meaning of the sentence in our mother tongue and build it correctly in French. Therefore, it is possible to say that the aim of the exercise has been met.

In the 5th meeting it was explained to the students that a new language was going to be introduced in the project at this point: Romanian. The objectives of this session were, once again, to develop the intercomprehension competence of the students by the discovery and confrontation of aspects of the Romance languages functioning and to establish a relation between Portuguese and other Romance languages.

These objectives would be accomplished through the performance of the "Mousse de Chocolate" task, in which the students had to put the instructions of a recipe in the correct order according to the steps of the preparation of a chocolate mousse.

Each part of the recipe was in a different language and the students had to use their intercomprehension competence in order to complete the task. The following step was to say in what language each part of the recipe was and finally to correct the task together with the teacher-researchers.

It was interesting to notice that when some of the students were asked why they had put a specific sentence in the end of the sequence, the ones that had made the right choice mentioned that the words "servi" and "decoreasa" could only be in the end of the recipe, while the ones who had not put the sentences in the correct order, did not know why they had chosen the sequence they did.

The ones who had made the right choice explained that these words should mean to serve and to decorate, what is only done in the end of the preparation, showing that they were using their intercomprehension competence in order to interpret the recipe. Of course other factors are involved in the interpretation process; however the intercomprehension competence is of great importance in this task.

In the 6th meeting the students continued on working with recipes. It was a complement to the previous session and the objective was,

⁴ From the fifty six students who performed the task only sixteen were able to build the correct sentence. However thirty three were able to translate it correctly, whether it was an exact translation or an exact one.

therefore, the same. However in this activity they did not work with instructions, they dealt exclusively with ingredients.

Their task was building a domino by connecting the ingredients with their equivalents in a different language. On this account, students had to rely not only on their intercomprehension competence but also on reasoning as a way of accomplishing this task since there were pieces of the domino in which the word in a different language was not enough for students to know their meaning.

In other cases the use of the intercomprehension competence was enough for solving the problem. Students worked in order to complete the domino and later they divided the ingredients in a table according to the language they were in: Portuguese, Italian, French, Spanish and Romanian.

Some of them considered this exercise to be difficult because of the similarities of the languages and it is important to mention that it is very positive that the students were able to conclude that the Romance languages have similarities, considering that this shows that they have developed their intercomprehension competence by confronting the functioning aspects of the Romance languages which is one of the objectives of this project.

However the fact that they are not able to identify the particularities of each language is not negative, since they did not have enough contact with them separately in order to identify which language is which and there was no focus on any specific language.

The last meeting aimed at concluding the project and therefore the activities had the intention of getting a feedback from the students about the developed tasks. The first activity was writing the end of the story from the first class. It was given thirty minutes for them to write the paragraph finishing the story and we could notice that in most cases the story ended with the boy learning new languages.

This opinion reflects these students opinion that learning FL is something positive and that discriminating someone for speaking a different language or having a different culture can prevent people from having rich experiences.

According to their evaluation forms, filled out in the end of the activities, it is important to notice that some of the students mentioned that it is not only because something is in a different language that they cannot understand it. It is possible to imply that these students are aware that through intercomprehension they are able to make inferences and thus understand something written in another Romance language: *"Que apesar de estar em outra língua eu posso entender."*

I would like to finish this report with a very interesting comment from one of the students that shows that our effort seems to be a stimulus for students to want to learn more: *"Eu aprendi muitas coisas"*

porque antes eu não sabia falar algumas coisas e antes eu nem me interessava e agora eu vi que é fácil se a pessoa se esforça."

Final remarks

According to students' participation in class, as well as the self evaluation form they completed, it is possible to conclude the results of the Project were positive. Students seemed to have grasped a notion of how to use inter-comprehension competence in learning a FL and also seemed to have awakened a sense of language awareness.

It could also be noticed students seemed to be more competent to compare and deal with new verbal data. As it was expected some students did not participate in all the activities and remained absent-minded most of the time. However most students had a good performance in the activities and the final result was very positive.

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