Second Language Learning in a Multilingual Classroom: Didactic Interaction Development

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Abstract

The foreign language classroom is a space in which various elements that constitute the interaction involved in the teaching-learning process: the teacher's intervention, peer interactions, learning methodology, materials, management of classroom space etc. However, when it is a multilingual classroom, there is also need to develop different strategies for action to promote the integration of all students and to ensure inclusiveness in the classroom and respect for cultural diversity. The aim of this paper is to reflect on these issues, show useful strategies and methodological tools in the didactic interaction and provide a practical example to bring to the classroom through a teaching proposal for cooperative learning.

Keywords: multiculturalism, didactic interaction, foreign languages, multilingual classroom, cooperative learning

1. Introduction

The foreign language classroom involves constant use of oral language through the didactic interaction. "The language teacher is thus also approaching language as a mediating tool for communication and acting in the language, which is then no longer, and not exclusively, an object of teaching but a means of interaction" (Ziegler, 2013:3).

El estudio de la interacción en las clases de lenguas extranjeras (LE) ha puesto de manifiesto la importancia de la negociación del significado y de la modificación de la interacción en el desarrollo de la LE. Estos estudios han mantenido que la interacción estimula y favorece la construcción del sistema interlingüístico del aprendiente a través de dos procesos básicos: la necesidad de recibir y procesar un aducto comprensible y el desafío de estructurar gramaticalmente su producción, es decir, el educto (Baralo, 1996:123).

Thus, a space of negotiation is created in which many different elements that constitute the teaching-learning interaction: the types of speech, the various roles involved, support material and methodologies, linguistic and cultural program as well as the personality of the teacher (Núñez, 1996:166). Indeed, in the language class any event becomes a *teaching and learning event* and learning is not only produced by the communicative exchanges of a learner with the teacher, but also through the interaction with other learners (ibid.). Peer interaction promotes reasoning, imagination and prediction, it is performed through verbalization and it offers students the opportunity to learn about other ways to approach a given task from different perspectives (Serra, 2004:12).

The foreign language classroom has certain characteristics that make the interaction a permanent teaching tool, however, in multilingual learning contexts it is necessary to provide an inclusive learning environment that promotes the integration of participants from different cultures in the teaching-learning process. In this regard, Cano, Soler & Lorente (2011:21) collect the assumptions of some authors¹ and summarize a number of important issues, which will be discussed in the following pages, to promote inclusion in the classroom:

1. The importance of developing activities of interest for students, facilitating problem solving in an interactive and collaborative manner.
2. To foster an emotional climate where every participant, every student feels included, valued and reinforced in their participations.
3. Openness to customs and lifestyles from other cultures that can be enriching for everyone.
4. To enhance simultaneous and different spaces, related to interests and objectives, thus allowing different

¹ Ainscow et al. (2001); Bielaczyc & Collins (2000); Tharp et al. 2002; Giné et al. (2009).

tasks.

5. Promoting self-regulated learning, where the ability of personal autonomy is reinforced.

In the following pages we will discuss some of these assumptions, expanding these perspectives and putting them into practice by a didactic proposal for the languages class in the multilingual classroom.

2. Didactic Interaction in a Multilingual Classroom

Several elements influence the didactic interaction involved in the foreign language classroom: the teacher's performance, peer interactions, learning materials, pedagogic methodology, the provision of classroom space, etc. However, when it comes to a multilingual context, it is also necessary to develop different strategies that allow the integration of all students, ensure inclusiveness in the classroom and promote respect for cultural diversity.

2.1 The role of teachers in the didactic interaction

There are a number of factors that influence the effectiveness of didactic interaction in the multilingual classroom, however, it is the teacher that acts as the agent who motivates, regulates and plans the interaction and the use of languages in different contexts. His speech functions as an emotional support and a model while stimulating reflection about the language. Thus, the teacher must be able to facilitate understanding, implementing strategies aimed at developing discourse skills, improve awareness about the criteria of language use and provide feedback to students.

The performance of teachers must be preplanned and encourage dialogue in the classroom using different strategies such as joint negotiation of communicative content. The frequent and desirable intervention of students, like all interactive behavior, must be subject to suitable guidelines which are laid down from the beginning: always practice essential standards of politeness (greetings, farewells, turn intervention request, acknowledgments, etc.) in the classroom or various extra linguistic elements i.e. ask to speak, not interrupting, modulating the tone of voice, gestures to bring the message and to respect the opinions of others, etc. (Núñez, 1996:171).

A specific feature of a language teacher would then be to have a detailed understanding of the various resources, which one speaker refers to when engaging in talk and interaction (Ziegler, 2013:18). Here are some of the teacher's functions in didactic interaction in the classroom²:

- ✓ *Activate prior knowledge* of students. Prior knowledge refers to the experiences that have shaped the identity and cognitive functioning of the student. The multilingual classroom instruction must explicitly activate this knowledge.
- ✓ *Connect with the students's initial representation of the content* and help to modify it in the direction of the construction of the final representation. Transform their previous representations about the object using reflection.
- ✓ *Observe the interactions between students and act as a guide* to the entire process from an external position. Therefore, it is possible to obtain information about their oral skills to provide feedback tailored to the specific needs of learners.
- ✓ *Suggest globalizing and open activities* to make connections between different content and offer the opportunity to seek various distinct solutions, to increase imagination and inference.
- ✓ *Encourage interaction between students through activities in small workgroups* and the sharing of the different representations, as this increases the possibility of relating with their peers, to reformulate their knowledge and develop their oral communication skills.
- ✓ *Provide appropriate tools* for students to work autonomously, adapting the language to the linguistic level of the student's speech. Teacher's speech must be clear and explicit in giving instructions, using verbal and nonverbal resources to facilitate understanding and encourage communication in the learning space.
- ✓ *Anticipate potential difficulties and design techniques for solving problems* in the classroom in an interactive and collaborative mode.
- ✓ *Facilitate the construction of systems of shared meanings* between teacher and students. Discussion to build knowledge involves the need for listening carefully with active mental participation, and the need for a cooperative and non-competitive argument and the ability to know the interlocutor and recognize logical implications and presumptions different to their own.

² Compilation based on contributions from Núñez (1996), Coll & Onrubia (2001), Tébar (2003), Serra (2004), Cummins (2005), Coelho (2005, 2006), Arnold (2011), Cano, Soler & Lorente (2011), Méndez (2012) and Ziegler, (2013).

- ✓ *Create a communicative classroom climate* that gives prominence to the students and note their contributions, promoting participation, careful listening and understanding of students.
- ✓ *Encourage attitudes of respect and appreciation* of the richness of the variety of uses of languages, developing empathic attitudes in communicative exchanges. Motivation and attitudes towards different languages and cultures in contact are of great importance in learning them.
- ✓ *Give attention to affect in the communicative interaction.* Oral language is closely related to interpersonal relationships and their emotional aspects. Thus, the teacher should be flexible with the strategies used in the classroom in terms of students' emotions.
- ✓ *Promote the development of the personality and identity* of the student enabling processes and strategies that promote self-esteem and personal security.

2.2 Intervention strategies in the multilingual classroom

Elizabeth Coelho (2005:99-108)³, referring to the process of scaffolding in education, identifies ten useful intervention strategies for L2 learners in the context of multilingual learning:

1. *Make connections with the experiences of students* designing lesson plans that bear in mind their prior knowledge, encouraging them to share information about their own language and culture. Therefore, it's possible to take advantage of all the opportunities that are presented to explore the richness of the linguistic diversity of the class.
2. *Provide a comprehensive education*, taking into account the difficulties caused by the linguistic distance of the mother tongue of the students and being aware that many students use an alphabet different than Latin. The author suggests some strategies: use simple vocabulary for new concepts, use abundant visual support, provides sufficient time to complete tasks, provide support repeating or paraphrasing the questions, ask another student to translate or give clues.
3. *Providing or creating alternative support materials.* Search written materials with lots of visual support and, if the language level is below the level of some students, create simplified versions of the material to provide the necessary information using simpler language.
4. *Encourage dialogue through cooperative learning.* This type of methodology focuses on both the process and the product of teamwork, thereby allow students to work effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds, which helps to improve relationships, to deepen their understanding and to develop their problem solving skills through meaningful dialogue.
5. *Incorporate language of students.* To insist that students use only the L2 may limit his intellectual skill in the second language activity. L2 learning is often more effective if they can consult bilingual dictionaries, taking notes or making drafts in their first language, or developing concepts in their own languages before transferring to L2.
6. *Provide performance models*, so that students know what they are asked to do. These models can be of all types, from oral or written to oral text production input to interaction models reproduced in the classroom through role play, performances, etc.
7. *Provide feedback on responses to support language production of learners.* To interrupt students and correct each mistake doesn't help. Indirect feedback is more respectful and provides more aid. This strategy provides the model of the correct form and sometimes is a motivation to help students to extend what he or she said.
8. *Guide students through educational texts.* The support provided through the guided reading process will make the difference between frustration and success of L2 learners (this is also the case for many native speakers). There are three phases in the guided Reading process: before reading, during reading and after reading. This three-step process also works well with audio-visual materials such as TV documentaries, educational videos, web pages, etc.
9. *Create graphic organizers* to reduce the language barrier and see how the fundamental ideas are related in a text, a lesson or unit. Models T, Venn diagrams, organization charts, flow charts, concept maps, chronological tables and trees are examples of different types of graphic organizers.
10. *Provide written scaffold* or frames that allow students to use new words, phrases and different forms of written output would be unable to be produced without help. The simplest type of scaffolding is provided by a written

³ The author formulates these strategies relying on Krashen's (1985) hypothesis of comprehensible input, in the model of scaffolding instruction and on Cummins's (2000) teaching-learning model of L2.

text with gaps: for example, to help students to use new vocabulary by providing a word bank from which students can choose from including two or more of the three words that they require

According to the author, the incorporation of these strategies to the planning and delivery of classes can be the difference between success and failure for the L2 learners (Coelho, 2005:99).

2.3 Cooperative learning and diversity in teaching and learning styles

Cooperative learning requires social interaction and negotiation of meaning between members of heterogeneous groups involved in tasks; in these activities all the group members contribute while learning from other members (Crandall, 2000:243). It is a teaching methodology that promotes appreciation of diversity and helps build awareness of the culture of the class, creating meaning together (Méndez, 2012:72). According to Ovejero, Moral and Pastor (2000), all existing cooperative learning methods significantly improve inter-ethnic relations and also significantly reduce prejudice in the classroom.

This way of working in the classroom, in addition to providing greater relevance to cultural aspects, also raises awareness of diversity in teaching and learning styles (Mas, 2011:12), this is an important aspect, because their reaction to certain types of tasks depends on the teaching model that students are accustomed. Indeed, Coelho (2006:192) warns that not all students are comfortable in a totally student-centered class. For example, many students of Asian origin are not used to group work and peer interaction managed by the students themselves, consequently they prefer individual jobs and intervene only when the teacher requires it directly, not on its own initiative. This aspect represents a major challenge in a multicultural classroom where many students come from educational systems focused on different aspects. For this reason, it is important to know the type of methodology of teaching students to avoid too wide a gap between theirs and the one used in the classroom. Therefore, it is very useful at the beginning of course to write down some important facts about the academic life of the students, to analyze their needs and adapt the teacher's performance.

2.4 The learning environment

As noted above, the creation of a suitable climate favors teamwork and interaction among students. This consideration does not refer only to the action of agents that affect the teaching-learning process, but also the environment where the teaching activity takes place: suitable materials, visuals, organization and structure of the class, etc. The distribution of spaces and materials should arouse the curiosity of the students (Nuñez, 1996:3) and be suitable to their capabilities.

Alfie Kohn (1999), from a progressive educational perspective, devised an ideal class as opposed to the traditional classroom, creating a scheme in which various aspects of the learning environment were assessed. In Kohn's scheme⁴, shown below, various observable realities encountered in academic classrooms organized into two blocks: the good signs in a classroom and the reasons for concern about the learning environment.

	Good Signs	Possible Reasons To Worry
Furniture	Chairs around tables to facilitate interaction Comfortable areas for learning, including multiple "activity centers" Open space for gathering	Chairs all facing forward or (even worse) desks in rows
On The Walls	Covered with students' projects Evidence of student collaboration Signs, exhibits, or lists obviously created by students rather than by the teacher Information about, and personal mementos of, the people who spend time together in this classroom	Nothing Commercial posters Students' assignments displayed, but they are (a) suspiciously flawless, (b) only from "the best" students, or (c) virtually all alike List of rules created by an adult and/or list of punitive consequences for misbehavior Sticker (or star) chart –or other evidence that students are rewarded or ranked
Students' Faces	Eager, engaged	Blank, bored
Sounds	Frequent hum of activity and ideas being exchanged	Frequent periods of silence The teacher's voice is the loudest or most often heard
Location Of Teacher	Typically working with students so it takes a few seconds to find her	Typically front and center

⁴ Shown here only the part of Kohn's scheme that refers to didactic interaction in the classroom.

Teacher's Voice	Respectful, genuine, warm	Controlling and imperious Condescending and saccharine-sweet
Class Discussion	Students often address one another directly. Emphasis on thoughtful exploration of complicated issues. Students ask questions at least as often as the teacher does.	All exchanges involve (or are directed by) the teacher; students wait to be called on Emphasis on facts and right answers Students race to be first to answer teacher's "Who can tell me...?" queries
Stuff	Room overflowing with good books, art supplies, animals and plants, science apparatus; "sense of purposeful clutter"	Textbooks, worksheets, and other packaged instructional materials predominate; sense of enforced orderliness
Tasks	Different activities often take place simultaneously Activities frequently completed by pairs or groups of students	All students usually doing the same thing When students aren't listening to the teacher, they're working alone

3. A Didactic Proposal for a Multilingual Classroom

This methodological proposal is aimed at trying to improve the joint creation of meanings through cooperative learning. It seeks to promote respect for diversity by building awareness of the cultures of the class. For this reason, the planned intervention is based on a methodology through tasks and projects that facilitate inclusiveness of students, while building knowledge through peer interaction and the teacher. Thus students have the opportunity to negotiate meaning by interacting with their peers while being much more involved in their own learning.

3.1 Planning and organization

The proposed intervention involves the implementation of collaborative task learning about different cultures in music class. We all have a musical background that can be leveraged to promote intercultural understanding by facilitating and encouraging respect for other cultures (Larraz, 2009). Hence all the students in the classroom can provide evidence of their culture and their own experience and share it with the rest of their classmates; while they discover new information about the music that will enrich your multicultural perspective.

It is a micro project to a class of Spanish as a foreign language, which could also be used to the learning of other languages. Students must complete tasks in small groups, however, to obtain the information necessary to interact with peers from other countries.

The general objectives to be achieved with the present teaching proposal are:

- Encourage the construction of knowledge of other cultures by creating meaning together through cooperative learning.
- To promote positive and respectful attitudes towards other cultures.

Firstly, you plan and design a guided cooperative project aimed at the joint construction of knowledge about music in the cultures of the class. Through this task, dialogue between cultures is promoted from tolerance and respect for diversity

The teacher prepares the lesson plan previously encouraging interaction between students. A proactive and empathetic attitude is also essential, in which cooperation and collaborative environment is promoted. The teacher's role will be to guide and monitor the entire process, walking among the groups to resolve difficulties that arise. This will aid the work of students, solving the difficulties as they arise and intervening when necessary. To do this, the teacher must provide appropriate measures to facilitate the autonomy of learners and use verbal and nonverbal resources whenever necessary tools.

Given the multilingual nature of the classroom which the proposal targets and that not all students feel comfortable in a totally student-centered classroom, the teacher in this intervention is responsible for providing direct instruction and control the whole process from an external perspective, offering his support at all times.

Secondly, you need to create a climate that encourages teamwork (small groups of three people) and interaction among students. To do this, they try to manage the classroom spaces in an appropriate manner, placing the tables and chairs to facilitate collaborative work and dialogue. A flexible layout would be desirable with movable tables and chairs, where possible from an organizational point of view.

As we will see in the teaching proposal scheme, the project is organized around a series of learning objectives that refer to three basic aspects: concepts, procedures and attitudes. Through the micro-project students will create knowledge together and organize the concepts taught using different strategies.

MICROPROJECT: "La semana multicultural de la música"

- ✓ **FINAL TASK:** Develop illustrative panels about the music in different countries.
- ✓ **SPECIFIC DIDACTIC OBJECTIVES:**
 - Conceptual objectives**
 - Explore the musical culture in different countries.
 - Learn about different musical instruments.
 - Procedural objectives**
 - Prepare questions to interview other classmates.
 - Interact and cooperate with colleagues to organize the work.
 - Negotiate the information to put in the panel.
 - Attitudinal objectives**
 - Actively participate in the development of the project.
 - Have a positive attitude and respect for other cultures.
- ✓ **DIDACTIC CONTENTS:**
 - Musical styles from different cultures.
 - Review of present simple in Spanish: regular and irregular forms.
 - Review of interrogative markers.
 - Lexicon: Music and musical instruments.
- ✓ **PROCEDURE:**
 - First, to activate prior knowledge, the Spanish word "música" is written on the blackboard and students are asked to say everything that comes to mind when they think of the word.
 - A mini-dictionary is created with the lexicon of this topic by brainstorming. Students are then asked if they think the music is the same in all cultures and if they know music from other countries. Some examples are given like flamenco and tango (fusion music could even be used) and are discussed between all the members of the class.
 - Subsequently the class is separated into small groups (three people) and each group must investigate the musical culture of a country of a classmate from a different country. They should:
 - Find information online about music in the chosen country.
 - Prepare interview questions for their peers.
 - Interview colleagues to confirm the information obtained is correct and maybe get other suggestions.
 - Prepare a first draft of the panel with all the information.
 - When everyone has the information gathered about the musical culture of the different countries that make up the class, seek graphic examples (images, sounds, videos, etc.) about the information found and prepare a panel of different countries. All work will be uploaded to a virtual platform e.g moodle to be created by the teacher and is titled "La semana multicultural de la música".

3.2 Evaluation

The assessment takes place throughout the entire process and serves to inform the progress and difficulties encountered. The assessment will help it inform the student (and teacher) of the progress achieved and the difficulties encountered in the process. By way of support and self-assessment, the students will be provided with a checklist about the project, which will help them to plan and organize the work. The following table shows a model of a checklist based in the proposal of Coelho (2006:198), but adapted to this task.

Planning

- ☐ We know what information is needed.
- ☐ We have consulted the teacher or fellow students about the potential sources of information.
- ☐ We have prepared interview questions for our peers.

Research

- ☐ We have planned the time to research on the internet or for interviews.
- ☐ We've helped our classmates by sharing resources.
- ☐ We have taken note of the information we have collected.
- ☐ We have discussed how our information is relevant.
- ☐ We have asked the teacher for help when it was needed.
- ☐ Our teacher has seen and approved our work so far.
- ☐ We are ready to make the final product

Final product

- ☐ We have agreed on how to present information.
- ☐ We have helped each other in revising the first draft.
- ☐ We have included graphic examples (images, sounds, videos, etc.) of the information found.
- ☐ We have asked the teacher for help when it was needed.
- ☐ Our teacher has seen and approved our work so far.
- ☐ We read our work and have corrected grammatical errors.
- ☐ We are ready to share our final product.

When the list is presented to the students, its contents could be discussed and adapted to suit the suggestions of the class.

Finally, it is desirable that an assessment of project implementation is carried out from the perspective of the teacher to make any necessary changes and improvements to it and reflect on their own teaching and the outcome of the teaching interaction in the context implemented. This has to be done in terms of the initial objectives of the same and also the objectives of the project in the classroom. In order to focus our attention in a specific way in the evaluation criteria, we can analyze our proposal using the following checklist⁵:

The learning context

- ☐ A climate is created that encourages teamwork and interaction among students.
- ☐ The provision of space encourages collaborative work.
- ☐ The group of students is heterogeneous

The project

- ☐ Encourages the construction of knowledge of music in other cultures, creating meanings together.
- ☐ Promotes cooperative learning.
- ☐ Helps generate positive attitudes towards other cultures.
- ☐ Promotes interaction and cooperation of the students to learn about the musical culture of their peers.
- ☐ Promotes student interest to explore the music of other cultures.

The teacher's intervention

- ☐ Provides clear and explicit instructions.
- ☐ Engages students in the project.
- ☐ Moves around the room, sharing the time equally to all groups and students in the classroom.
- ☐ Provides sufficient waiting time for students to answer questions and supports them by repeating or paraphrasing the question, asking another student to translate or giving clues.
- ☐ Provides feedback tailored to the specific needs of learners.
- ☐ Pays attention to all students and interacts with them on equal.
- ☐ Displays an empathic attitude towards the students.
- ☐ Develops strategies that promote self-esteem and personal safety of students.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have conducted a brief review of the characteristics of the elements involved in a teaching interaction in multilingual learning contexts: the teacher's performance, the interactions between students, teaching methodology, adapting materials, management of classroom space and teaching strategies to promote integration in the classroom and respect for cultural diversity. The aim of this work was to reflect on these issues and provide a practical example to take to the classroom through a teaching proposal to implement in a multilingual classroom.

Ultimately, the didactic interaction is presented as an essential tool to get to the construction of meaning in the multilingual classroom and cooperative learning is an ideal resource for students to be more involved in their own means of learning. The multilingual classroom is still a challenge for some teachers, but the cultural and linguistic diversity that reside in it is a great opportunity for personal enrichment, allowing direct contact with diverse realities and reflect on their own culture from different perspectives.

⁵ Here only some of the items on the checklist approach to inclusive education by Coelho (2006:210) are taken.

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