Informed Use of Learner L1: Plurilingualism as a Macrostrategy for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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Abstract

The use of learner L1 in TESOL contexts has emerged as an effective, if controversial, teaching strategy. This strategy is validated by the notion of plurilingualism. Plurilingual practices serve a variety of classroom aims and offer a range of pedagogical and intercultural benefits. However, there are several challenges impeding the adoption and application of plurilingual pedagogy. In response to these challenges, I draw on a postmethod framework and my own teaching experiences to offer several ideas for plurilingual classroom activities, developed with Spanish and Portuguese-speaking students. A plurilingual perspective can help ESOL teachers to recognize, respect, and make use of their learners' diverse linguistic and cultural resources.

Introduction

Views of monolingualism, native-speakerism, and subtractive language acquisition still dominate TESOL learning and teaching contexts. This is evident in TESOL teacher strategies to limit the use of learner L1 in English language classrooms by implementing a strict English-only policy, asking students to put money in a jar each time they speak their L1, or not allowing students to sit beside classmates who share the same languages. These strategies represent a view of learner L1 as a problem, rather than a resource. Sociolinguistic research over the past three decades on topics like codeswitching (Canagarajah, 1995; Lin, 1990), multicompetence (Cook, 1995), translanguaging (Garcia, 2009; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012), hetereglossia (Bailey, 2012), and plurilingualism (Glaser, 2005; Piccardo, 2019) has (re)positioned learner L1 as a classroom resource, offering justification for the incorporation of plurilingual pedagogical practices in TESOL. While this research and theory has yet to be implemented in large-scale educational reform,

individual teachers around the world are practicing plurilingual pedagogy everyday in their own classrooms (Edstrom, 2006; Ellis, 2016a; Lin, 2013;).

Coming from one of my classroom contexts, I will share some of my own experiences, challenges, and strategies in plurilingual pedagogy. I will contextualize these in recent literature to suggest a framework for the incorporation of plurilingual practices in TESOL contexts. Drawing from the literature and my own experiences, I will then use this framework to offer some ideas for plurilingual classroom activities and materials. I recognize that these materials emerged from a context where I had advanced knowledge of half of my learners' first language, Spanish, and receptive knowledge of the other half of the class' first language, Portuguese. As such, the examples and perspectives I share come from a unique synergy of classroom language ecology, and I recognize the limitations of some of the interactions and suggestions detailed for replication in other contexts. This, however, is not my aim. Rather, I intend to contribute to the conversation around developing plurilingual practices and how the diverse linguistic repertoires of learners and teachers may be embraced in different types of TESOL contexts.

German in English; English in Spanish?

In 2019, I taught beginner English and German classes for adults at a private language school in Toronto. This school had an English-only policy, with signs posted on classroom walls as a reminder for students. As a teacher in both the English language and foreign language programs, I found myself entangled in a web of contradictory language policies and practices. When I taught beginner German, I was expected to teach it in English. One day during class, one of my students pointed to the "English-only" sign on the wall and jokingly asked if he could still speak German with us. With these looming "English-only" signs, students in the school's English language program were, by contrast, shy to speak in their L1, and teachers, even those who had knowledge of their learners' L1s, swore by the English-only policy. When I began teaching the first level of the beginner English program, my predominantly South American students quickly caught on that I could understand them in their first languages: Spanish and Portuguese. However, with colleagues and supervisors passing by in the hallways, I struggled with my use of other languages in class and how this deviated from both institutional policy and the practices of other teachers. Luckily, there is a strong and ever-developing body of research that confirms and promotes the informed use of other languages in the ESOL classroom as an effective pedagogical tool.

Plurilingualism in Recent Literature

The adoption and enforcement of English-only policies in TESOL contexts reflect what Phillipson (1992) referred to three decades ago as the five fallacies in English language teaching. These myths of

monolingualism, native-speakerism, the maximum exposure theory, the early-start hypothesis, and the subtractive principle all inform the exclusion of other languages from most TESOL contexts. However, if the goal of language education is to create bilinguals, and not double monolinguals (Genesee, 2015), then TESOL teachers and schools should feel comfortable with the presence of other languages in English language teaching. Indeed, this recognition and inclusion of linguistic diversity serves in some way to challenge the coloniality and hegemonic force of English as a global language (Guo & Beckett, 2007). Beyond this, it functions as an important, versatile, and effective pedagogical tool, grounded in the notion of plurilingualism.

Plurilingualism is a concept closely associated with the Council of Europe (Breidbach, 2003; Beacco, 2005), which is defined as distinct from multilingualism in its recognition of the ecological interdependency and intercomprehension between languages in an individual's evolving linguistic repertoire (Lüdi & Py, 2009). While multilingualism describes situations of languages existing alongside one another in society, which Cummins (2008) has coined as the "two solitudes", plurilingualism depicts a "process of dynamic, creative 'languaging' across the boundaries of language varieties" (Piccardo, 2019). It recognizes uneven, unstable, partial competence among different languages in the same repertoire (Glaser, 2005), and theorizes this dynamic repertoire as the basis for a flexible, individualized, and contextualized approach to language teaching.

Plurilingual Pedagogy: Affordances and Challenges

This view of language and language learning as a dynamic, negotiated, continual process of meaning-making results in a multiplicity of affordances for ESOL teachers, along with several challenges for the broadly-defined TESOL context. Use of learner L1 in English language teaching can be beneficial for classroom management strategies, the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, and learner affect, to list only a few possibilities. To this end, institutional, ideological, and practical challenges, among others, must be addressed.

Affordance #1: Classroom Management and Giving Instructions

During one of my first classes teaching beginner General English to a group of exclusively South American adult learners, I heard some students whispering in Spanish after I had given the instructions for a pair activity. One student whispered to her partner, *¿qué es lo que quiere que hagamos?* (What is it that she wants us to do?). I did not immediately intervene as the partner began to retell the instructions in Spanish. However, when the partner explained a different interpretation of my intended instructions for the activity, I decided to engage in order to mitigate their confusion, while at the same time revealing my knowledge

of Spanish. As I walked over to the pair, I noticed that the other students also seemed unsure about the activity instructions, so I gave a quick class translation in Spanish, emphasizing and repeating the key words in English. All the students, initially surprised by my use of Spanish, then immediately understood the activity, including the Brazilian Portuguese speakers in the class.

Despite the concern and underlying sense of guilt I had after turning to Spanish to give instructions, use of learner L1 has long been conceptualized as an effective classroom management tool, especially for giving instructions or explaining meaning (Atkinson, 1987; Bouangeune, 2009; Piasecka, 1988; Tang, 2002). My decision to switch into Spanish to scaffold learner comprehension of task instructions, while a convenient and inclusive choice in this context, is obviously not an option with every group of learners (nor necessary at every level). In different contexts, plurilingual instruction-giving could mean preparing materials with key instruction words provided in the learners' L1s or projected on a screen, which would not require me as a teacher to have knowledge of the languages of my learners.

The above anecdote is emblematic of the need for such a strategy in order to avoid communication breakdowns during classroom tasks. Beyond giving effective instructions, I found it useful to refer to learner L1 to explain the reasoning behind my instruction. An important principle of adult learning theory, explicit instruction would not be possible at lower levels without use of learners' L1s (Knowles, 1968). Using learner L1s for these purposes in class also reflects the plurality of both learner and teacher language repertoires, thereby breaking down monolingual assumptions, and associated cultural stereotypes of the imagined English language speaker (Ellis, 2016b). Further, this anecdote reveals instances of intercomprehension in classroom practice, as class participants actively mediated between English, Spanish, and Portuguese to make meaning during class (Melo-Pfeifer, 2014).

Affordance #2: Teaching Contrastive Grammar and Vocabulary

As I got to know my South American students and cultivate a supportive classroom culture to enable risk-taking, my students began to recognize their linguistic resources, instead of suppressing their L1s during class. During class activities, students would often start an utterance in English, and then throw in a Spanish or Portuguese word or sentence, which I would translate for them on the spot before continuing in English. After completing the activity, I would give contrastive feedback on the newly used English grammar and vocabulary, as well as draw their attention to crosslinguistic learning strategies. As I gave this feedback, I also received important feedback from my learners. One day in class, I heard one of my students from Mexico, who was the "most-beginner" learner in the class at the time, say excitedly: "*ya puedo contar unas cosas*", ("I can already start to say some things.") and "*así puedo aprender*" ("I can learn like this."). Outside of class, these learners, contrary to the possible assumption that they would prefer to speak Spanish

with me, continued to actively code-switch between English and Spanish when needed, seeming to always incorporate more English and many of the structures and vocabulary we had just talked about in class. I was also careful to consciously start my conversations with them in English, both in and outside of class, since I know from experience how discouraging it can be when someone assumes it is easier for you to communicate in your first language, despite your effort or desire to speak in another language.

"My students began to recognize their linguistic resources, instead of suppressing their L1s during class."

By inviting my students to communicate using all their linguistic resources, we were able to draw on this dynamic communication to explore relevant contrastive structures and lexicons in class. In spite of the failed legacy of grammar-translation methods, the benefits of crosslinguistic analysis for target language acquisition are well documented (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 1997). Through crosslinguistic analysis in class, learners were able to identify key areas of language transfer and sources of communicative confusion, thereby saving time in the learning process (Neuner, 2004). For example, while analysing a Portuguese speaker's use of a simple past construction where present perfect is used in English, Spanish speakers (of Latin American varieties) were able to recognize the parallel use of the present perfect and the *pretérito perfecto*, and adopt a useful transfer strategy. Spanish speakers also had to engage with and become more aware of the uses of the present perfect tense by explaining it to their Portuguese-speaking classmates who do not use this tense in their L1.

Affordance #3: Enhancing Affective Factors of Learning

The acceptance and informed use of learner L1 in the English language classroom not only facilitates classroom management and opportunities for linguistic comparison, it also enhances learner affect and contributes to a classroom environment of vulnerability, risk-taking, and interpersonal learning. By having the chance to get to know my students and hear them express themselves in their L1s, I had a better sense of their learning experiences, challenges, and desires. I was also able to position myself as a co-learner, and enable students to position themselves as experts in their own languages. After class one day, one of my students, who was a grandmother in Brazil, was giving me an impromptu lesson in Portuguese pronunciation. She told me, "*muito bem* (very good), *you learn Portuguese, I learn English, também espanhol* (also Spanish)."

This utterance reflects not only the dynamic and flexible use of translanguaging, but also an instance of knowledge exchange which would never transpire in a monolingual model of learning and teaching. My student was sharing her experiences and expertise in a combination of English and Portuguese, while at

the same time expressing her enthusiasm for expanding her own plurilingualism. It has been argued that our goal as language teachers is to teach students how to learn *languages*, not just the *target* language of the classroom (Neuner, 2004). This learner's comment reflects that aim and illustrates the importance of plurilingual co-learning in order to generate respect for diversity in language, culture, and experience, while enhancing learner affect in the process of language learning.

While it is not always possible for teachers to access learners in their first languages, collaborative plurilingual efforts can be made between other teachers with knowledge of different languages, or through administrative support (L1 counsellors, multilingual questionnaires), in order to better understand learners' backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

Challenge #1: Institutional Policies

The English-only policies adopted by many TESOL institutions represent a barrier for teachers and students to feel comfortable using their additional languages in class. While ESOL teachers are surely aware of the complexities of navigating a multitude of languages in the classroom, an alternative to a strict English-only policy could be a negotiated class communication contract in which learners outline how they prefer and intend to use their L1s during class time. Of course, communication contracts shift and evolve over the course of participant interactions, resulting in constant revision, whether officially or informally (Melo-Pfeifer, 2014). The reality is, despite the intentions of institutions or instructors, learners will naturally draw on their L1s as they see fit to mediate their language learning. As such, institutional policies should focus less on limiting the use of other languages in class and more on increasing the use of English. When learner L1s are seen as a resource, rather than a problem, they can be used in informed ways by TESOL instructors to scaffold the increased use of English. For this to occur, institutional acceptance/promotion of plurilingual practices is not entirely necessary, but certainly helpful.

Challenge #2: Ideological Limitations

Just as the institutional theory behind TESOL contexts may limit or expand the space for plurilingual practices, individual teacher ideology plays a significant role in the management of languages and cultures in the ESOL classroom. As highlighted in my personal anecdotal examples of classroom plurilingualism, teachers who adopt plurilingual practices must be ready to destabilize their authority by positioning themselves as co-learners. Even when a teacher knows one or more of the languages spoken by students in class, and especially when a teacher is not familiar with many of their learners' languages, an exploratory approach that treats learners as cultural and linguistic informants is likely to be most effective in supporting communicative translanguaging and scaffolding through the L1 (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

When plurilingualism and pluriculturalism is a part of TESOL teachers' initial and ongoing professional development, the ideological terrain for plurilingual pedagogy opens up.

Challenge #3: Practical Shortcomings

A crucial part of all language teachers' initial and ongoing training is knowing how to select, adapt, and create tasks and materials. While TESOL teachers have access to a plethora of texts in other languages online, they may not see the direct application of these texts to TESOL contexts or may not feel comfortable creating or adapting plurilingual tasks or materials for the classroom. While many plurilingual practices can emerge organically from the learners themselves, teachers can also prepare and plan for plurilingualism, for example by collaborating with other instructors to develop plurilingual resources. Some possible ideas include dual-language books, identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2010), or multi-language vocabulary maps (Thomas & Maddy, 2014). In the final section, I will offer more specific ideas and examples based on the context I was teaching in.

Plurilingualism as a Postmethod Macrostrategy

Plurilingualism is part of a broader recognition and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. This perspective of plurality contrasts from the monolingual mindset which has traditionally governed the field of English language teaching. The coloniality of the English language itself has been deconstructed by critical theorists and scholars within and beyond the fields of applied and sociolinguistics. In response to the lasting effect of monolingual and monocultural views of language learning, Kumaravadivelu (2012) has called for an epistemic break from Centre-based knowledge production in English language teaching. This call is rooted in his analysis of the hegemonic dominance of English in an international system of economic and cultural globalization. This advances his argument for a postmethod approach to teaching English, which does not subscribe to a particular method, but adopts several teaching *macrostrategies*, such as maximizing learning opportunities, integrating language skills, promoting learner autonomy, or facilitating negotiated interaction.

These macrostrategies are further conceptualized within three postmethod parameters. The parameter of Particularity emphasizes the importance of understanding the linguistic, sociocultural, and political contexts where teaching and learning occurs; the parameter of Possibility calls for understanding of the relationship between teacher and learner identities and the relations of power which inform them; and the parameter of Practicality encourages teachers to theorize from their practice in order to practice what they theorize. These parameters parallel many aspects of plurilingual and intercultural education, such as the need for awareness of the diverse linguistic resources that learners bring to the classroom, or the need

for recognition and promotion of minoritized languages and cultures (CoF, 2019). The parameters also respond to the challenges outlined in the previous section, especially the challenge of addressing practical shortcomings (parameter of Practicality). It is within this postmethod framework that a new teaching macrostrategy can be conceptualized: informed use of learner L1.

Plurilingual Microstrategies: Classroom Activities and Materials

As I began to naturally adopt this strategy in my own teaching context with my beginner English learners, who were exclusively speakers of Latin American varieties of Spanish and Portuguese, I unknowingly developed plurilingual activities and materials for my class. Below, I share three examples of plurilingual *micro*strategies (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), or possible classroom activities.

Microstrategy #1: Raising Awareness and Recognition of Cognates

At the beginner level, I found that many students experienced frustration over all the things they could *not* understand, instead of recognizing all the things they already *could* understand. To remedy this, I brought in an activity to raise their awareness of Latin-based lexical cognates between their languages and English. I picked up several copies of free newspapers and asked learners to work in pairs to circle words that they recognized in the text. By the end of the activity, whether students had chosen the sports, politics, or advertisement section, the page was full of circled words. After seeing the success of this activity in raising their awareness of lexical commonalities, I started to bring in short texts full of cognates that I created according to the theme of the lesson. For example, though most teachers would never dare to show the following text to beginner English learners, there are at least 9 cognates to be found for a speaker of a romance language: *Globalization has resulted in the intensification of personal connections, commercial relations, and technological innovations.* Using these short texts, I would ask learners to first circle the words they recognized, and then we would discuss any new vocabulary, contrastive grammar structures, or differences in pronunciation. These texts could also be designed to draw learners' attention to false cognate relationships.

Microstrategy #2: Activating Lexical Pattern Production

When my beginner-level students asked me questions like "how do I say *comunicación* in English?", I realized that they were unaware of the lexical patterns between English and romance languages. When I was learning Spanish, one of my favourite strategies was to turn an English word into a Spanish one by modifying the ending, and then see if people understood me. I shared this strategy with my students in class one day and soon developed a collaborative resource of Spanish-English-Portuguese lexical patterns. For example, Spanish nouns ending in -dad and -ía can often be converted into the suffix -y in English

(sociedad, nacionalidad, economía, geografía). Spanish adjectives ending in -ado can often be changed to the ending -ed in English (organizado, identificado, autorizado, generalizado, mencionado). All of these adjectives are also past participles, which learners can begin to use with verbs in English by activating their knowledge of these patterns.

Microstrategy #3: Discussing Learning Strategies

While the first two microstrategies mentioned deal mostly with referring to learner L1 for the purpose of discussing contrastive grammar and lexical items, informed use of learner L1 can also support the language learning process by giving learners a chance to share and improve their individual learning strategies. This happened quite naturally in my class. Once learners realized they could speak in their L1s, the space opened up for authentic learning and teaching moments. For example, one day a student of mine began to explain to a new student how it can be difficult at first to understand what the teacher is saying, but "*poco a poco vas entendiendo* - little by little you start to understand." I took this opportunity to ask if other classmates could share some strategies they had for learning English. Learners shared many ideas, in a combination of English, Spanish, and Portuguese utterances, and I offered several of my own as we wrote them down and analyzed the grammatical, phonetic, and lexical content of the phrases.

Conclusion: Adopting a Plurilingual Perspective

When learners' L1s are seen as a classroom resource, and not a pedagogical impediment, plurilingualism can be adopted as a macrostrategy in any teaching context, with any group of learners, and at any level. Specific and appropriate microstrategies will depend on the synergic language ecology of the classroom and the repertoires of its participants, as well as the institutional and ideological possibilities or restrictions shaping the class context, and the levels and needs of the given group of learners. Drawing on my experiences teaching beginner General English at a private language institution to adult learners of Spanish and Portuguese-speaking backgrounds, I have outlined how the macrostrategy of informed use of learner L1 can produce a variety of plurilingual microstrategies. These classroom practices foster a perspective of plurality, which recognizes both cultural and individual diversity. Language learners come with diverse repertoires, strategies, and trajectories. A plurilingual perspective can help TESOL teachers to recognize, respect, and make use of diverse learner resources.

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