

Toward a social research perspective in colombian multicultural language classrooms*

*Hacia una perspectiva de investigación social
en las aulas de lenguaje multiculturales en Colombia*

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Abstract

This essay is the result of a deep and critical reading of recent studies on the socio-linguistic field. It discusses how to address the roles of identity, agency and investment from a research perspective in Colombian multicultural language classrooms. The rationale presented here may serve as a foundation for foreign language teachers who face the necessity of reformulating their objectives and instructional procedures to integrate the language learner and the language learning context taking into account the multiculturalism of our country.

Key words: Multiculturalism, identity, agency, investment, social research.

Resumen

Este ensayo es el resultado de una lectura profunda y crítica de estudios recientes en el campo de la sociolingüística, en donde se analiza el papel de los conceptos de identidad, agenciamiento y posicionamiento en las aulas de lenguaje multiculturales de Colombia, desde una perspectiva investigativa. La justificación teórica aquí presentada puede servir como fundamentación para los profesores de lengua extranjera que enfrentan la necesidad de reformular sus objetivos y procedimientos de instrucción con el fin de integrar al aprendiz de una lengua y el contexto de aprendizaje, teniendo en cuenta el multiculturalismo característico de nuestro país.

Palabras clave: multiculturalismo, identidad, agenciamiento, posicionamiento, investigación social.

Introduction

Currently, there is a great interest in the role of culture in language teaching due to a number of political, educational, ideological factors. There is a social and political pressure put on foreign language educators to help solve the social and economic problems of the times. We, as language educators, know that the mere acquisition of linguistic systems is no guarantee of national and international peace, tolerance, and understanding. Multiculturalism in our Colombian language classrooms reaffirms that language teachers have to be educators in their full social and political responsibility which makes them into agents of social change. Language learners have to be addressed not as deficient enunciators of language, but as potentially constructors of society. The texts they speak and the texts they write have to be considered not only as instances of grammatical or lexical enunciation, and not only as expressing the thoughts of their authors, but as critical utterances, contributing to the construction of particular cultural contexts. Understanding how these learners participate in their academic communities, how they acquire academic discourses in the target language, and how social interaction between them, as target language speakers, is affected by relations of power in the social are critical issues that can be studied from a social research perspective. Thus, after some concerns about multiculturalism in Colombia, and based on social theory, this essay will present how identity is multiple, social, and subject to change; how language learners' ambivalent desire to speak the target language is related to the conception of investment; and how agency is a key factor in the teaching practice if we want our students to be agents of change. Then, I will suggest some strategies that can be carried out in our teaching practice from a social research perspective.

Multiculturalism

Educators are increasingly aware that learners within a classroom represent a complex array of personal experiences, values, and intentions that can inform curriculum development and classroom instruction. The needs of the 21st century demand a citizenry that is culturally

sensitive and internationally focused, with an orientation toward the future rather than the past. Instilling respect for cultural diversity is often cited as a goal of foreign language instruction when we are called upon to justify our programs. Respect is the process whereby the Other is treated with deference, courtesy and compassion in an endeavor to safeguard the integrity, dignity, value and social worth of the individual. It means treating people the way they want to be treated. This goal is important, intellectually defensible and honest.

We, as EFL educators, need to be sensitive to the cultural implications of what we are teaching. We need to be able to help our students become aware of the value of different ways of seeing the world and, as Byram (1997) says, to adopt a critical and comparative methodology towards different cultural practices and beliefs. But what about the cultural diversity present in our Colombian classrooms? Will those students who do not yet see their own culture affirmed readily learn to value the target culture? In dealing with culture in my own classes, I have found it very helpful to students to make explicit the distinction between good and bad ethnocentrism when beginning from the perspective of respect for the students' own culture rather than for the target language. This technique helps avoid the unintentional appearance of bad ethnocentrism on the part of the teacher. Sometimes, our affinity and commitment to the target culture is open to misinterpretation from the students as a rejection of their own culture.

When teaching a foreign language in the middle of a multicultural classroom, we can recognize our students' own culture making it an object of study. Therefore, students positioned as researchers will begin to be aware of diversity within their own culture as well as differences with the target culture. Research on culture cannot be done once and for all, since cultures are not static but changing over time.

Colombia, as a multicultural and plurilingual nation, needs a language policy which looks not only outwards towards a globalised world, but also inwards to focus on local complexities. In the Curricular Guidelines in Foreign Languages (MEN, 1999), there are clear references to the terms "interculturalism" and "multiculturalism". These words characterize two educational attempts to understand and overcome particularity, by building bridges between one culture and another. The term "interculturalism" means a continuous dialogue between cultures, which implies interpreting, comprehending, tolerating, and valuing other cultures. The notion of "multiculturalism" has had the effect of highlighting the social diversity and cultural pluralism that exists within one and the same nation, within one and the same foreign language classroom due to differences in ethnicity, social class, and gender (Taylor, 1994).

It is seen as important that Colombian students develop a pluralist vision of the world, so that they are open to new ideas and have contact with different ways of thought and expression. The idea is that this recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity in our world may lead to recognition of the importance of tolerance and respect for the other.

Identity, agency, and investment in language learning scenarios

The issue of foreign language participation and socialization is closely related to important issues such as identity, agency, and investment (Duff, 2002; Norton & Toohey, 2002). Students need to negotiate discourses, competence, identities, and power relations so that they can participate and be recognized as legitimate and competent members of a classroom community. When we talk about identity, we mean a person's understanding of whom he/she is. However, this understanding depends crucially on what others think of us. In other words, identity can be seen as socially constructed as I explain below. Different researchers, drawing on different sources and using a variety of methodologies, have brought diverse perspectives to the relationship between identity and language learning. The expression «losing one's identity» is quite common in everyday speech. Sometimes people worry about the possibility of losing their identity when they come into contact with a new cultural system, as if identity were a valuable possession which can be lost and found. Jim Cummins (1996) and Cornel West (1992) are two SLA theorists who have been influential in helping me to develop an understanding of identity in my own teaching practice. From a social perspective, identity refers to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future.

West (1992) complements this conception of identity by affirming that it relates to the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety. Such desires cannot be separated from the distribution of material resources in society. These material resources can be represented in money, position, or status. People who have access to a wide range of resources in a society will have access to power and privilege, which will in turn influence how they understand their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future. Thus the question “Who am I?” cannot be understood apart from the question “What can I do?” In this view, a person's identity will shift in accordance with changing social and economic relations.

Likewise, agency is another important issue that is closely related to language learning. Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity individuals construct to act and to make their own free choices. This view of “agency” is based on two theoretical perspectives:

neo-Vygotskian approaches and critical discourse perspectives. These approaches emphasize that agency arises out of individuals' engagement in the social world. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) state that agency is never a property of a particular individual but rather, a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large. Within critical approaches, particularly the models based on what Canagarajah (1999) calls "resistance theories", individuals construct agency to resist being positioned marginally in dominant discourses and to fashion alternative subject positions that fulfill their goals and purposes. Individuals have the power to shape their experiences and impact their environment. Furthermore, individuals can solve problems and bring about positive change.

Regarding agency, we can explain what distinguishes an «actor» from an "agent". An actor refers to a person whose action is rule-governed or rule-oriented, whereas an agent refers to a person engaged in the exercise of power in the sense of the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world (Karp, 1986). Actor and agent should be considered two different aspects of the same person, according to Karp, or two different perspectives on the actions of any given individual.

The value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. Therefore, it is assumed that speech, speakers, and social relationships are inseparable. The notion of investment is related to social theory because of the fact that it attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world. According to Peirce (1995), "investment" is included in theories about language learning to signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. The language learner is conceived as someone who has a complex history and multiple desires. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social identity, which changes across time and space.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) use the term cultural capital to reference the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, such as language, education, friendship, capital goods, and money. These resources will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment.

It is important to note that the notion of investment is not equivalent to instrumental motivation. In the field of second language learning, the concept of motivation is drawn primarily from the field of social psychology, where attempts have been made to quantify a learner's commitment to learning the target language. Instrumental motivation references the desire that language learners have to learn a second language for utilitarian purposes, such as employment, whereas integrative motivation references the desire to learn a language to integrate successfully with the target language community. However, different from investment, the conception of instrumental motivation generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers. In this view, motivation is a property of the language learner—a fixed personality trait. On the contrary, the notion of investment attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world.

A research perspective from multicultural language classrooms

As Savignon (1991) argues, language learning results from participation in communicative events, so it is important to investigate how power relations are implicated in the nature of this learning. Regarding the roles of identity, agency, and investment, language learner should be understood as having a complex social identity mostly constructed with reference to inequitable social structures reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. In taking this position, I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity. It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak (Heller, 1987). Thus language is not conceived as a neutral medium of communication but is understood with reference to its social meaning.

From a research perspective, we, as EFL teachers, need to incorporate into the formal foreign language curriculum the lived experiences and social identities of language learners. However, we must take into account that students' social identities are complex, multiple, and subject to change. We might engage the social identities of our students in ways that will improve their language learning both inside and outside the classroom. A social research based on the multiculturalism of the language classroom, may help students understand how opportunities to speak are socially structured and how they might create possibilities for social interaction with target language speakers. Furthermore, it may help language teachers gain insight into the way their students' progress in language learning intersects with their investments in the target language.

Language learners can become ethnographers when doing collaborative research in their local communities with the active guidance and support of the language teacher. According to Heath (1983), learners will develop their oral and literacy skills by collapsing the boundaries between their classrooms and their communities. The emphasis on this collaborative social research is to focus precisely on aspects of social life, with a view to enhancing language learning and social interaction. A crucial component of any research is the use of writing for reflection and analysis because it can build bridges not only across geographic space but across historical time.

By using observation diaries, logs, or journals, language learners can be encouraged to investigate systematically what opportunities they have to interact with target language speakers and reflect critically on their engagement with target language speakers. In other words, learners might investigate the conditions under which they interact with target language speakers; how and why such interactions take place; and what results follow from such interaction. This might help learners develop insight into the way in which opportunities to speak are socially structured and how social relations of power are implicated in the process of social interaction. As a result, they may learn to transform social practices of marginalization.

Recording observations in diaries and using journals will create opportunities for learners to write about issues in which they have a particular investment, and in so doing, develop their talents as writers. Specifically, learners could use their diaries to examine critically any communication breakdowns that may have occurred with target language speakers. These diaries could be written in the target language and collected regularly by the teacher. The diaries might give the language teacher access to information about the students' opportunities to practice the target language outside the classroom, their agency, their investments in the target language, and their changing social identities. The teacher could help students critically reflect on findings from their research and make suggestions for further research, reflection, and action where necessary.

Learners could be encouraged to pay particular attention to those moments when an action or event surprises them or strikes them as unusual. Given the subject position student researcher rather than language learner, learners may be able to critically engage their histories and their experiences from a position of strength rather than a position of weakness. With this enhanced awareness, learners may also be able to use the language teacher as an important resource for further learning.

Students could use the data they have collected as material for their language classrooms, to be compared with the findings of their classmates and researchers. In comparing their data with other learners, the students will have an investment in the presentations of their classmates and

a meaningful exchange of information. Students may begin to see one another as part of a social network in which their symbolic resources can be produced, validated, and exchanged. Furthermore, the teacher may be able to guide classroom discussion from a description of the findings of the research, to a consideration of what the research might indicate about broader social processes in the society. In this way, the teacher could help students interrogate their relationship to these larger social processes, understand how feelings of inadequacy are frequently socially constructed, and find spaces for the enhancement of human possibility.

Conclusion

When we, EFL educators, treat language, culture, and society as mutually constituted, one of our main responsibilities then becomes to study how discourse both shapes and is shaped by sociocultural factors as identity, agency, investment, and power dynamics. These factors as well as culture are not static. They are changing across time and space. Therefore, research on culture cannot be done once and for all. Language is a form of social action, a cultural resource, and a set of sociocultural practices. Multicultural education advocates the belief that students and their life histories and experiences should be placed at the center of the teaching and learning process and that pedagogy should occur in a context that is familiar to students and that addresses multiple ways of thinking. In addition, teachers and students must critically analyze power relations in their communities and society.

The implementation of new ideas and research perspectives in our language classrooms could engage our learners and ourselves in permanent reflection and will constitute the first step towards the construction of a better society. Multiculturalism in our language classrooms affirms our need to prepare our students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role universities can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. It challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice.

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