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PLURELF: A project implementing plurilingualism and English as a Lingua Franca in English language teaching at university¹

Abstract

This paper presents a study on the implementation of a Business English university course aimed at promoting plurilingualism and English as a Lingua Franca (PLURELF). The course is inspired by research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the works on language diversity and plurilingual uses, such as those published by Creese, and Blackledge (2010; 2014), May (2013), and Pennycook, and Otsuji (2015), and by the literature claiming the need to incorporate a plurilingual or translanguaging perspective in education (e.g. Cenoz and Gorter 2013; 2015; García 2009; García and Li 2014; Kramsch 2012; Levine 2011). The PLURELF project relies on the hypothesis that the adoption of a plurilingual approach in English language teaching produces more positive results with regard to language development, intercultural awareness, and learners' attitudes than traditional monolingual approaches, thus challenging the idea, deeply rooted in the theory and practice of ELT, that a monolingual native-based perspective is needed in order to effectively teach the language.

This paper looks at the goals and methodology of the project and provides some of its key results.

1. Introduction: Plurilingualism and internationalisation in higher education

In this paper, we intend to provide a brief account of a four-year project (PLURELF) on the implementation of a Business English course inspired by a plurilingual and English as a lingua franca perspective. The project was carried out by the two authors, together with other researchers² at the *Cercle*

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de Lingüística Aplicada (CLA³) of the Universitat de Lleida.

The PLURELF project was the natural development of work conducted at CLA in the past 15 years, which has focused on three main lines of research: (a) educational policies and pedagogical practices focused on the management and promotion of multilingualism (Cots, et al. 2010; Llurda and Lasagabaster 2010) (b) the impact of mobility programs on the multilingual learning process and the development of intercultural competence (Cots, et al. 2016; Llurda, et al. 2016) and (c) the adoption of English as a lingua franca in the process of internationalization (Llurda, et al. 2013).

The group worked in the description of the individual and collective synergies that are created as part of the process of university ‘multilingualisation’, which is often driven by specific institutional policies. Research was geared towards intervention in the institutional dynamics of higher education in promoting multilingualism, focusing on how the inclusion of English in the curriculum was applied and with what consequences. In this sense, a central aim of the CLA is to develop specific pedagogical proposals to make the process of internationalization of higher education as efficient and effective as possible and, at the same time, to safeguard equity between the ecology of local languages vis-à-vis linguistic diversity and their speakers before the institution and the world.

In view of this objective, the CLA concentrates its efforts on two lines of work focused on how the university promotes the presence of English through, on the one hand, its use as a vehicular language and, on the other hand, as a curricular subject. In each of these lines, the CLA aims to situate itself in a perspective that integrates the macro- and micro-analyses of the social, economic, political and educational aspects of higher education. Thus, while analysing specific educational and socio-interactive processes that take place in the classroom, through ethnographic approaches, the CLA also examines sociolinguistic data related to the institutional discourses and the attitudes of the main agents involved such as policy makers, teaching staff, and students, following up with what the group had already learnt.

As stated above, in this paper we will discuss a project, which is already nearing its completion, conducted by members of the CLA. The project focuses on developing and assessing the implementation of a plurilingual approach in teaching English as a lingua franca in the context of a university’s ESP course.

³ www.cla.udl.cat. Twitter: @CLA_UDL.

2. Towards a plurilingual approach in teaching English as a lingua franca at university

This particular project is framed within the larger research programme of the CLA outlined above, and follows previous research conducted on multilingualism, interculturality, as well as second and foreign language learning and teaching. The project aims to bring together two research strands in applied linguistics that need to be further explored in a combined manner and with special relevance in our particular educational context: (a) multilingual language acquisition, and (b) English as a lingua franca. Originating from different theoretical backgrounds, these two lines constitute two of the main current challenges posed to established practices in the teaching of English, since they question the traditionally dominant model based on the authority of the monolingual native speaker. The study of bi/multilingualism has brought along the concept of *translanguaging* (Li 2018), which legitimizes simultaneous use of different languages, to the point that transitions from one language to another are promoted in order to maximize all the linguistic resources available by participants in the interaction. In fact, the notion of language as a separate entity is called into question and the language classroom is regarded as a place where participants can use all their communicative resources beyond the artificially established limits of traditional standard languages (García 2009). The second strand of research in applied linguistics at the core of this project is the study of English as a lingua franca (ELF). ELF challenges the native speaker's authority and brings the non-native speaker the opportunity to legitimately break with established norms (Seidlhofer 2011, Mauranen 2012). Following Jenkins' (2015) positioning of ELF within studies of multilingualism, this project brings these two areas of study together, aiming at contributing to a substantial change in the principles that support language teaching in general, and English language teaching at universities in particular.

2.1 Background

Globalization and a remarkable upsurge in international mobility have increased the visibility of language diversity, particularly in urban contexts

(e.g., Creese and Blackledge 2010; 2014; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Such language diversity is not reflected in how languages are treated in education, which remains strongly centred on a monolingual model of language teaching, oblivious to the diversity of linguistic resources possessed by students (Hélot 2012), and thus opposed to the use of students' L1s in the L2 classroom. In contrast with the idea that L2 interaction should be maximized to guarantee sufficient exposure to the target language, recent studies point to the positive aspects of using multilingual resources, both in terms of its effects in L2 development and its coherence with the increasingly multilingual environment in educational settings (e.g. Cenoz and Gorter 2013; 2015; Creese and Blackledge 2010; 2014; García 2009; García and Li 2014; Kramersch 2012; Li and Zhu 2013; May 2013). Undoubtedly, Cook's (1992; 2008) development of the notion of multicompetence and the interplay between L1 and L2 in language learning and teaching (Cook, 2001; 2003) have been key in establishing this line of research.

Along similar principles, Kramersch and Huffmaster (2015) hold that globalization has modified the expectations of foreign language learners, who are required to be ready to communicate in transcultural and translanguaging situations. This is clearly a challenge for language teachers who have been trained to teach the language following the principles of monolingual immersion and using a communicative pedagogy based on the ideal native speaker model. An innovative approach to language teaching, taking the learner's complete plurilingual repertoire into account, is framed within sociocultural (Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Swain and Lapkin 2000), ecological (van Lier 2004) and intercultural frameworks (Byram 1997). The sociocultural approach suggests that learning is a process that takes place within social interaction. In plurilingual educational contexts, the different languages spoken by learners will inevitably be used. This plurilingual repertoire should be viewed as a resource that may benefit both learners and teachers, rather than as a handicap that may hinder learning (Cenoz and Gorter 2013). Finally, the intercultural framework is at the heart of any attempt to include the notion of ELF in language teaching. As proposed by Grazi (2018), an ELF approach in ELT is intertwined with the development of intercultural communicative competence.

In the particular case of English language instruction in Expanding Circle countries (Kachru 1985), Cenoz and Gorter (2013; 2015) propose the adoption of a plurilingual perspective, arguing that a monolingual approach ultimately

promotes monolingual native speaker competence as a goal. This is incompatible with the actual outcome of foreign language instruction, which is plurilingual, multicompetent speakers. Apart from the many reasons for a learner not to be willing to mirror a NS accent, there is a great deal of research demonstrating that aiming at achieving NS competence and accent is unrealistic (Derwing and Munro 2009), and so it makes no sense having it as a goal in the ELT curriculum. The goal should be to achieve proficiency in the L2 – enough to accomplish any communication tasks that the speaker wants to complete – and that will vary depending on the individual. There is a need for recognition in all SLA circles that learners' communicative needs should be the goal – not some idealized notion of a NS.

Cenoz and Gorter (2013) maintain that adopting a plurilingual perspective has the following implications for English teachers:

1. Establishing realistic goals. To become plurilingual speakers means abandoning the unrealistic goal of 'becoming' a native speaker.
2. Using plurilingual competence. Plurilingual repertoires may be an extraordinary source of knowledge for developing language and discourse skills and language awareness.
3. Implementing an integrated programme. Teachers of different languages need to coordinate themselves and, by way of example, simultaneously work on similar texts, communicative events, or grammatical structures, even at different levels of competence.
4. Designing resources and activities that require the use of different language codes. The use of a variety of codes is a common practice among plurilingual speakers that is often ignored in the classrooms.

Levine (2011) further argues that a plurilingual approach must be structured and that students should participate in the co-construction of multilingual norms in the classroom, together with the teacher, in order to reflect upon the multilingual practices that are present in everyday human interactions, as well as in communication in the classroom context.

One possible way to introduce the students' plurilingual repertoire is through translanguaging practices. We see translanguaging (García 2009; Creese and Blackledge 2010; García and Li 2014) as based on the constructivist approach that allows students to learn their target language with the support of scaffolding in their previously known languages, thus placing the learner at the centre stage of their learning process. We consider that the adoption of a 'translanguaging approach' also legitimizes the construct of a multilingual and multicultural identity for the learner (Li and Zhu 2013). Canagarajah (2011)

warns us of the need to apply the constructivist approach critically, which means that it cannot be equated with a random use of a diversity of languages. Instead, the use of the different languages must be carefully planned and implemented.

Although several attempts have been made at the theoretical level as to how to develop multilingual competence among learners, there is a shortage of tools to guide teachers regarding the implementation of a translanguaging-inspired university curriculum in a structured and coherent way. This project aims to overcome this deficit by means of the design and implementation of a didactic model based on a plurilingual approach that is applicable to English language teaching and learning at universities in an Expanding Circle context.

2.2 Goals

One of the paradoxes in language education is that whereas in real communicative situations, plurilingual speakers combine the languages at their disposal, in educational institutions, languages are taught in completely separate compartments. Thus, the English teacher is expected to exclusively use this language as a medium of instruction and avoid any reference to comparison with other languages already spoken by their students. However, an increasing number of applied linguists have expressed the need for a change in perspective that leads to a holistic and plurilingual vision of the language teaching methodology, with the goal of enhancing the learning process efficiency by means of the incorporation of plurilingual resources already available to the learners (Canagarajah 2011; Cenoz and Gorter 2015; Creese and Blackledge 2014; Garcia and Li 2014).

This project is innovative because it starts with the hypothesis that the adoption of a plurilingual approach in English language teaching produces more positive results with regard to language development, intercultural awareness, and learners' attitudes than traditional monolingual approaches. Thus, the project aims to challenge the rather generalized idea that a monolingual native-based perspective is needed in order to effectively teach the language. A plurilingual approach such as the one proposed relies on the constructivist notion that new knowledge is constructed from previously acquired knowledge. It also avoids falling into the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson 1992) by recognising non-native speakers as competent users of English as a lingua franca rather than relegating them to mere learners

permanently dependent on the authority of the native speaker (Cook 2002; Llorca 2016).

Taking the initial hypothesis into account, this project intended to carry out a study with the following general goals:

- (a) To design teaching materials inspired by a plurilingual + ELF (henceforth, PLURELF) approach.
- (b) To implement such materials in a university ESP course.
- (c) To compare the results with a control group based on standard ESP practice.
- (d) To explore the applicability of the model behind the materials to other ELT contexts.

More specifically, this project had the following specific goals:

- (1) To explore the institutional and classroom contexts where the pedagogical intervention had to take place, taking into account students' beliefs about English language teaching and learning and their response to the classroom practices they had previously experienced.
- (2) To design the syllabus and materials for a semester in an ESP course.
- (3) To implement the syllabus and materials and to analyse the process with the support of qualitative and quantitative indicators.
- (4) To investigate the effects of the pedagogical intervention regarding language development, intercultural awareness, language attitudes and students' level of satisfaction.
- (5) To develop a pedagogical model that could be adapted to other educational contexts, based on a plurilingual approach to ELT.

2.3 Methodology

In this project, we examined the impact of the application of a PLURELF approach to the teaching of English in a bilingual university in Catalonia. In order to do so, two comparable groups of the first year of Business Administration degree (30-40 students each) underwent two different pedagogical treatments: the experimental group was subject to teaching following a PLURELF approach, whereas the control group followed a

monolingual methodology following the standard parameters in ESP teaching.

Data was collected and analysed using a mixed-methods approach (Riazi and Candlin 2014). A quantitative perspective was required to measure the effects of the implementation of the materials statistically with regard to (1) the improvement of learners' language skills, and (2) their attitudes towards English and towards the course. Such measurements were made with an English placement test and a previously piloted questionnaire. The qualitative research approach rested on the assumption that the analysis of language use in everyday interactions can inform researchers of the cultural and social patterns in meaning making. The qualitative perspective was inspired by interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, with the goal of combining emic and ethic perspectives, that is, the participants' vision of the context in which they are immersed combined with the researcher's knowledge of such contexts (Gumperz 1982; Rampton 2006). Both methodological approaches interacted at different stages of the project. Thus, the analysis of the learning process relied on qualitative data to understand the learning process as it takes place in the classroom and on quantitative data to measure the learning outcomes for statistical comparisons between different times during the pedagogical intervention and between the experimental and the control group. In this paper, we are presenting a brief account of the main outcomes of the project so far, and will not refer to classroom interactions, which are still under analysis. Thus, we will refer to the results obtained with the help of five different instruments. Three were used in order to measure language gains: a standard language placement test, a spontaneous oral production consisting in recording a 2-minute sales pitch presenting a given product to a potential customer, and a written commercial letter following the given instructions. Both the sales pitch and the commercial letter were assessed by an expert examiner that usually acts as evaluator for a major English testing organization. The fourth instrument was a questionnaire specifically designed for the occasion and conveniently piloted. Finally, we will report on the outcomes of a set of group interviews conducted with participants in both classes: PLURELF and monolingual.

2.4 Main results of the project

The PLURELF project has been fruitful in gathering evidence for the beneficial effects of teaching English with a plurilingual vision that emphasises the lingua franca uses of the language and incorporates the L1s of the learners, as well as other languages more or less known to them, as useful tools for the development of English competence in the performance of specific communicative tasks.

We will here provide some relevant results obtained with the use of three of the above-mentioned data collection methods: the language tests, the attitude questionnaire, and the group interviews.

- The language assessment instruments

Out of the three types of language assessment instruments used to compare the two groups of students in the study and to measure the progression for each group (standard placement test, oral production task and commercial letter), only one (the ‘sales pitch’ oral production task) yielded statistically significant differences between the two groups that are worth reporting here. Differences pointed to a beneficial effect of the PLURELF (experimental) group in the ‘sales pitch’ oral production task. No statistically significant differences appeared either in the placement test or in the letter. We also looked for signs of progression between the beginning and the end of the semester and no significant differences were found at all. It must be said here that the experiment lasted for only one semester, which in practice means less than four months of class time, and classes were 90-minute long and took place twice a week. With this type of implementation, we could not be very optimistic with regard to the impact of any kind of methodology on either language development or attitudinal changes, as we would probably need a longer period in order for progression to be made visible. So, we expected some differences to appear as we were confident that the PLURELF approach would have a beneficial effect (or, at least, would not have negative effect) among learners, but we were realistically aware of the difficulty in finding statistically significant differences, more so when the size of the two groups in the study was relatively small: less than 40 students per group at the beginning of the study, and a smaller number at the end, after we decided to include in the final comparison data from students who had attended at least 60% of the sessions and data from students with lower attendance records were separated from the sample. The final sample, thus, with only the students who had attended at least 60% of the classes, consisted

of 35 students in the PLURELF group and 16 in the traditional monolingual group. The number of 60% was decided arbitrarily. Most students attended more than 60% of classes but this threshold was established because it was considered that a 60% attendance implied the minimal sufficient exposure to the language teaching materials and methodology to consider they had the potential of having an effect on students' performance.

The sales pitch oral production task consisted of a short improvised oral text produced by students individually after having been shown an image with a product that they, as sales representative of a manufacturing company, had to promote to a store owner so that they would include it in their product catalogue. They were assigned a product out of eight different options, and the product they had to sell at the end of the semester was the same as the one they had been assigned at the beginning of the semester in an identical task. The audio recordings with the students' voices were sent to an expert rater with experience as evaluator of oral tests carried out as part of an internationally well-established English exam. The evaluator used a 20-point rubric that included the following categories: grammar and vocabulary; discourse management; pronunciation and intonation; and global achievement.

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used in order to compare the results of the two groups at the end of the semester controlling for the effects of the students' results at the beginning of the semester as covariate. Such analysis yielded a significant difference in favour of the PLURELF group, which performed better than the monolingual group with a score of 14.86, compared to the score of 11.31 of the latter.

The remaining two tests (a placement test and a written commercial letter) did not offer any different results between the two groups, which – together with the more positive result of PLURELF students in the sales pitch task– allows us to claim that not only the PLURELF methodology, which relies on the use of students L1 in class, does not affect students negatively, but quite the opposite, it enhances their performance in comparison with students following a monolingual native-oriented approach.

- The attitudes questionnaire

The attitudes questionnaire was responded by students at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Students had to rate from 1 to 5 the degree of agreement or disagreement with a set of statements. The numerical results were treated statistically for the sake of comparison between groups.

Two types of statements elicited students' attitudes towards the two central elements in this project, namely (i) nativeness and the use of native or non-native voices in classroom materials, and (ii) the systematic use of the students' L1 as a scaffolding strategy towards achieving the goal of L2 learning.

The following four statements dealt with the theme of nativeness:

1. My goal with English is to be able to speak it like a native speaker.
2. I would like to speak English like a native speaker.
3. I feel more comfortable speaking English with other non-native speakers than with natives.
4. English used in international trade should be the same as English spoken by native speakers.

And the theme of translanguaging and L1 use was presented in the following five statements:

5. It annoys me when people speak in one language and mix words from another language.
6. It annoys me when people write in a language and mix words from another language.
7. In speaking a language, those who don't use words from other languages are better speakers.
8. I like it when the English teacher tries to explain grammar or vocabulary without using Catalan/Spanish and keeps trying until s/he succeeds.
9. Many times I didn't understand classroom instructions in English in the Business English II course.

The analysis of the results at the end of the semester offered significant differences between the two groups in three of the above statements. First, in relation to the theme of nativeness, statements 1 and 3 were responded differently by the two groups of students. In statement 1, the PLURELF group had a mean result of 3.85, whereas the monolingual group mean rose up to 4.33, indicating a clearly superior support for the statement among students in the monolingual group. In other words, the monolingual approach reinforced students' enthrallment with the native speaker myth (Davies 2003) or fallacy (Phillipson 1992), which sustains that the goal of a language learner is to become undistinguishable to a native speaker, in spite of its potential for generating frustration among learners who will never reach such unrealistic goal. Statement 3, on the other hand, yields a greater support on the part of the students in the PLURELF group ($M=3.75$) vs. the monolingual group ($M=3.0$). Such result confirms the idea that PLURELF

students hold a more positive attitude towards the increasing use of English as a lingua franca among non-native speakers.

With regard to translanguaging and the use of the students L1 as a means to promote the learning of English, only question 8, out of the five questions referring to this issue, yielded significant differences between the two groups of students. Students in the monolingual group were more supportive of the teacher's strictly monolingual practice ($M=4.13$), whereas the PLURELF group showed a more neutral attitude (though slightly positive, as well) towards it ($M=3.73$). No other differences were found, which shows that attitudes towards using other languages apart from English were not greatly affected by the different experiences of both groups during the semester, which may suggest that the beliefs and attitudes towards this practice are more rigidly embedded into the learners' sets of beliefs. In the following section, we will see how students verbalise their resistance towards the use of their L1 in the English classroom, and how this practice challenges all their previously acquired system of beliefs with regard to second language development.

- The group interviews

Two groups of 8 students were selected, one from each of the two classes involved in the project, and they were invited to participate in two separate group interviews at the beginning of the semester, and again at the end of it. The groups included students with different profiles in connection with the level of their communicative skills in English as well as their academic performance. We video recorded and transcribed the four resulting group interviews. The subsequent analysis of the transcripts revealed a natural acceptance of ELF and non-native speaker models but a resistance to the use of the L1 in class and in the learning materials.

In relation to the use of non-native forms and models in class, some students openly stated they positively valued the fact that some of the speakers in the listening tasks were non-native speakers of English. By way of example, one student in the PLURELF group said⁴: "It's good, because it's a good thing for us to get used to it, as we will not always find English people on the street. (...) And one may speak in one way and another in a different way, and we must try to understand them all". To which one of the

⁴ All the interviews were conducted in Catalan, and so the extracts presented here are my own translations.

researchers asked: “And did you sometimes find it difficult?”. The answer is provided by a different student, who simply says: “Sometimes easier”.

In the interview that took place at the end of the semester with the monolingual group students, the researchers explained to them that in their class all listening tasks involved native speakers, whereas in the other class some non-native speakers were also used as speakers. In response to this information, one of the students stated that this was a good idea as “it is good for us to listen to people from other countries speaking in English”, and another student added “and because you will not always speak to native speakers”, to which the first student concluded by remarking: “Exactly. In the world, there are all kinds of people”.

The use of L1 in class was more contentious, as students in both groups objected to it. In particular, we expected PLURELF students to be more willing to embrace its use after having experienced it in class, but they seemed to hold on to their previous conceptions of what English language teaching should be like, possibly based on their previous experience as English learners all along their primary and secondary education, as well as any private lessons they may have attended (some had and some others had not attended to private extracurricular language classes in their previous years). In the initial interview with the PLURELF group, to the question formulated by one of the researchers asking whether they would prefer that the class was conducted exclusively in English, one student said that “at this level, yes” and “Catalan is useful to learn English at the beginning, (...) but now all in English would better”, to which several other students voiced their agreement, one of them adding that “if the teacher speaks to you in Catalan, you do not make any effort”. And another affirms: “and if you do not understand anything, you will have to make the effort to understand it. (...) I prefer it all in English because I think I learn more... more vocabulary, more...”. At the end of the semester, the same PLURELF group voiced their criticism of L1 use in class. One student declared: “I don’t see the point, (...) I think that if you don’t know English you have to make an effort”, and the same student later states: “I like it better all in English, because, ok, you have to make a bigger effort, and it’s clear that you can switch off if you don’t understand something, but if it is in Spanish, it is like I am not learning, because I read and I understand it”. Finally, in the monolingual group, at the end of the semester, one student declared: “What I like the most of my teacher is that she didn’t let me speak in Catalan, and when I had to explain something I had to do it in English, and that’s a lot of work for me, but at least...”. The researchers insisted on

this point: “So, the fact that she forced you to speak in English, did you like this?”, and different students voiced their approval: “yes, it is fine”, “I think so”.

3. Conclusions

In this brief account of the research project on the teaching of English at university level with an ELF and plurilingual perspective developed by members of the *Cercle de Lingüística Aplicada*, we have presented the ideas that support the project, its methodological implementation, and main outcomes. The combined results obtained through different methodological instruments provide a comprehensive picture of the beneficial effects as well as the complexity of such an innovative teaching approach, that relies on cutting edge advances in applied linguistics, such as the study of ELF and multilingualism, with its more radical take on translanguaging. The beneficial effects of such a teaching approach can be observed by looking at the results obtained by the PLURELF group in tasks designed to measure language development, since they are either equal to those obtained by the monolingual group, or (as in the case of the sales pitch task) even higher. This is combined with attitudes that are only slightly affected by the experience, and complemented by the realisation of an easy attitude of acceptance to non-native models but a frontal resistance to the incorporation of the L1 in the classroom as a valid learning tool.

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