

BILINGUALITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN YOUNG LEARNERS

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1. Introduction²

The present case study will be looking into the development of communicative competence in children who are learning English as a foreign language in a ‘bilingual’ school, in a country where this language has great additive value. The aim of this research is to monitor the development of communicative competence in children who are in the process of bilinguality and to consider the implications of its teachability.

The term ‘bilingual education’ in Argentina is widely used but its reaches differ significantly from other countries and label ‘all schools where there is Spanish and English tuition’. In private bilingual schools in Argentina, tuition is given both in English and Spanish, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day. According to Genesee (1988: 1): “Programmes of full bilingualism aim to develop proficiency in both languages in all domains, that is, dual-language maintenance”.

The case under study refers to a total bilingual-biliterate programme which implies the integral training of all language skills both in the first and second language. It is to be observed a great emphasis on the teaching of the language in itself together with other subjects and topics.

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2. Looking at bilinguality

According to Hamers & Blanc (1989), bilingualism is a social phenomenon, and bilinguality, a psycholinguistic occurrence. The children observed have Spanish as a first language and attend an English school for its added social value. The data was gathered at two bilingual schools in Argentina, with 2nd form co-ed classes of seven-year-olds. Both cases are expensive schools with rather privileged kids, who do Spanish as Mother Tongue in the morning and English as a Second Language³ in the afternoon.

Where do teachers stand regarding the nature of language? Can we tell children who do not speak English as a first language to “think in English”?; ask them not to translate; punish them for using their mother tongue at school?. Teachers fall into this trap and they were reported to have said: “Children speak Spanglish⁴ because they are lazy” (sic). Terms such as code-switching and code-mixing were never properly accounted for by teachers and showed no deep understanding of this occurrence. In these schools, the second language is somehow “given” to pupils, rather than taught and developed. Remnants of the Direct Method are still rather strongly rooted in the most traditional ‘bilingual’ schools: the more you speak to kids in English, the better results you will get. There is no real space for the integration of English and mother tongue, keeping both languages as far away from each other as it is possible. Cummins’s Common Underlying Principle is still ignored and teachers advocate the need to keep the child ‘untouched’ by their mother tongue in the English periods. The use of the target language on the part of the teacher (and the subsequent demand on the learners) manages to sanctify some practices that would not stand the test of any good methodologist.

According to competence in both languages, the children in this case study are Spanish dominant bilingual: although they are fluent and uninhibited, their accuracy in English can not be considered high. Although they are very young, they resort to the request of lexis when they can’t find the word they need on their own. An institutionalised phrase is “How do you say... in English?”. They are made perfectly conscious of the distinction within the two systems from the start so it is difficult to establish a clear-cut classification of their cognitive organisation. It is true, although the

³ This is the classification expressed by staff in both schools.

tendency is to call them mostly coordinate for their notions of translation, that they can handle fixed phrases and autonomous skills in the target language that have no correspondence with their mother tongue: “Can you say that again, please?” or “Shall we read a story?”. It has also been observed that kids at this stage can name concepts in English which are unknown to them in Spanish but which have been acquired in the target language. The most frequent cases observed had to do with labelling animals and ecological matters.

P: A country with trees. That is a habitat underground⁵

Regarding their age of acquisition, they are childhood consecutive bilingual, all of them having acquired their mother tongue first completely before they actually started their instruction in English. Less affecting factors for this particular group would label them as “additive, exogenous and monocultural” bilinguals, considering social status, presence of L2 in the community and group membership respectively. At school, when kids use the target language it is because there is an audience and an authority, thus gaining the teachers’ favour is a significant element at this stage. As they grow older, this factor is gradually lost and teachers resort to other means to ensure the use of the target language in class.

3. Observing the development of communicative competence

In 1972, the anthropologist and sociolinguist Dell Hymes coined the term “communicative competence” as a reaction to Chomsky’s description of the ideal speaker. Performance in a language means the engagement of an individual, “whether habitually or occasionally” in a particular kind of behaviour and competence is the ability to engage in this particular kind of behaviour. According to R.A. Hudson, communicative competence is

[...] knowledge needed by a speaker or hearer, but is much more broadly based than the ‘linguistic competence’ of Chomskyan linguistics. Instead of referring only to the linguistic forms, it includes our knowledge –perhaps ‘ability’ would be a better term– of how to use linguistic forms appropriately.

(Hudson, 1980: 219-220)

⁴ The mixture of Spanish and English: a common word used rather extensively and without much agreement on its meaning in the Argentinian context.

⁵ Our data

If speakers are communicatively as well as linguistically competent, they will also be able to form correct sentences and use them appropriately, both receptively and productively.

The kind of language the kids had to use in this research had to do with the use of “metalinguage”, which connects to a higher stage of development in communicative competence. The data recorded was spontaneous speech, disregarding the observation of egocentric speech since there’s no need for these children to express themselves in the target language. The following example raises another topic to discuss:

R: What did you do?
 P: A house.
 R: How?
 P: With a.. and a how do you say ‘rectángulo’?
 R: Rectangle.
 P: A rectangle and a door.

The same shortage of language for the description of the process applied when pupils had to account for a lexeme they did not seem to handle; their way out varied: gestures, translation, the change of topic or the end of the conversation. In the previous example, the kid seems to have a greater ability to describe the process. She can talk about the elements used in the drawing. Only a word is missing and she resorts to the highly drilled “How do you say... in English?”. Not only her linguistic ability is at play; her communicative notion of the code: she can ask that question when she is in need, she knows she is entitled to it, and she can ask that question from someone older who supposedly knows English better than her. This simple notion shows a developed code of communication.

P: I’ve got a mother, one father, and one brother or sister, I don’t know.
 R: Why “you don’t know”?
 P: ...
 R: You don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl?
 P: Yes.
 R: Why not?
 P: ... (the pupil looks down and does not intend to go on talking. The researcher uses a longer wait time period without losing eye-contact. The pupil resumes the conversation)
 ... Why I got one uncle... (The pupil decides to change the topic to avoid the conflict. The teacher goes back to the original obstacle)

The pupil isn’t aware (or it is unclear whether she is not refusing to admit) her lack of vocabulary, and through paralinguistic features, decides to bring the ‘brother/sister’ topic to an end. She attempts to produce a noticeable “topic change”

(Coulthard, 1977: 77) which is a late-acquired strategy, to avoid the conflictive evidence of her linguistic hole. The use of “why I got an uncle” is not a typical kind of error; in this case, the pupil’s strategy is to pick up a hint in the succession of the researcher’s opening questions to provide the answer, thus integrating both turns: “Why ‘you don’t know?’” / “Why not?”. The pupil senses the need for a discourse marker before the introduction of her new utterance. This ability to supply information answers with an extra load to enrich their speech is observable in children developing a second language when they are taking off the stage of two-word phrases.

4. From word to text

What comes first in the acquisition of communicative competence? The various components of communicative competence, such as the phonological, pragmatic, semantic and lexical level, are said to start in the pre-linguistic period of the child, while the morphological and syntactic aspect, though unobserved in this period, emerge noticeably in the production data. If we want to see how communicative competence grows in a foreign language learner, in Foster’s terminology (1990: 47), there are two aspects of human development that should be considered: “nature (i.e., innate predispositions of the human organism) and nurture (i.e., experience)”. In a foreign language, some aspects of communicative competence are developed simultaneously, but the order is remarkably altered: the phonological, morphological and syntactic aspects seem to be prioritised over the lexical, semantic and, last *and* least, pragmatic level in traditionally structured classes. Linguistic accuracy determines the succession of the components, since, unlike in the first language, the acquisition of competence is always digitalized by the teacher. Perhaps the only aspect that we can equate in both first and foreign language is the pragmatic aspect. The conditions seem to be similar: both depend on nurture, the child is stimulated by the caretaker; the student is encouraged by the teacher and in both cases, experience is what matters. By means of constant interaction, observation, trial and error and systematization, young children learn about the importance of, say, turn-taking (especially when they do not respect it); topic initiation, maintenance or change and the appropriate use of speech acts, which, in due course, will all lead to the development of coherence and cohesion in conversation.

In the following data, we can see how children are recreating a short story the teacher had read in class: “*The Tin Soldier*”. They were not reading or memorising parts of the story, they were recreating it with their own utterances within their own reach, unique and adapted to the context. Here we can see the first stages of meaningful communication at beginner level: the pupil makes use of learned utterances which have been widely rehearsed and little recombination is observed.

P: The Tin Soldier has a bayonet. He stands on one feet... no, foot.

T: Right.

P1: The tin soldier loves the dancer... He has one leg.

P2: The tin soldier is very brave.

T: The tin soldier is ?

P3: Is very brave.

T: He’s very brave. Why?

P: Because one day he...

P1: When they throw him in the fire he not cry.

It was reported by teachers that children in this context abandon the one-word stage very quickly. Here maturity and the need to communicate act as a factor of speed. They move on rapidly to the two-word stage which has its own rules of analysis. According to Brown & Fraser (1964) in Foster (1990), this stage is said to be ‘telegraphic’ because of the omission of content words. In the case of developing bilinguality, children use two-word phrases but they do incorporate function words. They already have a notion of noun phrases, as in the following examples:

T: What am I?

P: A monster.

P1: An alien.

T: What am I drawing?

P: One foot.

T: In a train, what comes after the engine?

P: The body.

P1: The carriages.

Syntactic categories are more difficult to analyse. “Particularly lively is the debate over whether young children ‘know’ (in a subconscious way) about categories such as noun and verb, subject and object” (Foster, 1990: 74).

Are they born knowing them or do they have to work them out? In their first language, children are said to recognise the categories of verb-noun, or action-object, rather. Foster 1990 argues that it is easier for children to expand the object than the

subject at the multi-word stage. Yet, in these examples of second language our data shows their comfort in the expansion of the subject:

- ❖ *A country with trees*
- ❖ *The house of the rats*
- ❖ *The dog Spot*
- ❖ *(I like) The books of children and the books of horror*
- ❖ *Someone yes, someone no⁶*
- ❖ *Who speaks English with you? My mother and a little my father*

I going to... vacations and I see TV and... playing

Agent + action + location + connective + agent + action + connective + action

I work a lot all the time and I do nothing else

Agent + action + quantifier + duration + connective + agent + action + non-existence

R: Why do you like speaking English at school?

P: Because we put (inaudible) from the best speak in English.

R: Ah that's interesting, isn't it?

P: I'm going to be the best speak in English, for learn and because I'm in English!

R: You're English?

P: No, I'm IN English. I'm in the turn of the English because like speaking in English.

As far as communicative competence is concerned, this child manages to hold a conversation, expand and justify his choice, use repair strategies (by raising his voice and overstressing the preposition 'in' when he was not understood) and even explain his choice of schools. '*In the turn of the English*' is not transparent for a native speaker of English but it is for the teacher or researcher, in this case, and the language used is considered successful here. Again, an analogical pattern is used without falling into the use of the native language: ('en el turno de inglés' could be translated as 'in the English shift' although it wouldn't be used like that in English). "The best speak in English" / "Speak in English" was a chunk used by the kids of one of the schools visited. It worked like a code inside the group and it suffered 'inflections' and syntactic modifications like any other word in the English language:

Is it easy for you to speak in English?

Me so so peak in English.

Children slowly develop a sense for cohesion and homogeneity in the conversational text. Although the rejoinder used here is not appropriate (he uses 'me' instead of 'mine'), this child manages to use a repair strategy to clarify the addressee of the question:

R: What is your favourite?

P: Me? The dog Spot.

Example 1

R: Please, tell me the story in those pictures.

J: Well, picture one I see people and children look a elephant and and and a... the sister is talking. Picture three I be, I see two elephants and ah the children and his sister. In picture four I look a elephant with four legs and the tree. In picture five I see the elephant **again** and I see the children again. In picture six I see the sister, the children and the elephant.

R: OK. Thank you. And now can you tell me what happened in the story?

J: The children ahh talking a your sister and said the /e/ elephant have five, five legs. And the sister ehh said ehh no, it hasn't. It's got four legs.

Already, pupils have a sense of texture and sequence in the story. So far, the resources they use are not very sophisticated (enumeration, use of 'and', numbers), however, 'again' is observed in example 1 as a sample of early cohesion. Another kind of cohesive device already developed is the use of 'well' and 'ehh' meant to fill the space of thinking time. They resorted to well-rehearsed structures with basic structures (subject + verb) but they are able to expand and sustain their turn. The value of their exchanges relies on the successful use of lexical accuracy rather than on grammatical accuracy to complete the story. Besides, the art of telling is a skill that children have already acquired in their mother tongue.

"It is extremely important not to equate acquisition with production/use of a construction" (Foster, 1990: 170). Turns in conversation between teachers and pupils are much shorter at this stage than later in their school life, unless the teacher is telling a story.

R: What do you do after school?

P: I work a lot all the time... and I... and I do nothing else. I work in the workbook... they they make a... they paint. They write a lot of work and they say a lot of summaries of stories, películas. (films)

R: Tell me what you don't do, cause you say you don't do anything.

P: I don't do... I don't... no sé.(I don't know)

R: Tell me what you do with Adriana.

P: We have to do summaries and then eh we do... no sé, muchas cosas... (I don't know, many things)

R: Well, tell me.

P: We do activities... eh.

R: When do you come to the library with Christine?

P: All the days. Fridays.

⁶ The child mistakes 'someone' for 'sometimes'.

The child keeps the topic and maintains topicality throughout. Foster (1990) posits that cohesion is achieved by devices that glue individual utterances together. In the previous example we can observe respect for turn-taking, no overlapping and a good command of cohesion, although the pupil jumps from 'I' to 'they' without a prior mention of a 3rd person. His understanding of the inclusive 'we' is still faulty; later in the narration he uses 'we' / 'I' correctly but he is wading within the zone of proximal development.

Children seem to manage to communicate very fluently from the very beginning. They are able to produce not only sentences that are grammatically correct but also that are extremely appropriate to the context where they belong to. Thus, children are exposed to a considerable amount of language from which they learn much more than grammar rules. It is argued then that since it is not known how significant grammatical competence can be for kids, their main social task is to acquire communicative competence. The role of the environment has consequently become more meaningful in the study of the acquisition of communicative abilities in children.

A usual linguistic skill to be found in the primary classroom is the framing of questions. Children do not feel daunted by the need to ask questions since they are used to being exposed to a dialogue pattern between teachers and class. The fixed structure of question word + auxiliary + verb only becomes a worry for adults learning a second language because of their grammatical awareness. Children solve this problem more quickly: they imitate intonation.

T: Now I want one... a toy. I'm going to say something about a toy, and you have to guess. I've got four wheels... I live in the playroom with a lot of toys...

P: Are you a car?

T: No, I'm not.

P: Are you an ambulance?

T: No I'm not.

P: Are you a... cuántas wheels tenía? (how many wheels did you have)

T: How many...

P: How many wheels you have?

T: Four.

P: I know, I know. A... Truck! Are you a truck?

T: Yes I am.

This gives the children a sense of comfortability with the language and the dialogue situation. Personal deixis, another advanced pragmatic notion, doesn't present major difficulties. The "I / you" pair and referential language use have already been

acquired both linguistically and pragmatically. When the lack of a lexeme occurs ('Are you a... cuántas wheels tenía...?') the child resorts to a further question. He has all he needs to bridge the information gap: question word + subject + verb and frames his question just like native children do at a younger age. The teacher acknowledges the question as clear and to the point and the adjacent pair is closed. Here, there's no need for an accurate account of question framing since the notion of auxiliary has not been grasped by the child.

Klima and Bellugi (1966) suggest that the earliest stage of question development reflects rote-learned structures used appropriately, but with no real understanding of the nature of the structures. Not until the second stage is there evidence of wh-movement. (Foster, 1990: 168)

(A metaphor to describe the fact that in a sentence such as 'What did you do?', the 'what' is understood as the object of 'do'; that is, it appears to have moved from the object position to the front of the sentence). *Who-where-what* are said to be first acquired by native children, before *when-how-why*. This pattern also applies to the children observed; teachers say this is probably due to the linguistic complexity expected after a question with *why*. See the following adjacent pair and the use of 'but' instead of 'because':

L: Why did he think he had five legs?
J: But he count her mouth.

Children may incorporate the first notions of tact and good manners in the foreign language. They will slowly develop the awareness that communication may break down if you do not share the same system.

A significant component in the development of communicative competence in this particular case is the use of what teachers call 'Spanglish', or in fact, code-switching. Teachers may get impatient if students mix languages but, why does it happen? When children run short of vocabulary they have various reactions: they keep silent, speak in a very soft voice, change the course of the conversation, ask for help with 'How do you say.... in English?' or 'how can I say...?', resort to body language or use mother tongue. But they do not use it randomly. They may *code-switch*, *code-mix* or *integrate*.

T: What comes out of a steam engine?
S: Humo. (smoke)
S1: Smoke.

This first example taken from an oral class in 2nd form is a typical case. Teacher makes a question and pupil answers in Spanish. The next event, from the same class, is slightly more sophisticated: the same pattern occurs but the teacher pretends not to hear and kid repairs communication by using English.

T: Good (pupil writes the full word). Look, second, what letters does it take?
 S: n, d (spells in Spanish)
 T: (pretends not to hear) Yes?
 Same pupil: N, D (spells in English)

This is a controversial issue: how do the teachers know what they can expect from each child? It is here where remnants of the Direct method are somehow taken for granted: if kids are spoken to in English, they will eventually pick up the sources they need for communication.

The use of code-switching may be observed in the form of enumerations as an alternative lexeme:

P: I work in the workbook... they they make a... they paint. They write a lot of work and they say a lot of summaries of stories, películas.

or intermittently, to better suit their needs:

S: Are you a... cuántas wheels tenía?
 T: How many...
 S: How many wheels you have?
 T: Four.

or with the intention to supplement the absence of adequate phrases in their lexicon:

R: Tell me what you do with Adriana.
 P We have to do summaries and then eh we do... no sé, muchas cosas...(don't know, a lot of things)

The next example shows an independent speaker of English who risks an explanation and expands successfully, creating a new kind of emerging structure:

My mother have got 40 years and my father too. That's all. ... I don't have brothers... (ni) and sisters and nothing.

The recurrent misuse of 'have' to show age, transferred analogically from Spanish, and an intensification of the double negative appear. The pupil inserts a Spanish word ('ni') in an utterance of English words with a Spanish-like structure. The extreme difficulty of the pattern with 'either' leaves it out of his reach and so he produces a parallel construction with the richness of the two languages he handles.

5. Can communicative competence be taught?

It has been somewhat neglected in EFL literature probably because of its intangibility and intrinsic difficulty in labelling it. Closer in time, Widdowson (1990) defines communicative competence as a ‘still unstable concept’ that is simply interpreted as “the ability to produce spoken utterances which are marked for illocutionary function” but he specifically argues that “no syllabus, however conceived and designed, can produce a communicative competence” (Widdowson, 1990: 39-40). The responsibility therefore lies on the teacher who will be in charge of putting this allegedly communicative syllabus into practice: “The fact that notions of everyday situations are included in classroom situations is not the recipe for a more comfortable relationship between the students and their target language” (Renart, 1997: 3).

Teachers were consulted informally and, quite surprisingly, the concept was not a ‘household’ term for them. The idea of linguistic accuracy prevailed: “*the ability to make yourself understood with the less number of mistakes*”. Children can be guided into it if “*the teacher doesn’t restrict the language used to a set of classroom phrases*”; if they are not overloaded with grammatical or system-based explanations and if they are allowed to use the language in activities that engage them. Little exposure to the target language or a teacher who constantly interrupts the children’s production for the sake of accuracy were identified as obstacles for the development of communicative competence. Comfortability in the use of the target language is usually fostered through the teaching of classroom language. Being able to make use of the language they need in the classroom creates a sense of independence. Some teachers consulted say they fix structures on the wall or word banks, which are available to be used when children speak or write, to teach them to be resourceful. “*What is not on the wall, then you can ask*” is the teacher’s reminder. The secret is to expose them to everything the language can give them, ‘*setting a limit is the problem*’.

Communicative competence includes then what Chomsky had defined as “linguistic competence” plus the rules of language in context that are analysed under the heading of pragmatics as well as “the attitudes, values and motivations” that are usually left out when discussing language. One of the main components of an individual’s communicative competence is a set of abstract structures or “schema” to face and handle different kinds of problems that imply a variety of linguistic resources, such as asking for things, complaining, answering negatively and others which are

equally complex. The schema will be therefore varied in its forms, that may probably have been taken from the individual's own experience or from other people's behaviour that we may have considered successful in other cases. By analogy, communicative competence in a second language could be based in the schema that children bring from their first language, though languages differ greatly in their grammatical and lexical realizations. It is then the role of the teacher to build on this already acquired capacity. If teachers ask the right questions, they also may help pupils to develop their communicative and thinking skills. A preference for referential rather than display questions will promote communicative competence.

6. Conclusions

Any approach to the understanding of communicative competence development must reconsider the role of the learner, the input and the relationship between the two (Foster, 1990: 185). The way the interaction between the communicative competence experienced by the child and the child's psychological make-up of the learner plus the right environment administered by the teacher will design the model of communicative competence in the early years of exogenous bilinguality. Unlike the acquisition of a first language, the birth of the second one will make use of resources of the native language to build the new one.

“Pragmatic development appears to involve a major role for input, including explicit teaching” (Foster, 1990: 185). The bilingual child is already equipped with a set of pragmatic rules that he/she will in turn transfer to the second language. Understanding people and events is an existing part of their cognitive development, thus enabling them to move comfortably in the sociolinguistic sphere of the new language. Children transfer the patterns of their first language, no matter how difficult they might be: It is their maturity that will allow them to expand what they want to say.

Competence is a blend between innate and acquired knowledge: the basis of Spanish and the input of the environment provided by the teacher and the school, the innate Universal Grammar and the core grammar the pupils are exposed to. Teachers then are supposed to set up the right scene for the creation of communicative competence, for this neglected aspect of language relies more on the fostering than on the actual teaching of the notion. What needs to be reviewed is whether the assessment

tools teachers have are appropriate for the development of skill. The significance of this growth will help us construct our pupil's communicative competence with an aim at creating an independent speaker of English.

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