



“I Could not Cope With English, so I Chose French” Hearing Students’ Voices when They Are Learning a Foreign Language*

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting the preliminary results of a research study that foregrounds the importance of taking into account the learners’ voices. This research shows the students’ experiences of a public university when they are learning French for specific purposes, compared to their previous contact with English as a foreign language. It presents a broader vision of what it means to study EFL and FFL in a public university. This paper gives voice to the students themselves in order to go beyond the language itself. It also provides a reflection upon our language education practices in Boyacá. The study revolves around the research question: What

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar los resultados preliminares de un estudio de investigación que se sustenta en la importancia de resaltar las voces de los aprendices. Esta investigación muestra las experiencias de los estudiantes de una universidad pública al aprender Francés sobre propósitos específicos, comparada así con el previo contacto del inglés como lengua extranjera. En la disertación teórica se presenta una visión global de lo que significa estudiar inglés y francés en contextos universitarios públicos. Luego se le da un valor a la voz de los estudiantes con el fin de ir más allá de la lengua y reflexionar acerca de las

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do students want to tell us about their needs and perceptions with regard to language education during their first contact with French as Foreign Language (FFL), as compared to English as Foreign Language (EFL)? The methodology takes the form of a qualitative case study.

Key words: Student's voices, Public University, FFL, EFL, Bilingualism, Language education

Introduction

As educators, most of us agree that learning foreign languages and learning about foreign cultures are important parts of education. A problem arises when the forces of globalization reduce this significant part of education to a very restricted meaning: Learning English. In this paper, I want to support a broader vision of what it means to become bilingual, or multilingual in a public university, supported by the students' voices, because successful education depends on teachers and learners having shared goals and understandings.

Freire (1998) p.72 stated, "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning". In the light of the above quotation, the preliminary aim of this research project is to give a voice to my students themselves. The students' voices reflect upon the learners' perceptions during their first contact with French as a Foreign Language (FFL) compared to their previous experiences with English as a

prácticas educativas de la enseñanza del lenguaje. El estudio gira en torno a la pregunta de investigación: ¿Qué nos quieren decir los estudiantes acerca de sus necesidades y deseos en relación con la educación del lenguaje durante su primer contacto con el francés como lengua extranjera comparado con el inglés? La metodología está enmarcada dentro de un estudio de caso cualitativo.

Palabras clave: voces de los estudiantes, Universidad Pública, Francés, Inglés, Bilingüismo, Enseñanza del Lenguaje.

Foreign Language (EFL). I carried out this research by bearing in mind the idea to empower the learner and my experience as an English and French teacher at the university level. What do students want to tell us about their needs and desires, with regard to language education during their first contact with FFL as compared to EFL? was the research question addressed in the study.

Literature Review

In order to deepen reflection on this central question, I will first focus on some important contributions of theorists and researchers in the fields of foreign language learning, English as a Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language, and Bilingualism policies in Colombia.

As was already mentioned, globalization plays an important role in relation to education and communication. In the last few decades, we have seen how the powers of globalization, technological advances and

English are interrelated (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). In some specific cases, that interrelation determines the paradigms to copy and follow in relation to what a student should learn and what a teacher should teach. One of the paradigms has to do with foreign language learning.

Nowadays, there is no point in trying to convince people to go against what they see as their own best interests. If everyone is arguing, "You must learn English! Your children must learn English!" there is no point in going into fully-frontal battle against that position (Brumfit, 2006). There must be another way and we might well begin by trying to understand what is happening outside Colombia in order to understand what is occurring inside. This would be complementary to the suggestion of one author who has influenced the post-method condition in language teaching, Canagarajah (1999), that we should start exploring knowledge in local instead of global contexts, in order better to understand the global-local negotiations.

In relation to what it is quoted above, I strongly believe that those global-local negotiations can be re-defined and better understood if we allow students their participation in the re-construction of their learning processes.

Freire(1972) described the education as a net where many aspects are interrelated:

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and

women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" .

This Brazilian thinker also emphasized the importance of meaningful dialogue between teachers and students. The informal education can liberate the learner to become autonomous in the way he/she thinks and behaves with a social responsibility.

Freire's(1998) contributions also lead us to reflect upon the authentic questions and desires that students have. This serves to knit together the relationship between student and teacher and how this can empower the class as a center of change. I find this inheritance inspirational in my own research efforts, recognizing that we, as teachers and learners, face dilemmas in educational contexts every day, by constantly being called on either to change or to continue perpetuating the status quo.

In this context, it is crucial to mention how the last four decades have been a time of accelerated change for Colombia, raising issues of language and culture, and how they are influenced by social, economic, and political factors, socially constructed, learned and taught. As Nieto (1996) states, 'Culture is not a given, but a human creation, dependent on particular geographical, temporal, and socio-political contexts and therefore vulnerable to issues of power and control, while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.'

As Nieto (1996) delineates above, Colombian culture has been permeated by

the globalization where socio-political decisions determined the future of language public education. In our context, globalization can be seen as a positive awareness-raising kind of net where EFL is the thread. This common belief has grown in the middle classes, where parents dream of sending their children to Bilingual schools in order to have a “better” future. De Mejía (2006) reports: “... prestigious or ‘elite’ bilingualism has a very high profile among the Colombian middle and upper classes and there is increasing demand for bilingual programs (especially English-Spanish provision). Parental support for bilingual education is thus very strong and attending a bilingual school is considered to be high status”.

Guerrero (2008), also addresses the evolution of the BNP (Bilingual National Plan) by contrasting the mismatches among British EFL policies, the Ministry of Education EFL standards, some theories based on critical pedagogy and the reality of our educational contexts. In her article she criticizes from a constructivist position the non-coherence between English policies and what actually happens in the English-learning classroom. From that perspective and based on what my students expressed, I can deduce that most learners around Colombia are trapped in a never-ending cycle of learning/failing to learn English for its own sake, not aware of what they are missing out on. In contrast to Guerrero (2008) above, and based on some results of this research, the learners’ perception is that where students are motivated to become bilingual, their desire only to “learn English” is actually decreasing.

As we could realize, from the aforementioned researches in Colombia in relation to

language education, there is a general demand for research in different languages. Not only English and French are seen as dominant languages, but also Spanish and Portuguese. These two languages are also growing up in the field of Foreign Languages teaching and learning.

This situation is unfolding in our classrooms, where students are reacting against English and showing their motivation or curiosity for other languages. This is demonstrably the case in the International Languages Institute at the Pedagogical and Technological University of Colombia, (UPTC). According to the official resolution N° 073 of 2009 of the Consejo Superior created the International Language Institute with the objective of offering the language services that learners and society need. The demand on teachers of French and other foreign languages, such as Portuguese, German and Italian increased each semester and it is why this fact called my attention.

The setting

Since 2009, the International Language Institute offers English, French and German courses for all students of the different programs at the UPTC. For all the university students of the different careers they have to choose to study and pass the four foreign language levels offered by the Institute. Based on the academic programs designed by the Instituto Internacional de Idiomas (2014), the syllabus is addressed with the three following parts:

- **Mission:** it is focused on promoting the ELL (English Language Learning) with academic excellence based on students’

interest and needs; it takes into account the standards, pedagogical and technological innovations.

- **Vision:** it aims at responding to the Colombian educational demands, taking into account the reality of the country, applying what the British Council proposes for the EFL. Instituto Internacional de Idiomas (2014).
- **The course contents:** are planned according to the contributions of Bourke (2006). The contents are divided in 16 weeks, and they are based on the foreign language textbook and some communicative activities proposed by the teacher and students' interests.

Each semester the students have to register in the foreign language courses. On average, there are thirty students per group. During the process of collecting data, I was a French teacher of three groups of level one. In my first contact with students in their first French class, I focused my attention on asking them about their previous experiences about learning a foreign language and the big majority focused on English. There were commonalities in the three groups with a critical regard to language education. The commonalities were the age of the students, their previous contact with English, and their position about EFL, the most important commonality was their frustration after failing the first English levels.

Steger, (2003) stated “despite its apparent utility as a lingua franca or a world language and the fact that students must pass examinations in it to graduate, many students are failing to learn it successfully”.

Because this wonder called my attention, I decided to conduct a mini-scale project in order to better understand and outline what students were sharing spontaneously.

Research design

This small-scale project was framed under descriptive case study research. Thus it encompasses a population with specific characteristics, the collection of a wide range of social facts and the analysis of the data. I decided to focus on specific students of three different groups of a first French level from the International Language Institute. As stated previously, this University offers foreign language courses for all the undergraduate programs. Each group has students of different careers.

I have applied a needs analysis based on Basturkmen's(2010)contributions. I took into account my initial surprise regarding the commonalities explained above. As a kind of exploratory stage, I observed with a critical eye the students' situation in the Language Institute. From this initial stage followed two more moments: *Informal talks* with other English and French teachers in order to hear them. Informal talks with students in groups and *an interview* with each student. The answers were copied into my journal.

A schedule for meetings was established. These meetings were held in the classroom fifteen minutes before starting the French class. I chose to meet at this time and place because the classroom is the scenario of educational and cultural negotiations of teacher-learner. The preliminary contact with these students and the way they felt

confident to express their opinions about their learning process were relevant to deciding about going deeper into this research.

The chosen participants for this study had studied English as a foreign language at some stage of their lives. They also shared bad experiences in relation to the language learning. They were five students of Economics, four students of Nursing, two students of Medicine, two students of Mathematics, three students of Biology and three students of Arts. Their age ranged from 17 to 30 years old. They came from Tunja and small towns from Boyacá. Ninety percent of the students graduated from public High School institutions where the English subject was not relevant.

After a preliminary contact with the students, I shared the idea of researching into their most important experiences in relation with EFL or FFL. They were motivated to take part of a research project and it facilitated their participation in the coming process. In order to expand communication with students, I invited them to join my social network where we could share academic questions or puzzles outside the classroom.

Considering myself as a curious language teacher and being aware of the importance of learners' voices, the study focused on the research question: What do students want to tell us about their needs and desires with regard to language education during their first contact with FFL as compared to EFL?

Instruments

I have applied two instruments to collect

data: participant *observation* and *interviews* with the students.

Participant observation

This observation had two moments and it was carried out since the beginning of the semester. It was achieved during a round table session during the second and the third French classes. First, I focused on behaviors, comments and questions that students had. From this participant observation, I wrote in my journal.

The interviews were applied to the students with the following questions:

Q1: Why did you choose French as a foreign language and not English or German?

Q2: What have you learnt in this first contact with the language?

Q3: Can you compare your experience learning French and learning English?

Q4: What do you think about the English teachers you have had?

Q5: What problems did you find in the university in relation with the foreign language?

In order to have more participation, I posted some questions on the wall of the social networking sites I have with academic purposes. Several students of different levels participated by writing comments. I found interesting and relevant answers in relation with the research question posted.

As we can see in the Figure n° 1 and n°2.



Figure No. 1. Sample of students' comments on a social network website, (facebook).



Figure No. 2. Sample of students' comments on a social network website, (facebook).

During the discussions in class, students had different positions. Some of them were critical. Others were sad or bad memories. Others were reflective to share and propose.

In general the main themes arising from the interviews were:

- They did not choose English because of

the beliefs and stereotypes about French, such as speaking French is more romantic than English, it is easier than English because it is close to the Spanish, the French phonetics are more interesting, the French culture and so on

- French called their attention because of the international academic relations between the Public University and other international academic institutions to get a double diploma.
- The traditional methods used by the teachers to teach English.
- English teachers focused on grammar, writing and reading.
- The students spent time at school learning the same topics.
- They failed English because of the placement tests.
- They strongly affirm having a better experience learning French than English.
- Unbalanced way of teaching contents from a textbook.
- Lack of materials to teach and learn French at the University.
- Lack of a cluster of foreign language courses to register different from English courses.

As we know in Colombia, the foreign language policy turns around English and most of the academic and commercial trades come from USA and other Anglo-

Saxon countries. Thus, French language is part of a minority setting in this country. As the Australian researcher Lo Bianco (2005) said, "There are two disadvantages in global language arrangements: one is not knowing English; and the other is knowing only English."

The problem arises when methodologies repeat the non-ending circle applying over and over again the same method. The evaluation system also took on a crucial aspect in the University: In the last year it was not uncommon to observe demonstrations in the university because of the imposition of English and the evaluation system, so the International Language Institute adopted alternative solutions.

What seemed to disturb the ancient English students the most was the waste of time learning always the same thing, along with the lack of meaningful interaction with different English speakers. In other classes, they did not feel comfortable to participate and they enclosed themselves in isolated groups of students. From a teacher's perspective, this kind of student needs more attention in public institutions in order to address these weaknesses.

Since 2012, we teachers can find more and more students motivated to learn French or another language. My particular point of view on this situation is divided into three aspects: the first one is the academic policies of the UPTC in relation with the foreign language offer, the International Language Institute curriculum related to the students' needs and what the Ministry of Education proposes. The second aspect is the academic discourses where they impose

English without reliable reasons for the future professionals of the country, it is clear that English is important but critical minds said that inclusion of other possibilities can give more development opportunities. And the third aspect is the need of a cooperative communication between teachers and students in order to negotiate and outline their voices.

From my observations, I could find that in 2010 there were two full time French teachers. Each teacher had four groups.

Noextension courses in French. One full time German teacher.

In 2014 there are four full time French teachers. Each teacher has six groups. Three groups for extension courses. Students of 7th and 8th semester were in French of first level. Other French teachers realised the same situation of low motivation to learn a second language.

In relation with the analysis of the answers, they were analysed and translated from the following chart.

| STUDENTS | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|----------|---|--|---|--|--|
| DAYANA | 1) por que me gusta el frances y pues es diferente del ingles y no es tan complejo como el aleman, ademas francia tiene convenios para intercambio con la universidad | 2) he aprendido lo basico del frances entiendo algunas palabras y puedo utilizar un vocabulario basico para expresarme | 3) se me hace mas complejo aprender ingles que frances tal vez aunque el ingles es un idioma indispensable actualmente no es que me guste mucho entonces siento una mayor facilidad para aprender frances con respecto al ingles. | 4) pues que los métodos utilizados para la enseñanza del ingles se quedan cortos o no todas las personas aprenden ingles de esa forma, ya que hay personas a las cuales les cuesta mas aprender ingles | 5) pues en cuanto al ingles que se queda muy corto todavía, ya que el ingles que enseñan en la universidad es muy tecnico. |

Chart 1.

Arising from the students' responses, they had a good disposition to share their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and ideas, it is pertinent to clarify that they used Spanish to communicate. My role was to lead the round table and monitor the order of interventions as I was taking notes based on what they said. This round table took forty minutes and I took notes of the most relevant and common interventions.

Out of twenty students, twelve answered they chose French because they could not cope with English and they had traumatic experiences when they learnt English in

primary school or High School. The expectations placed on teachers speaking and guiding a foreign language are many.

However, the students' voices outline what Freire (2004) stated: "education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing-of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't."

Four students answered they chose French because they did not have enough opportunity to register in the English level

so French fitted very conveniently into their schedule. Three students believed that French is an interesting language to learn and the last three expressed they already studied English and they would like to travel abroad. However they complained about the listening skill performance. As researchers into EFL and FFL have noted, an affective involvement of the learner during an interaction is the key determinant of the quality of understanding he experiences (Larsen-Freeman, 2012; Macaro, 2003; Aldera & Mohsen, 2013). Indeed, learners can be greatly helped in developing their listening skills if they are constantly reassured that they do not have to understand everything.

At one moment, a student raised her hand and explained: "Yes! I do not like English because we have English wherever, and whenever - furthermore it does not have anything exciting to learn!" (Translation from Spanish version). In this piece of data we can analyze the impact of motivation when learning English. Another aspect is that English teaching has been taught without the integration of language and culture, because teachers in the schools have to deal with the demanding contents established by the administration of the school or because of the standards; thus, the action of banking isolated contents in students (Freire 1972) is repeated every day.

Another student interrupted saying: "Look teacher, English for me is the imposition of the world powers, I think that we need

revolution and for that reason I chose French. (Translated by the researcher).

Resistance against English comes from traumatic experiences in which professor took an important role. Besides, with these kinds of experiences students can see the language as their enemy. Furthermore, several actions established by the Colombian Government do not take into account teachers' realities and what they have to face every day. For the next question, in general they appreciated the new phonetic, cultural and social aspects they have learnt from the language. Half of the group of the group stated that they have learnt more aspects and useful structures to communicate better, than what they have learnt in English. They felt motivated to continue studying.

As Edge (2008) states "As a rough generalization, we can say that people listen and read for two basic reasons: for enjoyment and for information". These are two sources of motivation that the teacher has to work on. The more students use their language skills for enjoyment, the more language ability they are likely to acquire. When I propose to empower students' voices they were more than motivated to participate and share their thoughts and experiences. Thus, motivation to learn French is increasing each semester; we can see what students think about comparing English and French.

Comparisons students made between their learning process in French and English.

| English | French |
|---|---|
| More complicated to read. | Easier to read because it is quite similar to Spanish, there are more cognates. |
| English has more possibilities to learn and practice. | In Colombia, there is not enough opportunity to learn French. Nor to practice |
| There are a lot of resources. | Not enough resources to learn and practice. |
| It is a dominant language, it is important to learn English because of the globalization. | It is known as a romantic and cultural language. It is important to learn French because it is a free choice. |
| It is complicated to write in English. | It is complicated but funny to write in French, because of the French accentmarks. It is sophisticated, it is more affective. |
| I have terrible experiences at memorizing lists of vocabulary. | In French it is easier to relate the vocabulary with the context. |
| Teachers are bored and they teach always the same topics with the same examples. | Teachers are more empathetic and they use different ways to teach. French is different to learn. |

In relation with the University policies, students criticized the management of the contracts of languages teachers. They complained about the evaluation and they would like to have more opportunity to practice and develop the speaking skill.

In a general aspect, I can say that students liked to be heard; when we give them the opportunity to express themselves they are more receptive to participate actively in future activities.

When something is new and all the students are at the same level, it can give them self-confidence to study. Students would like to have more material, sources, spaces and “native speakers” to practice what they have learnt. It is what they have learnt and what they have heard. They do not see the language as a conflict. At the UPTC there are not enough French teachers to cover the current demand of the students.

Based on the analysis, in order to answer the main questions students revealed they are aware of their own language learning process; however the educational system and policies do not benefit their needs and desires. There are mismatches between the national policies and the internal policies in the university. It can be measured with the high levels of dropouts in language courses. Around fifty percent of the dropouts occur before the first mid-term exams. The negative experiences that students have with English influenced them to perceive the language per se as the problem. According to some researches it has to do more with the traditional methods applied to teach a foreign language and the lack of teacher development regarding the quality of education.

Conclusions

I can conclude in this research that through the students’ voices we can have a detailed

panorama of what it is happening with the language education in some public institutions. Students need more attention and they feel motivated if there is a meaningful way to learn a language. The study helped to enlighten the language teachers in order to work together and give students the possibilities to be positive and not negative. There is a strong resistance to learning English but it is shaped for different reasons.

Resistance against English, to learn English, comes from different perspectives, They are all related to pedagogical, political, ideological and individual issues. Students struggled with English also because of the archaic idea that being bilingual is to speak their native language and English. Learners felt a mismatch between the language policy and the real practice in the daily life And some other students end up enrolling in English courses because they did not have any other language courses, different from English, to select.

Students' desires have to do with the use of didactics in the classroom, the banking methods perpetuated bad ideas about the learning process. Students wanted to be heard and assessed with diverse tools and not only placement tests.

Their interests revolved around traveling abroad and the possibility of communicating with foreigners. Teacher and learners took an important role during the discussions and the data collection. After the process, they realized that language is not an enemy but it is the real source to understand the world from a different perspective where English or French can be just a choice.

Language, culture and pedagogy are the axle to construct the post-methods practices. Learners, who are becoming professionals, should have the choice of selecting the foreign language they want to study. Otherwise it would be seen as a sociocultural imposition of the moment if English language is the only choice to study. It is possible that learners of English under any kind of imposition can be relegated to a subordinate socio-psychological status.

We cannot deny that French is also a dominant language and students can suffer an acculturation process if they are not rooted in their own culture and identity.

This kind of study helps us to raise a cultural, sociological and linguistic awareness of our situation and how we can learn from this situation and contribute to such a demanding change. This inspiration can be helpful to light a spark in these initial explorations in order to project them for future macro research.

The act of listening to students' voices provides an opportunity to empower our local and social aspects in relation to bilingual language education. It is important to reflect upon the actors in the classrooms where we re-construct and learn about the world every day.

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