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EFL classroom interaction from a multilingual perspective within the Transylvanian school context

PhD Dissertation

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1. Introduction

Interest in multilingualism has been gradually increasing in the past two decades, gaining the attention of both researchers and policy makers. Learning a third language is a common occurrence around the world. Among the five types of trilinguals that have been identified by Hoffman (2001), the most common in Europe is a bilingual who acquires a third language.

The benefits of multilingualism and multilingual education have been advocated by a number of scholars (Cook, 2002; Pavlenko, 2003; Jessner, 2008; Cenoz and Gorter, 2013; Cenoz and Gorter, 2015) in recent years. In particular, findings that emerged from new research fields like Third Language Acquisition (TLA) and inquiries that have been made around the notion of multicompetence have contributed to a better understanding of multilingual processes and language use.

As in all other domains of language acquisition, the study of L3 or additional language acquisition requires an in-depth analysis and evidence emerging from a wide range of theoretical frameworks. The present paper relies on two theoretical approaches – multicompetence (Cook, 1991) and the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina and Jessner, 2002) – as a lens through which we can discuss foreign language teachers' beliefs towards language teaching, their current teaching practices and provide valuable insights into English foreign language (EFL) classroom interactions.

Both multicompetence and the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM) adopt a holistic approach when

looking at language learning and the linguistic repertoire of multilingual students. These two theoretical proposals are considered to be the forerunners of a new trend in the field of language education that focuses on multilingualism and language integration. The aim of this investigation is on the one hand, to show and describe, through classroom-based empirical research, to what extent are multilingual students' and teachers' linguistic resources activated during foreign language (FL) classroom interaction, thus reflecting upon how multilingualism is incorporated in the educational context under investigation and, on the other hand, to interpret and evaluate classroom language use based the theories outlined in the literature review. Until very recently (and this is still true for some of the schools and teachers), the only guarantee for successful instructed language learning seemed to be a strict separation of the languages in the multilingual learner and in the classroom (Creese and Blackledge, 2010; Dégi, 2010; Crump, 2013; García, 2013, Gorter and Cenoz, 2017). As has been just mentioned, in the 20th century English language teaching theories promoted a monolingual approach (Hall and Cook, 2013) and, thus, the languages of the subjects are often kept totally apart, and contact between them in the curriculum is rejected (sometimes even forbidden) since it is considered a hindrance to successful language learning. In order to avoid interference from other languages, teachers keep knowledge about other languages, including the L1, out of the classroom (Dégi, 2010).

Yet, the traditional way of separating languages has been contested on several occasions and new proposals to soften hard boundaries between languages have emerged

(Garcia, 2009; Canagarajah, 2013, Gorter and Cenoz, 2017). Studies show that languages are not kept in separate containers so during multilingual interaction languages in the mind interplay and speakers rely on their full linguistic repertoire (Dégi, 2010; Tullock and Fernández-Villanueva, 2013). Additionally, metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive skills are developed as part of multilingual development and should also be fostered in an instructed context (Jessner, 2008; Boócz-Barna, 2010; Sindik and Božinović, 2013).

The present dissertation aims at providing insight into a specific multilingual context, the Transylvanian Hungarian minority situation. The paper focuses on describing and interpreting classroom language use, exploring the frequency and scope of using non-target languages bearing in mind the theoretical concepts and practical suggestions articulated by the concept of multicompetence and the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism. Furthermore, the paper also considers teachers' and students' beliefs regarding multilingualism and multiple language use during English foreign language instruction.

Adopting a multilingual perspective and applying several methods of data collection, the research is based on classroom audio and video recordings, teacher questionnaires, and interviews with both teachers and students, and a comparative content analysis of the data.

Results obtained from different schools, teachers and students are compared and contrasted, identifying some good practices and tendencies within current EFL teaching in the Transylvanian educational system. Data provides information not only about language use in EFL classes but also regarding

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the effects of teachers' beliefs on their educational practices, students' attitudes towards multilingualism and multiple language use, and the roles that school types and second language exposure play in shaping language use within the EFL classroom.

2. Research Questions

The aim of the present research was to explore the ways multilingualism is incorporated in the English language teaching practices in some Transylvanian high schools. Therefore, the study focuses on classroom language use (the variety of languages used and the situations in which non-target languages occur), English teachers' beliefs regarding classroom language use and behaviour and finally, students' opinions about classroom language use and the help of non-target languages in acquiring the target language (English).

1. In order to describe how multilingualism is manifested in EFL classrooms we need to answer the following questions regarding the linguistic behaviour of the participants:
   1.a Which languages are used during an EFL class?
   1.b When and for what pedagogical functions are these languages used?
   1.c By whom and with whom are these languages used?

2. The second question focuses on teachers' beliefs about language use in the EFL classroom:

2.a What kind of linguistic behaviour (monolingual vs. multilingual) is used and encouraged by teachers during an EFL class?

2.b Are there any explicit or implicit rules concerning language use during the EFL class? (i.e. How does the teacher control targeted language mode? Does the teacher allow the use of other languages in an EFL classroom?)

3. The third research question focuses on learners' beliefs regarding the use of other languages during foreign language learning and the type of languages students consider as helpful in learning English:

3.a What are the students' opinions about multiple vs. monolingual language use in the EFL classroom?

3.b Why do students consider the use of other languages during EFL classroom an asset in learning English?

3.c What are the languages that are viewed to help students in learning English?

3. Methodology

In order to explore the languages used during EFL lessons and to answer the research questions above, a mixed method (Dörnyei, 2007) data collection and analysis was designed. For the purposes of this study, data was collected in two counties (Mureș/Maros county and Harghita/Hargita county) and three localities within these two counties. The research procedure

involved different time periods. First, in the year 2009 data was collected in Mureș/Maros county in two localities – Târgu Mureș/Marosvásárhely and Luduș/Marosludas. Then, between autumn 2011 and spring 2012, further data was collected in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda, Harghita/Hargita county. In both counties I chose a grammar school (a school with Hungarian as the language of instruction in both cases) and one vocational school or school group – schools with Hungarian and Romanian sections.

The research includes the investigation of ten EFL classes from five different schools in Transylvania: one industrial school group in Luduș/Marosludas; one grammar school and one vocational school in Târgu Mureș/Marosvásárhely; and one grammar school and one economic school group in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda. Student participants of this study are Hungarian-Romanian bilingual minority students in grade 12, their last year of high school, with their age ranging from 18 to 19. Classroom observation necessarily included the teachers of the ten classes visited (n=7 teachers), however, a questionnaire survey was carried out including all the English language teachers from the visited schools (n=16 teachers) since I was interested in finding out whether there are any shared beliefs regarding EFL teaching and the use of non-target languages among the teachers of the same institution. Classroom observation included ten classes in five schools and a total of 231 students. Following classroom observations, the study included interviews with 14 students from the total 10 classes. In each class I asked students to volunteer for an interview and, thus, one or two students offered to participate in the research.

The data collection procedure was designed to include several steps. The first step was handing out the questionnaires to the EFL teachers (n=16) in order to gain insight into the way language teachers perceive their language use in the classroom. Questionnaires provide, thus, information regarding the social background of the teachers involved and their perception regarding the frequency of target and non-target language use during EFL classroom interaction. Furthermore, audio and video-recorded classroom observations were carried out in order to look at the linguistic behaviour of both teachers and students paying special attention to the use of non-target languages (codeswitching phenomena) during the EFL classroom. Finally, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were carried out with students to get some insight into their beliefs regarding the importance of non-target languages and how students actually perceive their own language use. Post-observational interviews were used in the case of teachers to discuss and to check their own understanding of the patterns of classroom language use and to verify my analysis of the classroom recordings.

4. Results

Data collected through the above mentioned multiple procedures led to the following results:
1) Similarly to previous research findings (see Nikolov, 1999; Lugossy, 2003; Nagy, 2009; Nagy and Robertson, 2009; Thompson and Harrison, 2014) the results of the teachers' questionnaire administered as the first step of the data collection phase show that (a) 7 out of 10 Hungarian

teachers who teach exclusively Hungarian students reported using non-target languages during EFL classes; (b) classroom language use is influenced by the teachers' mother tongue; (c) the use of non-target languages during EFL classes depends on the educational focus, namely, (d) these non-target languages are used for conveying meaning (explanations, making connections between languages, translation), maintaining discipline and for informal talks (see also Nikolov, 2000; Nagy 2009; Nagy–Robertson, 2009; Thompson–Harrison, 2014). However, it was surprising that only 8 respondents (out of 16) marked using non-target languages in case of joking and telling off students. Moreover, questionnaire results show a discrepancy between teachers' language mode and teachers' control over students' language mode. On the one hand, teachers use both English and their mother tongue for a number of reasons listed above, while, on the other hand, they require exclusive target language use from students – students are expected to use only English during group work or to ask questions in English.

2) Classroom observation data gives evidence for the presence of multilingual speech during EFL classroom, though the type of the school and the mother tongue of the teacher affect not only the type of languages used but also the frequency of codeswitching within the lesson. EFL classes in the monolingual schools follow a target language only pattern of language use, while English lessons observed in the mixed type schools allow for a more varied language use, present in both teacher-talk and student-talk. Data also brings several examples of pedagogical functions

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concerning classroom codeswitching. Though there is a wide range of discourse functions attached to the codeswitching instances, classroom management and the overall goal of the English lesson shapes the frequency of these codeswitching functions.

3) Student interview data, on the one hand, validate classroom observation findings regarding teacher language use; on the other hand, students discourses reveal that codeswitching to non-target languages is helpful and '*easier*'. Explanations given in Hungarian or Romanian are better understood and translating English words or text into Romanian, rather than into Hungarian, is considered easier. Student interview results suggest that in the course of the foreign language learning process students tend to rely on those languages in which they are more proficient or languages they are exposed to the most.

5. Conclusion

The dissertation provides a description of the two theoretical concepts which offered the necessary background for the present research by providing arguments and support for the need to adopt a multilingual, holistic approach in language education. The common perspective of the two theoretical frameworks focuses on the linguistic behaviour of multilinguals claiming that they have a special ability to handle effectively several languages and language awareness to benefit from their previous language knowledge and language learning experiences while learning an additional language. Constructing a rather new picture of the language learner and

striving to overcome the monolingual perspective still persisting in pedagogy and instructional aims, both theories propose some changes for current language teaching pedagogy that involve the importance of previously acquired languages and language learning experiences and the exploitation of these languages during foreign language instruction.

The aim of the study has been to explore English foreign language classroom interaction within the context of Transylvanian Hungarian minority education in order to investigate the extent to which multilingualism is present in the classroom teaching and learning environment and whether existing multilingualism in the observed classes supports or enhances the acquisition of English as a third language. Findings concerning classroom language use have shown that there are three major factors that influence linguistic behaviour and code choice within the English foreign language classroom, namely, the type of school or the school context, the English teachers' proficiency in the students' native language and teachers' beliefs and preferences regarding classroom language use.

Results show that the presence or the use of non-target languages within the foreign language classroom does not automatically improve language learning or teaching. With one exception, teachers using non-target languages did not use these languages deliberately in order to support integrative foreign language learning but, in some cases, even overused non-target languages.

Overall, on the basis of these findings, I suggest that the curriculum of teacher training programs needs to be revised so that future language teachers should learn about the

pedagogical implications of multilingualism. Furthermore, such teacher training programs or professional development programs for in-service teachers should provide courses on third language learning and teaching in order to enable teachers to understand the learning process of their multilingual students and possibly to develop more efficient teaching strategies.

By studying EFL classroom language use in a Hungarian minority context, I wish to have contributed to the development of the newly emerging trend of softening boundaries between languages and integrated language teaching. Research on multilingualism in education and, particularly, language teaching, might mean not only an advance in the field of SLA or TLA, but it may also contribute, on a more practical level, to the progress of teacher training by setting new aims for future work on language teacher education.

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