Towards the development of a plurilingual and pluricultural competence

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Abstract

In 2001, the CRAPEL ran an experimental course in both English and Spanish for French-speaking adult beginners. This course, which was aimed at learners wishing to study two languages without having to follow two separate courses, was based on an integrated approach to the teaching-learning of two target languages: same communicative aims, same activities and tasks and types of materials were selected for each language, with a view to optimising the effects of learning strategies and developing plurilingual competence. First, results confirm the practical feasibility of this project as regards teaching and learning and its effectiveness in terms of outcome. However, several additional questions need to be dealt with. After presenting the didactical and pedagogical approach and its characteristics in language didactics in France, the study focuses on the language contacts and learning strategies learners develop during the experiment, as well as their repercussions for the development of such a competence.

Introduction

In 2001 the Crapel (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues)[1] ran an experimental course in both English and Spanish for French-speaking adult beginners. The course, which was aimed at learners wishing to study two languages without having to follow two separate courses, was based on an integrated approach to the teaching-learning of two target languages. The same communicative aims, the same activities, tasks and types of materials were selected for each language. As a result, the effects of learning strategies were optimised, and the development of a plurilingual competence was defined as the capacity of a speaker to manage several communicative repertoires that vary according to circumstances.

Our experimental course lasted 88 hours. It was semi-intensive, consisting of two one-and-a-half-hour classes a week and one conversation with native speakers of the two target languages once a month. Native speakers intervene in our session as communicative partners to develop learners' oral comprehension and production. The heterogeneous group was composed of nine adult volunteers,

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[1] www.univ-nancy2.fr/CRAPEL

all administrative workers at the university, who wanted to learn the two languages for personal reasons. For research purposes, all the sessions as well as the conversations with native speakers[2] were recorded on tape and on video tape. In addition, two series of interviews with the learners were organized. The first one took place prior to the session in order to collect their position on the co-existence of several languages in one course and on the role of integration in the learning process. The second interview took place after the session about their evaluation of the teaching-learning and their language learning. The teachers who participated in the session also interviewed the learners individually, although this may have prevented certain answers. Nevertheless, our learners knew the experimental nature of the course and considered these interviews as a contribution to improve the integrated approach. The data which we used for the paper are the learners' productions (and especially interlingual transfers and code switches), their metacognitive comments (their learning practices) recorded during the session and their opinions and attitudes about the training (their representations).

This paper presents the results of ongoing research on the effects of the integrated approach on language learning. We first describe the teaching-learning methodology. Focusing on the first analysis, we then comment on the ways in which the learners dealt with the two target languages. Finally, we suggest areas for which we feel further exploration is warranted.

From the separation between language courses to the concept of integration

The starting-point for this research project was the observation that in France, when a person needs to learn more than one foreign language at the same time, he or she has to follow and manage several courses in parallel, each course aiming at the acquisition of one language. Of course, this constraint costs time and money. But above all, we notice that the separation between the different language courses may provoke negative effects on learning, leading the learner to develop representations such as:

"Learning one language is different from learning another language"
"Transfers between languages may hamper acquisition"
"Contacts of any kind between languages should be avoided", etc.

Eventually, these representations may even make the learning of several target languages more complicated, emphasizing the fear of mixing one language with another.

This fear of mixing languages shared by a lot of learners may be generated by a certain conception of teaching-learning languages in France. First, the separation between different courses is not just a question of where and when the languages are taught (that is, in different places, at different times), but also how they are taught. Actually the very conceptions of language and methodology may vary a lot from one language teaching context to another. For example, in general, English teaching-learning is based more on language structures and on the communicative approach, whereas Spanish teaching-learning is based more on literacy in general, and literature in particular (Normand: 2002). The language approaches are different; therefore learners may not see similarities between languages and may think that one language corresponds to one way of learning it.

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[2] The reader would find a detailed report of the experiment in Bailly et Ciekanski 2003.

Then, several studies in language classrooms reveal that interference and transfer are usually considered, by teachers and learners, as resulting from faulty acquisition of each language. Teachers usually do not encourage learners to compare one language to another nor to connect the learning of one language with that of another, as if learning English does not have anything to do with learning German or Spanish. And if sometimes teachers compare languages, it is to stress the differences much more than the similarities. In fact, the separation between languages is shown as a condition to avoid confusion and to promote easier learning and better acquisition.

Thus, the separation between languages does not only concern foreign languages but also the presence and role of the native language in teaching-learning languages. Even if the use of the native language seems to be legitimized more and more in language classrooms, according to recent official instructions[3], most teachers and learners still do not consider it as a useful resource for the acquisition of another language. For them, the best way to learn a foreign language is the immersion course in which the use of the native language has to be avoided as much as possible. Consequently, code switches are also avoided as much as possible.

This short overview of the situation of language teaching-learning in France tends to show that the separation between language courses is commonly seen as positive for learning. Studies of learners of several languages reveal that L1 and L2 do play an important role in L3 acquisition[4] (Poulisse, Bongaerts 1994; Williams, Hammerberg 1998). As regards his production, the learner has to deal with cross-linguistic influences and language switches. Thus the knowledge the learner develops in any other language may influence his learning of the new language. It may even facilitate it if this knowledge becomes a learning resource as has already been proposed by several innovative projects. For example, the Eurom4 method presents a strategy for the simultaneous learning of several Romance languages through inter-comprehension reading tasks (Blanche-Benveniste, 1997). Those experiments propose a plurilingual approach through the training of one specific skill (Debaisieux, Valli, 2003). Other experiments put the stress on the development of metalinguistic awareness as a tool for plurilingual competence (Dabène, Ingelman, 1996). Nowadays, the knowledge of two or more languages is becoming a necessity and even an economic and social key issue in our societies. Since every monolingual speaker has the potential to become multilingual, it may be time to think of didactical propositions as an alternative to the "separated model" which prevails in our training.

The integrated approach to the teaching-learning of two target languages

Following the perspectives opened by Eddy Roulet (1995) with his work on the integrated approach to the teaching-learning of the mother tongue (L1) and the second language (L2), our project aims to exploit the common properties of languages and to develop certain forms of metalinguistic reflection, so as to facilitate the learning of two target languages. Thus in our case, the integration gathers the mother tongue (L1) and two new foreign languages (two L3). According to Roulet, the integration has to concern what language is and what learning a language is. He recommends the same didactical approach for the two target languages. In our integrated approach, these conceptions are based on four primary didactical principles for the two languages, as follows:

- Give priority to communication rather than to the language structures

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[3] For example MENESR report 1996, concerning Spanish teaching in secondary school.
[4] The term L1 refers to the learner's native language, L2 to any previously learned non-native languages and L3 to the language that the learner is currently acquiring.

- Distinguish between the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and propose an appropriate way to work with them
- Implement a constructivist and a cognitivist approach through task-based learning
- Develop autonomous learning

The didactical approach
The training of the four skills requires specific tasks and types of material for each one. Thus, a document for oral comprehension does not serve for oral production (there is no point in trying to speak as a TV speaker…).

As regards oral production, in each session there are three types of activities to develop the learning process: discovery activities to observe useful linguistic forms, systematization activities to aid memorization, and practice activities to develop competences.

As regards oral comprehension, the activities aim to improve other strategies than the bottom-up model. Learners are invited to build hypotheses from the communicative situation, to check in the document and confirm or reject their first hypotheses (top-down model).

As regards cultural training, the learning objectives concern the cultural implications of communication:

- verbal and non-verbal communication usages and their variations: politeness, communicative gestures, etc..
- social facts concerning daily life (customs), cultural life (personalities, hobbies, popular culture), and the common knowledge shared by natives about history and geography.

The pedagogical approach
The integration between the two courses resides in the choice of the same communicative and learning aims.

- The **same forms and contents** are taught for the two languages: namely the same speech acts (asking for information, claiming, describing, etc.), the same communicative situations (face-to-face communication, phone conversation, TV news, etc.) and the same topics and types of material (weather report on radio, TV news about international issues, etc.). To facilitate memorization, vocabulary and language structures for each language are presented in trilingual and tricoloured documents (green for English, red for Spanish and blue for French).
- The **same activities and tasks** are proposed for the two languages. In an oral or written comprehension activity, the listening/reading objective is the same for the two languages. For example, learners have to find nouns related to food, possessive forms, etc. from two oral/written documents (one in English, one in Spanish). In speaking activities, learners also follow the same objective. For example, first they observe and compare how to compliment, to formulate excuses, to thank, etc. from methods in English and Spanish. Then systematically, in pairs, they practise how to express compliments, excuses and thanks, first in one language, and then in the other. Finally, they use either English or Spanish in conversation with native speakers. The documents used in oral comprehension are authentic. Special methods are used to improve oral production.

In this way, the teaching of Spanish and English follows almost identical patterns. As to the learners, to pass from learning English to learning Spanish means to change the linguistic context but not the learning context, since there are two target languages but only one method. In our system, they do not have to change their way of learning or their conception of language when they alternate between target languages. Moreover, selecting similar types of materials and thinking up the same tasks for the two languages create opportunities of improving their learning strategies. For example, to set the same comprehension aims for the two target languages, in an oral comprehension activity, makes the learners:

- activate the same semantic hypotheses for the two languages (for example: in an oral comprehension activity based on BBC news and TVE news: learners have to find names of countries, personalities, other expected words heard during the first bulletin and which can also be found in the second bulletin)
- activate the same cognitive operations in two different linguistic contexts (for example: making prediction about content and linguistic form, checking and confirming first hypotheses, formulating new hypotheses, etc.)

The approach encourages learners to set up bridges between the languages, insofar as it develops linguistic and learning knowledge which can be transferred from one target language to another.

In our experiment, each course was run by one teacher. The four teachers all work at the CRAPEL, that is to say they share the same didactic culture. This common culture contributes to ensuring the same learning environment for all learners.

Language contacts and learning strategies set up by learners in our experiment

In the classroom, the learners have to cope with three languages: French, English and Spanish. Contrary to general practice in France, French, the learners' native language is the privileged language for the classroom management between teachers and learners. Instructions, explanations concerning the carrying out the tasks and metalinguistic and metacognitive comments upon the learning are formulated in French. During the learning activities, French is often used to compensate for the lack of competence in the target languages.

Contacts between English and Spanish are frequent during discovery activities. Comparing the two target languages may be used by our learners as a strategy to structure the linguistic system of each target language. It is also a means to develop a metalinguistic awareness, insofar as the presence of two target languages puts a stress on the formal aspect of languages. We noticed that the learners' memorization strategies depended on their cognitive styles[5]. In a few words, we can say that in our group globalist learners are more likely to set up common rules to organize their learning of English and Spanish and to memorize at the same time the English and the Spanish forms of a term (e.g. *Sixty/sesenta*). Analytic learners may prefer to emphasize the differences between languages and to memorize languages separately, at different moments. Thus our approach tends to favour the former.

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[5] The data analysis revealed general cognitive style tendencies in the pupils' metalinguistic comments and evaluation of their language learning.

At the beginning of the class, the learners could choose the language they wanted to start with. Most of the time, the learners decided to begin with English. In the organization of our integrated approach, the first language in the activity may become a "resource language" (Coste, 2001) used to access the second language. Thus, the learners could use their English to help them to build sentences in Spanish, whereas French would have been expected because of the proximity between the two Romance languages. For example: "On dit *primero* pour dire *d'abord*. Tout à l'heure on avait *first* en anglais".

In this example, the Spanish word *primero* is arrived at via the English word *first*, which has been encountered before, during the English activity. The semantic and formal hints found in the first linguistic context make learners able to build hypotheses for the second linguistic context.

However, the learners reacted differently to language contacts of different kinds such as code-switching, transfer, etc. For the majority of the group, language contacts meant confusion, preventing successful acquisition. As a consequence, interference between the two target languages were regarded by learners as obstacles in their acquisition process. That is why on some occasions, learners developed strategies to avoid the language contacts encouraged by the integrated approach. For example, they neglected close similarities between French and Spanish, especially during the activities for oral expression. As Matutin Sikogukira points out (1993) in his study of the transfer of cognates in L2 and L3, beginners prefer learning words with different forms in L2 and L3, in order to facilitate the appropriation of the languages. Moreover, this attitude towards similarities may be related to the fear of false friends and to the great importance the learners give to linguistic errors in communication failures. The learners also failed to exploit code-switching between the target languages as a communicative resource. During the activities of systemization, most of the learners reacted strongly against code-switching when it was used by partners in pair work.

Our conclusion concerning contacts and strategies is that one does not learn different languages in the same way, at the same pace, with the same difficulties and the same success. Our learners differed in the degree of progress made in the two languages, and most of them perceived the experiment as a failure. However, according to Daniel Coste and al. (1998) this "ordinary imbalance" seems to be part of the construction of a plurilingual competence. Some of the common representations shared by our learners about language and language learning were in conflict with the idea of integration proposed by our approach. The integrated approach did not seem to create any particular cognitive difficulties for the learners, since their production never showed any confusion between the two target languages, and since they were able to progress in both target languages with satisfactory results. The difficulties highlighted by our experiment are mostly related to learning proceedings and representations inherited from school, which are less appropriate in our context.

Towards the development of a plurilingual competence

As we saw previously, learners create a sort of trilingual repertoire, whose function is to facilitate retention and to make it possible to employ new cognitive strategies. However they seem to be reluctant to use their repertoire for communicative purposes. We can say with Simona Pekarek (1999) that using a language to compensate for gaps in another language is not natural if the interaction is predefined, mechanical and repetitive. In interactions whose main aim is language learning, there exists an implicit understanding that the appropriation of linguistic forms is more important than actual communication. In these circumstances, the use of the native language or any other language

is seen as a failure, and some of our learners even prefer to stop the interaction rather than to code-switch and try to solve the problem.

On the contrary, we think that to encourage learners to use all the linguistic resources they possess, when the context permits it, may be another communicative strategy appropriate for a plurilingual speaker. In our experiment, to allow beginners to use their native language during a conversation with native speakers contributes to a certain extent to the development of a bilingual competence, as a first step towards plurilingual competence. We observed that when beginners prevent themselves from using their native language during interaction with native speakers, after a while, the interaction loses any communicative value or purpose and instead its aim seems to be the systemization of linguistic forms encountered previously, without taking into account the reality of the situation such as the identity of the interlocutor, the nature of the communication, etc. In this context, we cannot really say that learners are learning to communicate with foreigners. Treating French as a useful resource in learners' interaction with target-language native speakers who speak French too, thus helping them to convey the message they want, permits some learners to consider code switching as a tool in solving communicative problems. Communication becomes more important than in the former situation where French was forbidden, and learners also learn how to manage two languages, depending on negotiation with the interlocutor. This may contribute to establishing a rudimentary but effective bilingual repertoire. Another solution would be to organize conversations with a competent speaker of English and Spanish so as to permit learners to improve their practice of code-switching.

Our conclusion is that when the interaction is not only a learning situation but also a communicative situation, the will to communicate legitimizes the use of another code, and code-switching is no longer seen as a failure but as a useful resource. In this case the cooperation of the native speaker is of the utmost importance. The native speaker is often chosen by the institution for his ability to speak his native language. To a certain extent, he embodies the linguistic norm aimed at. That is why he may be reluctant to speak the learner's language. However, in a plurilingual perspective, it seems very important to us to consider the native speaker as a plurilingual speaker as well, insofar as all the native speakers who participated in our experiment live in France and speak French. They all have to manage a plurilingual and pluricultural capital, to use Bourdieu's terms. That is why they can be interesting models for communicative strategies, and especially as regards code-switching.

However native speakers also have a common representation of their role in exolinguistic communication[6]. Most of the time, they see their interlocutor primarily as a person who is learning a language. So, they put the stress on the correction of linguistic forms and consider the interaction as an opportunity to practice language. Obviously, learners want to communicate with a native speaker to improve their linguistic competence. But in our plurilingual perspective, it would also have been useful to consider the learner as someone who has to learn how to interact in exolinguistic communication to become a competent foreigner. For us, this implies rethinking the didactic contract which underlies the interaction between native speakers and learners. It also implies sensitizing the learners to the intercultural dimension of any exolinguistic communication. Our experiment offers learners possibilities for drawing intercultural comparisons between members of different communities and perceiving themselves as mediators between several cultures. This will form part of our future investigations.

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[6] Exolinguistic communication: interactions where one of the participants is a foreigner.

Conclusion

The data presented in the paper are from the very first experimental course. Several things should definitely be improved such as the pedagogical approach to code-switching. However, this experiment has shown that the integrated approach can be an alternative in the development of a plurilingual competence. Conceiving the project, we paid special attention to learning strategies and their cognitive implications. Further investigations, particularly into the intercultural aspects, could be considered, in promoting the development of a complete plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

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