

Developing plurilingual competence in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance that plurilingualism has in a globalised world and in the foreign language classroom. It outlines the different varieties of English that have emerged as a consequence of its becoming a lingua franca or global language, and mentions the primary causes and consequences of this. In order to ascertain the importance of plurilingualism in this context, this paper discusses Kachru's tripartite model and its validity in a modern context given that nowadays English is a lingua franca. Finally, this paper analyses ways of fostering plurilingualism in the classroom by presenting teachers with examples of tasks that encourage them to adopt this perspective on teaching and learning.

Keywords: plurilingualism; multilingualism; globalisation; culture, lingua franca.

Resumen

Este artículo destaca la importancia que el plurilingüismo tiene en un mundo globalizado y en la enseñanza de idioma extranjero. Asimismo, esboza las diferentes variedades de idioma inglés que han surgido como consecuencia de haberse convertido en una lengua franca o global, mencionando las principales causas y consecuencias. En relación a esto último, este artículo discute la validez del modelo tripartito de Kachru en un contexto donde el inglés se ha convertido en una lengua franca. Además, se analizan maneras de fomentar el plurilingüismo en el salón de clases, presentando distintas tareas para motivar a los docentes a adoptar esta perspectiva para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: plurilingüismo; multilingüismo; globalización; cultura; lengua franca.

VARIOUS FACTORS, namely geographical-historical and socio-cultural ones, have contributed substantially to the spread of English as a lingua franca. The former relates to the spread of this language as a result of colonisation, while the latter looks at the way people from all over the world have come to depend on English for different purposes (Crystal, 2003). In this respect, English has become a vital language in the international context, essential for political life, business, communication, entertainment, safety, the media, science, education and, last but not least, the computer software industry, which has come to be at the fore of the globalised world we live in.

All the factors mentioned above are part of the phenomenon known as globalisation, which has been defined as “the phenomenon in which people in different locations worldwide are increasingly linked in such a way that events in one part of the world have an impact on local communities around the world” (Richards & Schmidt 2010, p. 247). This has had, for obvious reasons, a considerable impact on the widespread use of English since it fosters the connection between nations and their national cultures and economies. In this respect, to cite an example, English has come to be widely used in the entertainment and tourism industries around the world. Thus people who are not native speakers sing songs in English, watch movies in English, and wear clothes with English words or phrases printed on them.

As a direct consequence of globalisation, English has come into contact with several languages from all over the world. This has given way to different varieties, or World Englishes, defined by Rajagopalan (2004, p. 111) as a language that “belongs to everyone who speaks it, but it is nobody’s mother tongue.” This will be discussed at greater length in the subsequent section.

As highlighted previously, modern societies are complex environments, characterised by both linguistic and cultural diversity. Consequently, teachers nowadays encounter plurilingual students in the language classroom, and it is vital for them to teach English in a way that blurs the boundaries between the target language culture and their native culture.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the reasons why English has become a global language, explain which aspects should be taken into account when teaching English from a plurilingual perspective and to consider some of the implications of this in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

English as a Global Language

As mentioned before, English has become a lingua franca. Although research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) has increased in recent years, a consensual definition of ELF seems to be missing (Mollin, 2006). Most definitions refer to English being used for

communication between different groups of people, each speaking a different language (Richards and Smith 2010, for example) but there does not seem to be a consensus as to the precise location of such conversations in a theoretical or conceptual space (Mollin, 2006). This brings into question the validity of the much-cited tripartite model put forward by Kachru (1985), at least as far as ELF is concerned.

This model, despite the drawbacks that will be mentioned below, has been the most influential so far, dividing English usage into three categories or circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. This is in direct connection with the well-known distinction between English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). According to this tripartite model, ENL is spoken in countries where it is the first language of the majority of the population, such as the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia (i.e. the Inner Circle), as opposed to ESL, which is spoken in countries where English is an official language, but not the main language of the country (i.e. the Outer Circle). These countries are usually former colonies of the United Kingdom or the United States, such as Nigeria, India and Malaysia. Finally, EFL is used in countries where English is not used regularly as a means of communication, but it is learned at school even though students have little opportunity to use the language outside the classroom (i.e. the Expanding Circle). Japan, China, and Argentina are examples of countries that use English as a Foreign Language (Kachru, 1985; Kachru & Smith, 2008).

Despite being used worldwide, the current status of ELF has questioned the extent to which this model is still valid (Bruthiaux, 2003, Mollin, 2006), since it considers only the standard varieties of English. In other words, the speakers in the Inner Circle are defined as norm-providers, whereas, for example, learners or speakers of English in the Expanding Circle do not seem to have the right to develop a variety, and are therefore seen as norm-dependent. In addition, the model fails to account for the fact that ELF has gained prominence in recent years between the three circles, perhaps most notably in the Expanding Circle. In addition to this, some authors have suggested that ELF goes beyond Kachru's circles, involving all speakers in cross-cultural communication (Jenkins, in Mollin, 2006); said concept will be discussed in the following section.

World Englishes

As mentioned before, the variety that is generally considered to be most prestigious is that which belongs to the Inner Circle, that is, the variety of English that comes from the countries where it is spoken as a native language. However, the spread of ELF nowadays has meant that the majority of proficient speakers are not native speakers, but second-language users, and as a result of this, the Inner Circle has lost much of its privilege. In this respect, the term World English has been coined to refer to the use of this language

in countries other than those where it has traditionally been considered a mother tongue. A possible solution, as far as the tripartite model discussed above is concerned, would be, as it has been suggested by Kachru (1985), to have one big circle that includes every English speaker. In connection with this, and as a consequence of this as well, teachers nowadays encounter plurilingual students in their language classrooms, and so it follows that it is necessary to teach English in a way that blurs the boundaries between the target language culture and their native culture. This involves being sensible and reaching an equilibrium to prevent one variety from outweighing the other.

In this sense, finding a balance between the cultural implications of the different varieties and the formal aspects of the language is an aspect worth taking into consideration. Primarily this means keeping all of the cultural components present so that students will not lose their ethnic pride. This idea has given way to new perspectives as regards language teaching: plurilingualism and multilingualism.

Plurilingualism and Multilingualism

The Council of Europe (2007) makes a distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism, defining the former as the “repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use”, dividing in this way language speakers into ‘monolingual’ (people who speak only one language) and ‘plurilingual’ (people who speak more than one language); and the latter as “the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one ‘variety of language.’” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013, p. 594)

Multilingualism takes place in countries with a colonial history or a high rate of immigration, and globalisation has helped to increase the number of contact zones between these cultures, and consequently, language exchange occurs more intensively. These contact zones have been defined as “the space in which transculturation takes place—where two different cultures meet and inform each other, often in highly asymmetrical ways.” (Pratt, 1991, p. 584)

These contact zones were scarce in the past, since hard boundaries were kept between cultures and languages, having the idealised native speaker variety as a reference for English teaching (De Saint Georges & Weber, 2013, p. 33). Nowadays, with the changes brought about by the phenomena mentioned before, it is necessary for teachers to adopt a plurilingual approach to English teaching. Such an approach will help students combine their linguistic repertoires in the different languages, provide them with exposure to the target language, help them to improve their communicative and academic skills and will expand learners’ metalinguistic awareness¹ and experiences as plurilingual speakers. As a result, learners will learn English in a more efficient way (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013), since language is seen not only as a major aspect of culture, but also as a means of access to cultural manifestations (Bernaus, 2007).

Classroom Implications

In order to promote plurilingualism in language classrooms, it is vital that learners gain knowledge and understanding of various types of discourse and language use and that they develop social and intercultural understanding. For this reason, teachers should respect the students' backgrounds and cultures, and treat their language classrooms as alternative spaces in which different cultures can come into contact and enrich one another (Barboni & Porto, 2011).

For practical purposes, it is important to know whether students already have knowledge of other languages or not. If they do, it is advisable to know how much knowledge they have; if they do not, teachers can provide them with the relevant information to improve their knowledge. This can be done through simple and interesting tasks, such as the ones outlined below. These tasks have been trialled in different courses at primary (such as the first task) and secondary schools in Buenos Aires province. The Curricular Design in this province of Buenos Aires makes specific reference to both plurilingualism and intercultural education, aiming at making students aware of the richness of both their native language and other languages, as well as developing positive attitudes towards speakers of different languages.

- What does the world eat for breakfast? When dealing with the topic of food, a good idea would be to include information about, in this case, what people have for breakfast in different countries. In this way, students will not only be revising the key vocabulary through an interesting task, but also learning about other cultures. The concepts of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' could also be introduced, and students could vote for the countries with the healthiest and unhealthiest breakfasts.
- Recognising words from other languages that are used in the students' native language. This assignment will make students aware of how many borrowings they use in their daily lives without noticing because they have naturalised them. A cross curricular element could be added if some historical background is provided for each word, explaining how those words became a part of their native language because of colonisation and popular culture, some terms such as "okay" remain in Spanish nowadays.
- How languages are distributed around the world (where people speak French, Chinese, etc.) This is another interesting cross-curricular task, since it provides students with exposure to the target language through the explanations, as well as informing them about different parts of the world. This could very well be a cross-curricular project to carry out

with a geography teacher.

Another task through which plurilingualism can be fostered in the classroom would be an “Intercultural Roleplay” in which students are given different role-cards with traits from a variety of cultures written on them. The pupils are asked to act as depicted in their cards. Afterwards, several questions are asked in order to make them reflect on the different cultures. (European Centre for Modern Languages, 2003)

Students can also be exposed to a variety of languages and discourses by reading extracts from books or poems, listening to songs, watching interviews, music videos, or movies. This will not only bring them into contact with various cultures and languages, but will also act as a trigger for the discussion of controversial topics. For example, students could see how concepts such as beauty are conceived in other parts of the world, and they could even carry out a survey in their school to see what people think about beauty. By doing so, they will not only be using the language for communication, but they will also be learning about how beauty is conceived in other cultures. Another task could be showing students videos of people from several countries speaking English, having them guess where they come from, and asking them which differences they can observe when comparing their use of the language to the student’s own.

The tasks mentioned above are just a few examples of ways in which teachers can promote plurilingualism in their language classrooms, since the possibilities are endless. What is key is that teachers educate themselves on plurilingualism, and that through trial and error and critical and systematic evaluation, decide which strategies fit their context best.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to state that even though English has traditionally been considered a prestige language, it is no longer seen in this way. Rather, it provides a means of communication between people from different nations in a globalised world where cultural boundaries are often blurred. This is when plurilingualism plays a major role, since it enables students to learn the target language by building their knowledge on the foundations of their own culture. By fostering plurilingualism in the language classroom, teachers will guide students to learn the target language in a meaningful and relevant way. They will value other cultures as well as their own, and will be learning much more than just a language: they will be educated in a holistic way.

Note

1. The ability to objectify language and dissect it as an arbitrary linguistic code independent of meaning" (Roth, Speece, Cooper, & de la Paz, 1996, p. 258).

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