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Promoting linguistic and cultural awareness in Portugal: new challenges for educators

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Europe: the pursuit for democratic citizenship and the promotion of linguistic and cultural awareness

Increasing population mobility within Europe and the consequent increasing contact between peoples and languages - the result of different phenomena, political, socio-economic, cultural and demographic - has an important role in the construction of citizenship, favouring communication, the understanding between peoples and intercultural contact.

Over the last decade the Council of Europe has stressed the importance of education for democratic citizenship and human rights and the fight against racism and xenophobia, calling attention to the role of languages in this process. As Trim says: 'The need for mobility and access to information taken together with the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance establish effective communication skills across language boundaries as an indispensable part of the equipment of tomorrow's citizens facing the challenges and opportunities of a transformed European society' (Trim, 1998, p.6).

One of Europe's aims in this 'transformed society' is to increase linguistic and cultural awareness, promoting people's appreciation of Europe's linguistic and cultural heritage. Byram points out that '... in addition to mobility, intercomprehension and economic development, there is the further important aim of maintaining the European cultural heritage, of which linguistic diversity is a significant constituent' (Byram, 2002, p. 5)

Linguistic diversity can be compared to bio-diversity and both are under threat: 'Just as the 'information age' has commenced, two of the world's great stores of information, the diversity of biological organisms and of human languages, are imperilled.' (Brush, 2001, 517) According to the Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com> – last modified January 2003), about 417 languages are classified as almost extinct and many others are facing the same danger in the coming years. Some researchers argue that linguistic diversity is disappearing faster than bio-diversity. According to the most optimistic estimate, in 100 years' time, 2% of biological species and 50% of the world's languages may be dead or moribund.

It is interesting to note is that these two types of diversity (biological and linguistic) seem to be extrinsically correlated, enforcing and supporting each other: where one is high the other is also and vice-versa. 'Evolution has been aided by diversity. The strongest and most stable ecosystems are those which are the most diverse. Diversity contains the potential for adaptation whereas uniformity can endanger a species (including the human species) by providing inflexibility and inadaptability' (Baker, 2001, p. 281, quoted by Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002, 14)

We thus understand the enrichment of diversity and the importance of its preservation and promotion, which depends on a common understanding of citizenship. Europe is linguistically and culturally diverse, but is dependent on some forms of unity. Europe seeks to promote and preserve its heritage of diversity while it tries to maintain its sense

of unity by developing a sense of a democratic European citizenship. Individuals are encouraged to build their personal identity (with the help of their language(s)) within regional, national and even supra-national dimensions. We understand that citizenship is an independent concept which can be experienced at all these levels.

However, there is a need to implement language education policies which also promote social inclusion and democratic citizenship among Europeans. Language education policies are not only concerned with pedagogical aspects, but also with social and political problems: the capacity and opportunity to participate in social life depends on the individuals' plurilingual competence.

Taking multilingual Europe as the point of departure for a polity 'Europe' in the shaping process of which all people in Europe need to be included, plurilingual a competence appears as one of the prime objectives in education for democratic citizenship: in addition to their immediate relevance for cultural inclusion, language(s) are also a material prerequisite for political participation. (Breibach, 2002, p. 11)

The role of plurilingual competence

We assume that plurilingual individuals have access to varied knowledge and to diverse ways of seeing the world they live in, being more flexible and creative and also having a capacity to participate as citizens in multilingual/plurilingual processes not only in their own countries but also within other European contexts. Thus, the construction of a democratic and multicultural Europe requires plurilingual citizens, who need 'intercultural skills for living in communities where cultural diversity is the norm. They need critical cultural awareness to understand the world around them and challenge injustice, complacency, social exclusion and unwarranted discrimination.' (Starkey, 2002, p. 29)

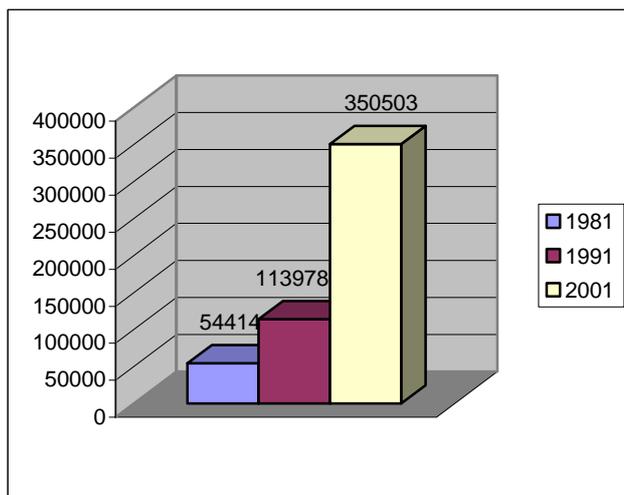
The pursuit of diversity embodies the development of a plurilingual competence, which leads to a greater understanding of the plurilingual repertoires of self and other and to the respect for language rights. Plurilingual competence allows the individual to (re)assess, systematically and continuously, the linguistic and cultural knowledge s/he possesses, acquired both in school and in other contexts. It is unique, dynamic, heterogeneous, composed of unequal elements (adapted from Coste & Zarate, 1996 and Andrade & Araújo e Sá, forthcoming). Some studies have suggested that plurilingual competence may be composed of four interrelated dimensions: management of social and affective dimension; management of linguistic and communicative repertoires; management of learning repertoires, and management of interaction.

An example of a project to develop linguistic and cultural awareness in Portugal

Our project, developed in Aveiro, Portugal, and entitled 'Learners' attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity: a study for the Third Cycle of Basic School' is focused on the management of the social and affective dimension of plurilingual competence, which concern the 'wishes, predispositions, motivations and qualities the individual is able to use in interaction, as well as the attitudes towards languages, cultures, the speakers and communication.' (Andrade & Araújo e Sá, forthcoming)

The project was developed to meet the new challenges educators have to face in Portugal, where changes of the demographic/social panorama have highlighted the relevance of studies on multilingualism and multiculturalism. According to SEF (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras – Foreign Affairs Office - <http://www.sef.pt/estatisticas.htm>), the growth in the number of legal immigrants from 1981 to 2001 was about 69% (from 54,414 to 350,503), as we can see in Figure 1. The (still not definitive) data for 2002 shows that the number of immigrants was 235,627, taking into account only residents and not those who have residence authorisation. Most of those who lived in Portugal in 2002 come from Portuguese language speaking countries in Africa (PALOP).

Figure 1: number of legal immigrants in Portugal



Source: - <http://www.sef.pt/estatisticas.htm>

The same source shows that in the district of Aveiro, where this research was undertaken, the number of immigrants in 2002 was 8,577. They came mainly from Brazil and Venezuela (4,263), but also from elsewhere in Europe (1,824) and the PALOP (1,401). Taking this into account, we developed our project over a school year with a class of 21 students from the 9th grade. It aimed to (a) facilitate contact with situations which could positively influence students' attitudes towards diversity and (b) conceive strategies and creating materials to promote language awareness.

Education, and more specifically language education, is an important part of the individual's socialisation and therefore a fundamental means of the acquisition of values and attitudes, and of developing one's sense of democratic citizenship. Language teaching and learning is a valuable way of promoting the development of positive representations towards diversity and has a prime responsibility in the development of a culture of respect for individual identities. As Candelier (1998) wrote: 'Knowing another language may, because it entails communication, be a definite step towards tolerance'.

Legendre (1998) also stresses the role of language learning: 'Learning a language means learning to be closer to others. Learning a foreign language means equipping oneself with

intellectual tools for confronting the real and the unknown, as well as personal enrichment through knowledge of other cultures and other views of the world. Learning also means combating the ignorance that lies at the root of intolerance and racism’.

Our project aimed at to make students realise the importance of language learning and of the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity and to be able to analyse their representations as far as languages and peoples are concerned. However, we believe that all subjects should be aware of these issues, and as all subjects contribute to the students’ formation as individuals, we have not only worked with the language teachers (Portuguese, English and French), but also with the teachers of all other subjects.

In the first phase, the students were characterised in terms of their linguistic biography, future linguistic projects and their images/representations about other languages and cultures. Then we implemented four didactic modules: ‘Diversity in Portuguese language and in Portugal’s geographical areas’; ‘Linguistic and cultural diversity around the world’; ‘Contact with different languages and cultures’; and ‘Three linguistic workshops with native speakers (Chinese, Dutch and Arabic)’.

In each of the modules activities focused on competencies concerning not only the affective domain, but also linguistic, metalinguistic and metacommunicative aspects. In the first three modules the students were given contact with different languages, first in the written form and then verbally. In the third module student watched a video, listened to people speaking in different languages and read the transcription of what had been said in the native language of the speakers. The work was developed in a progressive way, with only direct interaction with native speakers missing. That was the aim in the fourth module: we wanted students to establish direct contact with other languages, to interact with people of different nationalities and to analyse their representations and reaction.

Language workshops

An analysis of students’ representations concerning languages and language learning and their students’ images of the people who speak them and the places where they are spoken are part of several studies (Baker, 1992; Candelier & Hermann-Brennecke, 1993; Cain & De Pietro, 1997; Matthey, 1997; Moore, 2001). It is assumed that stereotyped images may influence the learning process and students’ perception of languages’ place and value within today’s society positively or negatively.

For this reason we decided to organise language workshops, and the students were asked about the languages they wanted the workshops to address. There was a vote, and the languages chosen were, in order: Chinese, Arabic and Dutch - two more ‘exotic’ languages (Chinese and Arabic) which they considered more distant from their own mother tongue, and a Germanic language because they were curious about the supposed similarities between Dutch, English and German.

Questionnaires completed before the workshops suggested that students’ representations about the three languages, independently of the actual language, were based mainly on affective reasons, i.e., emotional judgements. They considered, for instance, that a language was ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’. They also presented pragmatic representations mentioning the difficulty or easiness of reading, learning or speaking these languages. They showed linguistically based ‘judgements’ when referring for instance to the graphic systems, or less often cultural representations, where the traditions of the other countries

were mentioned. There was only one reference related to a representation of a student's image of the native speakers of the language.

Students were also asked to associate three words with each language (also before the workshops). Most of the words selected were concerned with cultural aspects ('Chinese food'; 'desert'; 'tulips'), followed by words showing value-based opinions ('ugly', 'funny'; 'nice'; 'weird'; 'complicated') and by the people related to the language ('yellow skin'; 'strange eyes'; 'blonde women'). Very few associations related to language, whereas there were several topics related to culture: dressing; food; geography/weather; landscape and sports; industry; political-economic aspects; behaviour and religion.

These representations were largely neutral, which showed that the students did not have many negative or positive preconceived judgements about the language they were going to encounter. During the workshops the native speakers tried to create an entertaining atmosphere and provided information about their culture in addition to 'teaching' the students some curiosities about their language.

The workshops were considered very positive by the students, who said, for instance, that they were 'funny', 'interesting', 'important' or 'cool': some students thought the workshop on Arabic language was 'boring' or 'monotonous', although most liked it. This may have been because in this workshop the activities were connected mainly to the Arabic script and not so centred in verbal interaction. This supposition was confirmed by the students' explanations of their opinion about the nature of the activities in this workshop.

We concluded that the reasons why the workshops were rated so positively had to do with the learning of new things. The students referred to the learning process in general, mainly to the learning of specific aspects of the three languages ('Dutch is a mixture of German and English'; 'I learned how Chinese characters were created'; 'I learned how to write Portugal in Chinese'). They also referred to the learning of cultural facts. The affective representation of the languages (they were 'funny', 'interesting', 'cute'; 'weird') was referred to several times. For their evaluations of the workshops, the students took into account their representation of the native speaker: one student referred to one of them as 'boring', but the remainder mentioned the fact that the native speakers were 'nice' and 'had made a big effort'. Some students, though not so many, justified their evaluation on the grounds that they had never had such a contact with native speakers of those languages before.

What the students most appreciated in the activities was the language learning possibilities offered (e.g.: 'I already 'know' how to establish a dialogue (hello, how are you) in Dutch') and culture (e.g.: 'Chinese food seems weird'). They also mentioned the types of activities used ('the activities were interactive' or 'different') and some specific aspects of the languages (e.g.: 'it is written from right to left') and their affective images of them. The materials were considered, although as less relevant.

Thinking about what they did not know before the workshops, the students mainly referred to linguistic aspects of languages, which showed that the language they knew least about was Arabic. They mentioned that they had learned many linguistic things, for instance that 'Dutch is similar to English'; 'in Dutch the G is read R'; 'Chinese language has several tones'; 'Arabic language has the *alifato* – Arabic alphabet'; 'There are diacritical marks in the Arabic language'). Finding a language easier or more difficult

than they expected was referred to by some students. They mentioned cultural aspects, though only as far as Chinese language is concerned (e.g.: ‘Chinese calendar is based on the moon’; ‘In China there is a 15 days’ party to celebrate new year’).

When asked what they liked the most in the workshops, most students referred to specific aspects of the three languages. Some said they liked everything. The native speaker was an important element for most students, and the materials used, the cultural aspects and the type of activities developed were considered less so.

Some conclusions

Our purpose in this paper was to show one of the many possible ways to work with students on the development of their plurilingual competence. In this case, we used language workshops with native speakers as part of a wider project.

Before the workshops, students’ representations of the three languages proposed had mainly an affective origin and most had no cultural elements. However, when asked associate three words related to each of the languages, students chose mainly cultural aspects and made very few associations related to language. After the workshops, which were very much appreciated by the students, they appeared to be more aware of the learning process and of the importance of such activities, as well as the relevance of the contact/interaction with a native speaker in his/her mother tongue. Linguistic aspects were now rated as much more important and relevant, being several times cited to justify the students’ responses about what they learned and what they liked most.

We suggest that our example shows the importance of studying students’ representations of languages and cultures, for ‘...it is precisely because representations and images of languages play a central role in language learning processes, and because they are malleable, that they are relevant to linguistic and educational policy’ (Castelloti & Moore, 2002, p.7).

Such workshops are one of many possible ways of presenting situations which enable students to interact with different languages and cultures and which help them to understand that in European societies today, ‘it is desired that Europeans live in and with different languages’¹, valuing the role of languages in the development of a trans-national European identity.

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¹ Quotation from the proposal to a SAPIENS project - *Analysis/construction of the plurilingual competence – didactic trajectories for a language education* - which a team from the Department of Didactic and Educational Technology from University of Aveiro, Portugal, with other researchers from other institutions, applied to.

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