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Raising the profile of language and identity in learning during student teacher education

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Abstract

This paper presents data - questionnaires, student working group notes and film presentations - gathered during a pre-service course for primary teachers piloted in 2005-6 at the IUFM d'Alsace, France. Our aim was to sensitise student teachers to the needs of their linguistically and culturally diverse pupils, to provide them with strategies to support all children in their learning at school and to create a safe environment where values are shared, rights acknowledged and pupils are recognised and respected in their diversity. The data illustrates that knowledge about culture, language and identity and the way in which it was acquired, namely through problem-based and collaborative learning, was decisive in facilitating the adjustment of the students' essentially monocultural world-view.

Introduction

It has been asserted that citizenship education of the 21st century should not only attend to raising awareness of democratic processes involved in governing a country but should also be concerned with social justice, human rights and peace (Naval, Print, Veldhuis, 2002). In order to identify with such issues and to become caring individuals in our increasingly multicultural societies children will need to develop a sense of empathy as well as to appreciate and learn from cultural differences (Clough & Holden, 2002; Banks 2001). If teachers are to encourage these qualities in children then they themselves also need to leave behind an essentially monocultural worldview, improve their intercultural awareness and sensitivity and develop a capacity to empathise, widen cross cultural borders and teach effectively in increasingly heterogeneous classes (Stoer & Cortesao, 2001, Banks, 2001). Providing the knowledge and the tools necessary to help student teachers reflect on such issues is a vital part of their education and training. The questions of how to sensitise student teachers to the needs of their linguistically and culturally diverse pupils and how they might be provided with strategies to support all children in their learning and create a safe classroom environment which recognises and promotes respect for diversity challenged us as teacher educators.

The TESSLA project

We took up this challenge within the framework of a European Comenius 2.1 project named TESSLA (Teacher Education for the Support of Second Language Acquisition) funded by the Socrates programme. The remit of this project was to develop course materials which would help teachers to understand why and how they should support bi/multilingual children at school.

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Our innovative approach is to provide a holistic approach to language development in pre-school and primary education, which is not confined to linguistic programmes and to traditional classroom based learning, but destined to provide student teachers and teachers with knowledge about psychological, social and linguistic dimensions of language acquisition and language support. The curricula which are elaborated on these grounds are meant to be totally or partly realisable at universities or teacher training institutes in our partner countries and in other European countries. (www.tesla.org).

Working closely with our Scottish colleagues from the University of Edinburgh, we devised a short course aimed at student teachers in initial teacher education. The main didactic model chosen by the team was problem based learning (PBL) used in conjunction with theoretical readings and illustrated by personal testimonies and video recordings of teachers, parents and children interacting at home and at school. In addition to these materials, a wide variety of other resources (music, children's literature, website materials including games and classroom ideas) were incorporated into the course to cater for all tastes and learning styles. By embracing a multimodal approach as advocated by Gellevij et al., 2002; Jewitt et al., 2000; 2001; and Sternberg et al., 1998, encompassing simulation, discussion in peer groups, reading and visualising we hoped that the course would have a greater impact on student attitudes and learning than more traditional teaching and learning models.

The course content was designed to fit into eight three-hour sessions (see below) which constituted the 24 hour module both institutions were able to pilot. Each session aimed to deal with a particular aspect of teaching and learning in a culturally diverse environment.

1. Introduction
2. Linguistic and cultural diversity
3. First Language(s) and Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Learning
4. Bilingualism
5. Language sensitive teaching
6. Identity and home-school relationship
7. Linguistic policies, official documentation and terminology, National and European levels, portfolios (group planning of presentations)
8. Student presentations & peer assessment

Hancock, A., Hermeling, S., Landon, J. et Young, A., 2006

Given the innovatory nature of the PBL approach for the French teacher education institution, IUFM d'Alsace, it was deemed necessary to devote the entire first session to introducing this approach and to allowing students to familiarise themselves with the flexible working environment in which it necessarily takes place. The final session was dedicated to student presentations affording tutors the opportunity to use holistic assessment, a form of assessment which appeared to us as highly appropriate for a course using PBL.

Holistic assessment recognises the intrinsic meaning of the target performance. A decision made, a problem solved, a case presented, a literary criticism made; all are whole acts with their own integrity and should be assessed as such. Analytical marking destroys their essential meaning. In making holistic assessments, however, the details are not ignored. The question is whether, like the bricks of a building or the characters in a novel, the specifics are tuned to create an overall structure or impact. We arrive at a judgement by understanding the whole in the light of the parts. The argument as a whole has to be judged. (Biggs, 1999)

Context and Data Collection

The data presented in this paper was collected during a pilot course conducted in 2005-2006 with two groups of primary student teachers (n=64) at the IUFM d'Alsace in Colmar, France. The participants were asked to complete an initial questionnaire with the aim of providing information on their cultural and linguistic background and experience and their attitudes toward and knowledge of second language acquisition and its role and influence in the classroom. Identical questionnaires were administered at the end of the course as well as a means of evaluating the impact of the course on student teachers. In addition to responding to the pre and post course questionnaires, the student teachers also produced working group minutes based on the course content and topics covered during each session in relation to the initial 'problem situation' designated at the start of the course as part of the problem based learning approach. These group minutes provided much insight into the student teachers' struggles, worries and concerns with regards to the linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms in which they would be teaching and provided a means for the student teachers to collectively build on their various experiences in order to produce models of effective practice. The final session of the course, during which each working group presented their ideas on and examples of such teaching practices, was also filmed allowing us the opportunity to examine and present the various influences we feel the course had on its participants.

Given our professional context (initial teacher education preparing mainly white, middle class female students, recruited locally to teach in local primary schools in the Alsace region of France) we were particularly aware of the need for our students to further their knowledge about issues associated with bi/multilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity on a global level. Alsace is a still largely a bilingual region; Alsatian is the second most widely spoken regional language in France, albeit by an ageing population (INSEE, 2002). However, bilingualism is all too often exclusively equated with bilingual French/German school programmes, leaving the family bilingualism of pupils at best ignored or at worst discouraged (Hélot & Young, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, the previous language policies of the French state which denigrated or even forbade the speaking of regional linguistic varieties, notably at school, have left their mark on the population (Young & Hélot, 2007). Even current education policies support a language hierarchy which places French as the sole official language at the top of the pyramid, mainstream European languages on the upper tier, regional languages on the lower tier and migrant languages at the bottom (Young & Hélot, 2003).

We also felt that as teachers operating in increasingly multicultural societies our students needed to develop an empathetic understanding of pupils whose home cultures vary considerably from the school's mainstream culture. The ability to empathise would, we hoped, better equip them to strike the fine balance between promoting national unity and respecting cultural and linguistic diversity in accordance with the Declaration of Human Rights and the International convention on Children's Rights, as recommended in French National Curriculum documents (M.E.N. 2006).

PBL: Empowering students

Banks writes: "citizenship education must teach them to know, to care, and to act." (Banks, 2001: p9). Knowledge and empathy alone, we believe, are not sufficient to engender action. If schools are to put into practice the French democratic ideals of "liberté, égalité, fraternité", then teachers need to be provided with the opportunity and support to become fully informed about issues of language and culture, from an insider and an outsider perspective (Banks, 2001) and, most importantly, to critically analyse and rethink their own values and beliefs in the light of new knowledge and fresh perspectives.

How can I get my students to think?" is a question asked by many faculty, regardless of their disciplines. Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional method that challenges students to "learn to learn," working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. These problems are used to engage students' curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter. PBL prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate resources. (Barbara Duch, 1995, <http://www.udel.edu/pbl/>)

The real life problem with which students at the IUFM d'Alsace were presented was the following:

Mme Martin teaches a class of 7 year olds which contains a number of children whose home language (their mother tongue) is different from the language of the school. Mme Martin is really concerned that these children don't seem to be making the same progress as the native speakers of the school language. Some of them don't participate in learning activities. The French/francophone children in the class are losing patience with these children's attempts to communicate. Mme Martin would really like to help these pupils more and would like to help the class as a whole to be more welcoming. She is discussing with you what she might do.

Students were asked to reflect together in small groups of 5-6 on the problem before beginning the course and to continue their reflection throughout the course. Time was allowed at the end of each session for small group discussion and note taking. Each group gave themselves a name and spent some initial time exploring the experiences and knowledge of each individual group member of relevance to the problem before entering into a discussion. Such small group discussions provide students with a safe space in which to share experiences and beliefs and to question each others', as well as their own, attitudes and conceptions of the world. This approach to learning is fundamentally student centred, rather than teacher led, and takes place in a flexible, rather than a structured, environment. Within such a framework, teachers take on a facilitating role, guiding students in their quest for relevant information, rather than

transmitting knowledge in a rational manner to passive recipients. When students are provided with appropriate conditions in which they are free to explore beliefs and to actively participate in knowledge construction, they may use this freedom to challenge mainstream practices and commonly held beliefs and to negotiate alternative approaches and attitudes.

Understanding the knowledge construction process and participating in it themselves [can] help students to construct clarified cultural, national and global identifications and to become knowledgeable, caring and active citizens in democratic societies. (Banks, 2001: p10)

PBL empowers learners by giving them a voice and providing them with a forum in which they are encouraged to consider alternative viewpoints, work collaboratively (an important skill for their future profession) and reach collegial decisions when considering the problem and writing up group suggestions and conclusions.

In his recent article *Language Education, Identities and Citizenship: Developing Cosmopolitan Perspectives*, Starkey discusses the importance of providing 'a space for learners to reflect on and develop new complex identities and articulate these with their understandings of citizenship' in our 'multilingual world of increasing hybridity' and defines such processes as education for 'cosmopolitan citizenship' (Starkey, 2007: p.59-60).

The data gathered during the pilot course and presented in the following section illustrates the extent to which knowledge acquired through problem-based and collaborative learning can facilitate changes in attitude and beliefs.

Changes in attitudes and perspectives

We were interested in knowing the starting points of our student teachers and in documenting any changes that might occur as a result of the course. The pre- and post-course questionnaires (see www.tessla.org), working group minutes and final course evaluations were valuable resources which provided illuminating comments regarding the student teachers' personal experience and impressions prior to during and at the end of the course.

Experience and attitudes towards bilingualism

The pre-course questionnaires provided information on the student teachers' various linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as on their initial attitudes to second language acquisition. While some were raised bilingual - three of the students spoke languages other than French at home and had learned French at school - others admitted to being essentially monolingual despite their years of foreign language education. Many students held high standards regarding what it means to be bilingual (e.g. a bilingual individual speaks and reads two languages 'perfectly' with no interference between languages, speaking a dialect and another language does not qualify an individual as bilingual) which, along with answers to some of the other questions, alerted us to certain misunderstandings and misconceptions of bilingualism and second language acquisition. For example, in response to the question of how a teacher might help a child whose mother tongue is not French many of the students advocated the practice of 'total

immersion' in the school language in which the child would be asked to speak only French and where the teacher would encourage the child's parents to speak French at home as well.

D'après vous, comment pourrait un enseignant aider un enfant qui parle une langue autre que le français à la maison à s'épanouir dans le système scolaire français?'

In your opinion, how might a teacher help a child who speaks another language than French at home develop his/her full potential in the French school system?

Je pense qu'il ne faut que s'exprimer en français avec lui, même si on connaît sa langue. Il faut que l'enfant baigne complètement dans cette langue (le français). Il faut lui demander de s'exprimer souvent en l'interrogeant dès que possible.

(Student L13)

I think that we should only communicate in French with him- even if we know his language. He must be completely immersed in this language (French). We must ask him to express himself often by questioning him whenever possible.

Si c'est possible, je conseillerais aux parents d'essayer de parler le français avec leur enfant pour que l'école ne soit pas le seul lieu où il parle mais que cette langue soit encrée dans la vie quotidienne.

(Student L23)

If possible, I would advise parents to speak French with their child so that school is not the only place they speak French but that this language is also anchored in their everyday life.

Many student teachers expressed concerns that the children's mother tongues (L1) would interfere with their progress in learning French. Others feared that parents were not placing enough importance on learning French. In fact, most were quite ambivalent about how to reconcile the home language and the school language. While most agreed that the family's L1 should still be spoken in the home, they also manifested fears that French, the language of the school, might in some way be displaced by the child's L1 as expressed in their answers to the question: 'En tant qu'enseignant, si un enfant parle à la maison une langue autre que le français, quels conseils donnerez-vous aux parents?' (As a teacher, if a child speaks a language other than French at home, what advice would you give to the parents?).

Si ces derniers parlent le français, même difficilement, je les inciterais à parler cette langue avec leur enfant de temps en temps.

(Student L7)

If the former speak French, even with difficulty, I would urge them to speak this language with their child from time to time.

Les parents doivent essayer, dans leurs possibilités, de pratiquer aussi le français à la maison.

(Student L8)

The parents must try, within their possibilities, to also use French at home.

Le conseil que je donnerais aux parents est de parler également français avec leur enfant (si au moins il le parlent) sans pour autant négliger leur langue maternelle.

(Student L12)

The advice that I would give to parents is to speak French as well with their child (at least if they speak it) without necessarily neglecting their mother tongue.

Tout dépendrait du niveau de français de l'élève. S'il a du mal et que les parents parlent le français je leur demanderais de la parler à la maison (tout en conservant une place pour l'autre langue.)

(Student L2)

It would depend on the pupil's level in French. If he is having difficulties and the parents speak French I would ask them to speak it at home (at the same time leaving room for the other language.)

Need for teaching tools and strategies

Many of the student teachers expressed feelings of helplessness and apprehension at the idea of teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Some were already aware of the difficulties and had experienced similar situations through classroom observation and practice. Most of them were keen to acquire 'tools' that would help them integrate these pupils in the classroom, help them progress in their learning and establish communication between teachers, pupils and parents and between the pupils themselves. The minutes taken by the group secretary at the end of session one in answer to the questions 'What do you hope to get out of this course? What are the questions you would like to find answers to?' illustrate our students' preoccupations:

Comment apprendre le français à un enfant non francophone en classe? Comment faire, quelles attitudes, quelles réactions faut-il avoir pour les intégrer dans le groupe classe ?

(Group F, session 1 minute)

How can you teach French to a non francophone child in class? What can be done, what attitudes should you adopt, what reaction should you have in order to integrate them into the classroom?

-Comment tenir compte de toute cette diversité dans son enseignement, comment s'adapter aux nouveaux venus, tout en ne pénalisant pas le reste du groupe classe ?

-Comment instaurer un climat propice aux apprentissages de la nouvelle langue (enjeux psychologiques : les nouveaux doivent se construire une nouvelle vie dans un nouveau pays, loin de leur camarades...), c'est-à-dire comment faire en sorte que ces enfants soient bien dans leur peau dans ce nouveau pays ?

(Les Taupes glasses group, session 1 minute)

- How can we acknowledge all this diversity in our teaching, how can we adapt to newly arrived children, whilst at the same time not penalising the rest of the class?

-How can we establish a positive learning atmosphere for the new language (psychological implications: the newcomers have to build a new life in a new country, far from their friends ...), that is to say, what can we do to insure that these children feel comfortable in their new country?

Que souhaitons-nous recevoir? Outils pour intégrer les enfants multilingues, des outils pour pallier aux différents rythmes d'expression et de compréhension entre des enfants multilingues et monolingues, des outils pour établir une relation, communiquer avec les parents qui ne parlent pas la langue de l'école.

(Les Monoglottes group, session 1 minute)

What would we like to get out of this course? Tools to integrate multilingual children, tools to compensate for the different rhythms of expression and understanding of the multilingual and monolingual children, tools to build relationships and to communicate with parents who do not speak the school language.

Changes in outlook and opinions

The working group minutes, post-course questionnaires and final course evaluation demonstrated a definite change in outlook on the part of the student teachers. The themes that arose from the data included '**valuing the child's language and culture**', '**integrating**' the children, their language and culture and their parents into the classroom, valuing differences, and '**building bridges**' between teacher and pupils and between the pupils themselves.

Valuing children's language and culture

On the final course evaluation the answers to the question 'What have you learned through this course' highlighted these themes as illustrated in the following answers:

L'importance de valoriser les langues maternelles à l'école et d'encourager les enfants à continuer de la [sic] pratiquer. Favoriser l'interaction, l'utilisation d'images, de jeux pour l'apprentissage d'une langue.

(Student L23)

The importance of valuing mother tongues at school and of encouraging children to continue speaking it [sic]. To favour interaction, the use of images, games in order to learn another language.

L'importance de valoriser les langues maternelles des élèves à l'école afin de faciliter le bilinguisme et l'intégration des élèves ne parlant pas le français. Les albums bilingues, l'intervention d'un parent à l'école, les contes, la cuisine sont autant de manières de valoriser les langues étrangères.

(Student L21)

The importance of valuing the mother tongue of the children at school in order to facilitate bilingualism and the integration of pupils who don't speak French. Bilingual storybooks, having parents participate at school, stories, cooking are all ways of valuing foreign languages.

J'ai appris énormément de choses durant ce cours ; à savoir : comment intégrer un élève, dont la langue maternelle n'est pas le français en classe (les différentes stratégies à mettre en place) – qu'il faut valoriser la langue maternelle de l'élève, que les parents ont un rôle très important à jouer, comment s'apprend une langue :

il y a différence dans l'apprentissage de la langue maternelle et d'une langue étrangère.

(Student L12)

I learned an enormous amount of things during this course; for example: how to integrate a pupil whose mother tongue is not French in the classroom (different strategies to put into place) – that you need to value the child's mother tongue, that his parents have a very important role to play, how you learn a language: that there's a difference between learning your mother tongue and a foreign language.

Welcoming differences and building bridges

Many of the student teachers expressed a desire to 'build bridges' towards and between pupils and to 'reach out' to them:

J'ai appris que beaucoup de choses pouvaient être mises en œuvre pour aider à l'intégration d'enfants étrangers (goûters, chansons, interventions) dans le but d'aller vers la culture linguistique de l'autre, mais surtout de créer un climat favorable aux apprentissages.

(Student L13)

I learned that many things can be put into place to help integrate foreign students (sampling specialities, songs, visits) in order to move towards the other person's linguistic culture, but especially in order to create a favourable learning environment.

La parole est le pont vers l'autre et ne pas pouvoir lui parler ce n'est pas pouvoir le rencontrer.

(Student L26)

Language is the bridge to another person; if we cannot speak to him we cannot meet him.

Ce cours m'a permis de découvrir des situations d'apprentissage où les langues n'étaient pas laissées à la porte et de réfléchir comment moi-même intégrer cette interculturalité.

(Student L15)

This course has allowed me to discover learning environments where languages were not left outside the classroom and to reflect on how I myself might integrate this interculturalism.

Je sais à présent qu'il existe des stratégies multiples et variées pour accueillir des élèves non francophones de manière à ce qu'ils s'intègrent dans le groupe classe. D'autre part, il importe de distinguer deux objectifs à suivre avec eux : Intégration et valorisation, Acquisition de compétences en langue française pour les apprentissages.

(Student L7)

I now know that multiple and varied strategies exist to welcome non francophone pupils so that they are integrated in the classroom. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish two objectives to pursue: integrating and valuing them and helping them to acquire linguistic competence in French for learning.

Raised awareness and empathy

Some student teachers specified that their opinions had not changed as a result of the course (as they were already convinced of the necessity of valuing children's home languages and cultures) but that they now felt better equipped to do so.

Cela a changé ma manière d'envisager l'apprentissage des langues à l'école. Au départ, je ne me sentais pas capable, mais en sachant intégrer les connaissances des parents et des enfants dans leurs langues dans des apprentissages scolaires, on n'est seul et on se sent plus sûr.

(Student L11)

It has changed my way of looking at language learning at school. At first I didn't feel capable, but knowing how to integrate parents' and children's knowledge of their languages into learning at school, I don't feel so alone and I feel much more confident.

Je ne suis pas sûre, d'avoir changé d'avis car il me semble que j'étais déjà dans cette optique-là. Cependant, il est certain, que ce cours m'a permis d'avoir les yeux sur les moyens très riches et diversifiés que l'on peut mettre en place dans une classe multiculturelle.

(Student L13)

I am not sure if I have changed my opinion as I think I was already approaching it from the same angle. However, I am certain that this course has opened my eyes to the very rich and diversified means which can be put into practice in a multicultural classroom.

Other student teachers specifically stated that their attitude and regard towards bilingual children had changed, that the course had allowed them to reflect on issues they had never previously considered and had helped them develop an 'awareness' of the situation. In answer to the question 'Qu'est-ce que vous avez appris dans ce cours?' (What have you learned through this course?) they replied:

A prendre du recul sur les réalités de vie de ces enfants qui n'ont pas un accès aisé au langage. Recul nécessaire pour aboutir à une analyse, sans doute plus juste, des moyens à mettre en œuvre pour favoriser l'apprentissage d'une langue.

(Student L26)

To stand back and better judge the reality that these children who do not have easy access to the language experience. This distance is necessary to carry out an analysis, no doubt a more accurate one, of the means to put into action to favour language acquisition.

J'ai été amené à mener des réflexions sur des thèmes auxquels je n'avais jamais réfléchi.

(Student L5)

I was led to reflect on themes about which I had never previously thought.

Pendant le cours j'ai appris qu'il faut vraiment tenir compte de la vie culturelle, de l'histoire des élèves non-francophones, et surtout de leur langue maternelle, ne pas seulement les plonger dans le bain de la langue nationale officielle.
(Student L19).

During this course I learned that it is necessary to take into consideration the culture and background of the non francophone pupils, and especially their mother tongue, not to simply immerse them in the official national language.

These comments and many others provided by the student teachers display evidence that the course provided them with some of the knowledge and tools necessary to begin to develop a better sense of empathy and understanding of their bilingual pupils. Their feedback also demonstrated that most student teachers felt that the course had provided them with valuable strategies aimed at developing empathetic and understanding classrooms.

Conclusions and future research

The data gathered during this study provides indicators of an adjustment of the students' initial, essentially monocultural, worldviews in relation to languages, bilingualism and learning. Through discussing, sharing and building on their own experiences of teaching and learning, students have been able to consider issues such as a pupil's right to exist in his/her own identity as opposed to conforming to a standardised ideal, how to make education more accessible through contextualised language support and also the empowering potential of collaborative learning.

The final student evaluations of the course showed evidence of participants having gained new insight into the importance of language and identity in learning, reflecting the idea that citizenship for the twenty-first century should be 'based on the principles and values of pluralism... respect of human dignity and cultural diversity as enrichment.' (Audigier,1999).

Many students have modified their initial beliefs and attitudes concerning bilingualism and the support of bilingual pupils within the school context. They have also improved their intercultural awareness and sensitivity and developed a capacity to empathise and better understand cross cultural borders.

Such changes in attitudes and beliefs have already begun to bear fruit in the classroom situation. During final session group presentations the students gave various examples of classroom activities designed to promote intercultural learning and value bilingual pupils, which they had already begun to put into place during teaching practice. In addition, we have both observed certain students during teaching placements actually putting into practice some of the advocated strategies to support bilingual pupils in their learning.

Given the reported positive influence of the course on student perceptions, we now intend to follow up this study with further interviews and observations of course participants in the field in order to investigate the long-term impact of the course on classroom practices.

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