

2 Doing research with teachers

Luci Nussbaum¹

Key concepts: action research, collaborative research, ethnography, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, plurilingual didactic sequences.

1. Introduction

Educational institutions are the ideal place for conducting research in the social sciences, due both to the relevance of their mission (educating future generations) and because they centrifuge changes in society, conflicts and tensions. Consequently, schools serve as a scenario for both research in teaching and learning and for a broad spectrum of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, social psychology and discourse analysis, for example). In our case, we were interested in their dimension as a sociolinguistic observatory, as a space for learning languages and for building plurilingual skills. In this respect, schools offer the advantage of bringing together, in a single building, all the actors whose communicative and learning practices we want to investigate; they are also a place for updating language policies, for socialization and for observation of the development of didactic approaches to language education.

The presence of researchers in schools is complex, given that faculty is often wary of their intentions (Unamuno, 2004). Indeed, research activities may represent an exercise of power by interpreting social realities and by legitimizing them through dissemination (Heller, 2002). Furthermore, in many

1. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, Catalonia/Spain; luci.nussbaum@uab.cat

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cases the results of the research are of no use to the educational institutions themselves, and yet represent a source of symbolic benefits for the researcher, boosting their curriculum and bringing them professional prestige. For this reason, teaching staff are often wary of those who knock on their doors to conduct research, and sometimes hide certain spaces and practices from outside observation.

Research in schools thus entails a long journey of mutual recognition and trust between the researchers and the teaching staff, and a negotiation of give-and-take. In our experience, the most effective reward for both parties is engaging in a mutually satisfying project in which both the researchers and the teachers occupy complementary spaces – rather than asymmetrical ones – to collaboratively build educational knowledge. For external research teams working in a school, this option represents an excellent opportunity to acquire educational experience, to compare theory and practice, and as a source of inspiration for future investigations. For teachers, it offers a chance to share their professional concerns with colleagues who can help them to reflect upon them, as well as the reward of being a collaborative participant in building didactic knowledge and disseminating it jointly.

This chapter aims to construe the process of some of our experiences, which may be useful for developing teachers and doctoral students who intend to undertake studies in educational institutions on the different facets of language teaching. The second section of the article outlines certain aspects of the collaborative research process between teachers and university researchers, pointing out the differences and similarities between action research, ethnography and conversational approaches to analyzing data, and collaborative research involving teaching and research teams. The third section presents a didactic approach to plurilingualism that addresses our conception of linguistically diverse education, and discusses a model of educational intervention that has been successfully developed by the GREIP group and has enabled us to gather a body of important data for understanding the process of plurilingual learning. The fourth section puts forward an example of collaborative research. Finally, the chapter concludes with some general considerations.

2. Innovation through research

Collaborative research falls under what is known as action research, a working methodology coined by Kurt Lewin (1946) as being the convergence between social sciences studies and social action programs. The main objective of Lewin's proposition is to achieve theoretical advances and social changes in parallel, blurring the conventional boundaries between the production of knowledge and its implementation in social environments. In the field of education, action research is understood to be a process of reflection on teaching and learning in order to intervene in them and hence bring improvement (Burns, 1999; Elliot, 1991/1993; Stenhouse, 1985/1987; van Lier, 1988).

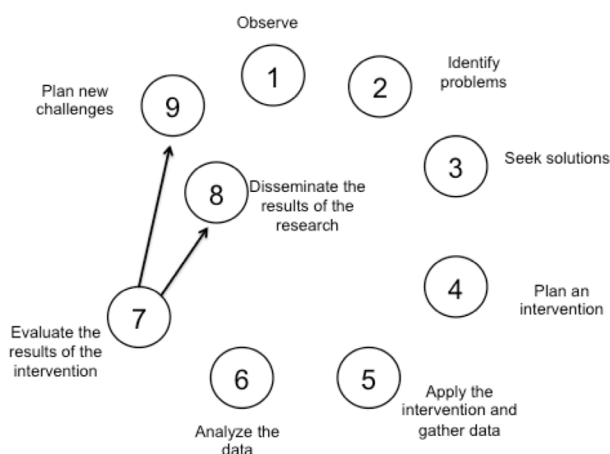
Educational publications often establish distinctions between action research, ethnographic research and collaborative research, depending on the actors or executors of the process and their interests. According to these viewpoints, action research should be the task of the teacher, while ethnographic research would be the work of researchers – at a distance from teaching concerns – interested in constructing explanations about social practices in educational institutions. Collaborative research, meanwhile, would be the common ground of both researchers and teachers. In this respect, it is worth noting that the research undertaken by the GREIP group encourages the dissemination of findings through the joint production of texts written collaboratively by researchers, teachers and trainee teachers.

Collaborative research is nourished by the principles of action research, given that its aim is to improve teaching practice, but it needs the instruments provided by ethnography, a field in which collaborative research processes are becoming more and more important. Consequently, in our experience, the three options are very closely related, and can be combined. In this section we will firstly discuss action research before enumerating the ethnographic procedures that help to implement it and presenting our views on data analysis. We will conclude this section with a reference to collaborative research.

2.1. Action research

Action research (see also Pascual, this volume) is a procedure that systematizes the considerations that all teachers make informally on their everyday practices (Nussbaum, 2016). Indeed, when leaving the classroom, the teacher tends to carry out a mental review of how the lesson went, on which they base any considerations of adjustments in future classes. In doing so, they take into consideration the experiences they have amassed, guidance from their reading, attendance of training seminars or discussions with colleagues, but these actions are not enough. If one wishes to innovate by implementing actions in an educational situation, it is necessary to systematically observe what goes on in the classroom and interpret these phenomena in view of all the circumstances that make up life in the classroom. The innovative teacher is one who gathers information systematically, analyzes it and compares it with research on successful educational practices, plans his or her interventions, evaluates them and disseminates them. The stages of action research are shown in the following diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The phases of action research



Action research can encompass a whole working program or a small aspect of it, such as progressively adjusting lesson activities for a student with learning difficulties. In any event, the problem will have been defined based on formalized observation (Phases 1 and 2), for which instruments to gather and analyze data should be provided. This will lead to the search for solutions to the problem (or problems), in Phase 3, to guide any modifications to previous practices to improve the educational intervention. These proposals will emerge from a considered perusal of specialist articles that reflect similar problems and the solutions to them, or discussions with other colleagues. Phases 4 and 5 entail not only planning and implementing the intervention but also amassing the instruments to gather information whose analysis (Phase 6) will enable the results of the intervention to be assessed (Phase 7) and to prepare the information to disseminate the experience, in Phase 8, to immediate colleagues and to the language teaching community by means of publications and meetings. Sharing the results of research is an essential process to encourage dialogue among teachers and researchers and to amplify the sphere of language teaching (Camps, 2003). An assessment of the intervention is likely to throw up new challenges (Phase 9) that will lead to the resumption of the process.

It is difficult, though not impossible, to conduct action research alone, given that the process entails complex tasks. This is why we believe it should be conducted with other people. Whatever the case, it seems opportune to revisit the ethnographic and exploratory procedures, which are summed up below.

2.2. Ethnographic procedures

Ethnography – the discipline which, since its inception, has been associated with the tradition of anthropology and, later on, linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (see also the contributions to this handbook by Antoniadou & Dooly, this volume; Corona, this volume; Unamuno & Patiño, this volume) – pursues, in educational contexts, a thick description of school life. In other words, it seeks a comprehensive and multidimensional description, in order to render the complexity of educational institutions. As we shall see, this entails gathering various types of data to compare and interpret them, as the

stakeholders involved themselves do – students, teachers, etc. – by applying an emic approach; in other words, without projecting external interpretations (which would be an etic approach), to capture the way in which participants in communicative events understand and construe their actions (for a discussion on emic versus etic approaches, see [Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990](#)).

[Erickson \(1984\)](#) notes two basic principles of ethnography in educational contexts: (1) making the familiar strange, or seeking the deeper meaning of what might seem ordinary and habitual, for the study group (behavioral norms, rituals, the use of a certain language for a certain activity, etc.); and (2) stating researchable questions, or asking questions that can be answered by observing the daily life of the study group.

Ethnographic procedures per se entail working for long periods of time to acquire the status of a member of the group that is being studied, and being able to engage in what is known as participant observation, not only in the sense of being accepted as a member of the group but, most importantly, in the sense of getting actively involved in the events that take place within the group ([Rappaport, 2008](#)). In our case, we have been able to engage in this type of research because we have integrated in regular classes and joined in as teachers or teaching assistants in classroom activities. This has enabled us to gather natural data through audio and visual recordings of the group's activities.

In addition to these core data, ethnography uses field diaries, interviews, informal conversations, discussion groups and, of course, the analysis of written documents. Ethnography also proposes the triangulation of data; in other words, generating a dialogue between the different sources of information. For example, the verbal usage of teachers (gathered by recordings) may respond to certain language policies (stipulated in official documents), while those of the students might reflect their resistance to these policies (also recorded from classroom interactions). Triangulation processes are necessary not only for generating a dialogue between data but also for returning, time and again, to the analysis of the transcripts made by the different members of the group. Furthermore,

ethnographic procedures allow one to capture the impact of the research protocol on the data obtained.

2.3. Incorporating the research device in the analysis

In the processes of gathering and analyzing data (see [Moore & Llompart, this volume](#)), [Mondada \(2003\)](#) suggests three principles that all researchers should abide by (see also [Masats, this volume](#)).

- The principle of observability: the phenomena of interest to be analyzed are described by the speakers themselves through their activity. For example, we can only say that a student uses a particular language if we can clearly see that he/she orients towards the use of that language, whether or not his/her statements abide by the rules laid down by grammar or dictionaries.
- The principle of availability: the manner in which data are gathered and processed reveals or hides the phenomena to be studied. This principle implies that if, for example, we want to study student participation, we will need to equip ourselves with the instruments to capture their actions during the class (the notes they make in their notebooks, the way they handle objects, their interactions with fellow students, their glances, body language, etc.). Otherwise, we would only have a partial overview of their participation.
- The principle of symmetry: the research set-up should be accounted for in the data analysis. It is often said that research procedures (the presence of the observer, cameras, etc.) modify reality. However, according to this principle there is no such change, given that there is no essential reality that pre-exists at the time the data are gathered. For this reason, a thorough analysis of the data makes the inclusion of the research set-up (the presence of the researcher, camera, etc.) essential in the analysis, considering it as a constituent part of the construction of the data.

Let us take, by way of example, an audiovisual recording of a group activity involving three girls and one boy in the fifth year of primary school, and their teacher, in a science lesson in which French is used as the vehicular language. The aim of the teaching project was to document the procedures of integrating science and language learning. The group is facing a computer, whose screen displays a diagram of the respiration and nutritional process of plants, written in Catalan. The teacher wants the students to conceptualize the life processes of the plants, recognize their names in Catalan – given that the content forms part of the general science curriculum – and later explain the phenomena to the rest of the class in French².

Figure 2 shows the positions of the group: the teacher is behind, out of the camera's range, which is at her side.

Figure 2. Position of the camera



This audiovisual recording lets us transcribe the oral interventions of the teacher and the children and analyze the verbal actions of integrating curricular and language content (the principle of observability). However, we cannot do

2. These data were gathered by I. Camacho and transcribed by L. Nussbaum.

this entirely because, in collecting the data, the camera did not capture what is written on the screen or the body or eye movements of the teacher. So, the principle of availability is not completely fulfilled. The analysis was able to capture the movements and glances of the students, who were facing the camera, the computer, the teacher and the other students (the principle of symmetry).

Taking into account the research set-up in studying data implies, from our point of view, analyzing the data exhaustively by applying the procedures of conversation analysis.

2.4. Analyzing data using conversation analysis

In our research, we see ethnographic perspectives for gathering data in the classroom (and outside it, as will be seen at the end of this chapter) as being compatible with the analytical perspectives of conversation analysis with an ethnomethodological orientation (see also [Masats, this volume](#)). The use of a conversational approach proves to be particularly successful for recovering the interpretation of actors (students and teachers) with regard to institutional language policies – the emic perspective referred to above – for understanding systems of interaction, and for establishing connections with other observations undertaken in the schools. At the same time, conversation analysis allows us to examine curricular learning ([Moore & Nussbaum, 2011](#)) and the activities undertaken by learners as ‘emergent plurilinguists’ ([García, 2009](#)).

The purpose of ethnomethodology is to explain the principles that govern social actions based on a study of the ‘methods’ that people use to make their everyday activities congruous. This task entails studying how meaning is constructed interactively, how people interpret the activity they are engaged in, how they choose what is relevant, and document it through their conversational moves. A study of these interactions should observe towards which logic people are orienting, adopting their perspective, from within their system (an emic perspective) and not from outside. Conversation analysis suggests that the contributions of speakers are anchored in the interactional context, this being

understood not just as the situational framework, but primarily as a sequential environment in terms of the turns of the preceding and the next speakers. The contributions of speakers thus create the context in each sequence of interaction, maintaining it or refreshing it. This is thus an approach in which one should not seek influences from the situation on what the speakers are doing, unless the individuals concerned orient towards a specific aspect, making it relevant.

Until quite recently, conversational approaches have been little used in studies on language learning. However, some publications in the last few years have shown that this is a perspective that is becoming increasingly relevant (see, in this respect, the reviews by [Hall, 2004](#); [Markee, 2015](#); [Seedhouse, 2005](#); also [Masats, this volume](#)).

Conversation analysis calls for a thorough examination of all the data in the transcription; not only linguistic data, but all the multimodal aspects (body position, movements, glances, use of objects, etc.) that contribute to the progress of interaction ([Moore & Nussbaum, 2011](#)). This is justified by the principle whereby transcription is already the first phase of the analysis, and therefore has clear implications for the interpretation of verbal activity ([Duranti, 1997/2000](#); [Nussbaum, 2006](#); see also [Moore & Llompart, this volume](#)). In this respect, one of the extremely productive procedures adopted by the GREIP group (following the proposals of other research teams) is to study transcriptions collectively in data analysis sessions. Recordings and transcripts are examined as a group, making it possible to achieve more accurate transcriptions and avoid subjective interpretations.

Systematic work using the abovementioned procedures gives an understanding of the benefits of cooperative action in the data collection process. Furthermore, when action research is done collaboratively with colleagues who are also interested in educational innovation, the task is much more efficient because efforts are united to construct didactic knowledge, while at the same time addressing it from the perspective of specific professional interests. In the following section we will deal with this form of action research.

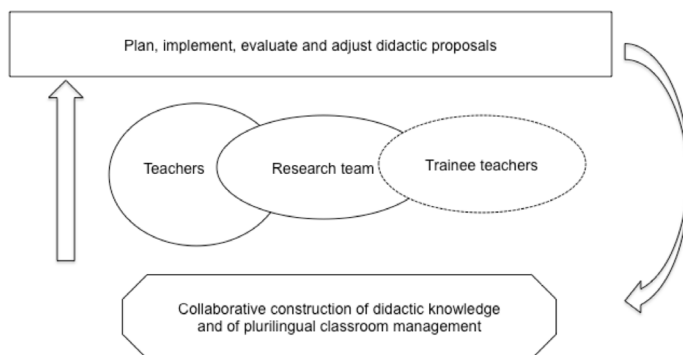
3. Collaborative research

For some years now, our research group has been undertaking studies on plurilingual education in educational institutions in Catalonia, with the involvement of active teachers, trainee teachers and young researchers in our group whose master's or PhD projects were in this field.

Our choice to do collaborative research is based on a series of considerations, which are detailed below (see also Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2006; Unamuno, 2004). Investigations in educational contexts often only consider the researchers' perspectives and ignore those of the participants (teachers and students). The unease that can be felt in classrooms when under observation can only be overcome by active and committed participation of research groups with schools, students and families (Carr, 1995/1996) in order to articulate their needs through joint endeavors. The aim is thus to design research projects that allow a dialogue between different agents, theories and conceptions of education (Cazden, 1986/1989). Research for and in action (Elliot, 1991/1993, Stenhouse, 1985/1987), with a cooperative orientation, helps to overcome the tension between the researcher and the object of the research, by considering that the person doing the research is also a subject of it, thus reducing the gap between research teams and their subjects, and between theory and practice. This involves a gradual process of fine-tuning which can sometimes be frustrating for everyone involved, but often successful.

Our objective is to experiment, along with teachers and students, with new forms of teaching local languages (Catalan and Spanish) and foreign languages in an integrated way (González et al., 2008; Nussbaum, 2008; Nussbaum & Rocha, 2008). At the same time, we aim to construct situated didactic knowledge in contexts of learner heterogeneity, in schools that teach in Catalan, Spanish and one or two foreign languages, and to educate plurilingual people on the linguistic diversity of their milieu and the world. Figure 3 illustrates this collaborative relationship.

Figure 3. Collaborative research



Detailed below are some of the lines of work undertaken in these collaborative actions.

4. Plurilingual projects

Historically, languages have been taught separately, the argument being that this provides more intensive contact with the language in question and avoids any possible cross-contamination between linguistic systems. The basis for this common stance is the prevalence of a monolingual vision of multilingual learning, with languages being understood as separate compartments of knowledge (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2005; amongst others). However, the existence of plurilingual usage both in and outside the classroom in communicative activities (reading, exchanges mediated by technology, etc.) would seem to obviate the rule of 'one language for each classroom'. And yet, hybrid resources, far from being an obstacle to learning new skills, constitute a useful structural base for taking part in complex learning practices which, in fact, lead to the acquisition of competences for acting unilingually, i.e. using a single language when the circumstances so require (Moore & Nussbaum, 2011; Nussbaum, 2014).

In this respect, [Duverger \(2007\)](#), when referring to the integrated teaching of curricular content and languages, talks about the didactization of plurilingualism in schools. The author distinguishes three types of plurilingual regimes: macro-level, meso-level and micro-level. The first refers to the planning of teaching in different languages in terms of subjects and time periods, which tends to be defined in the school's language curriculum. Thus, for example, it is possible to plan the teaching of mathematics in English or science in French. The second type, the meso-level regime, refers to planning the use of certain languages for specific activities. For example, if the subject is geography, it is possible to refer to maps or other documents in either English or Spanish, although the didactic sequence would be taught in Catalan. Finally, the micro-level refers to the unplanned plurilingual usage that takes place in schools in multilingual areas ([Nussbaum, 2014](#)). The meso-level regime, which consists of choosing different languages for specific moments of a learning unit, has been the inspiration for part of our collaborative work in schools (see the following sections).

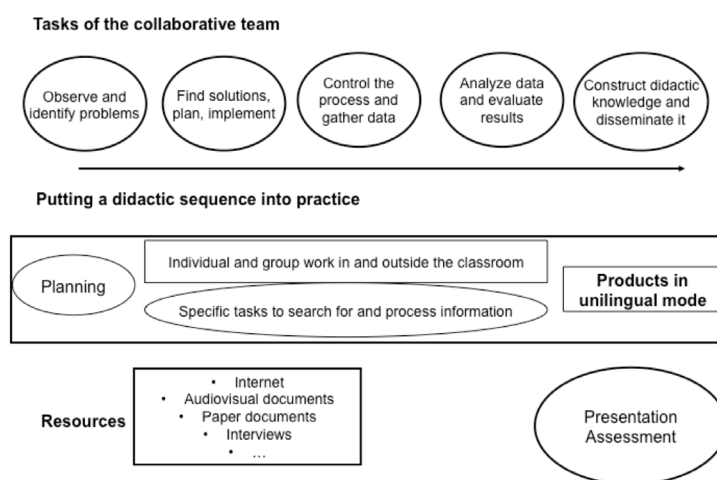
We view learning as a situated social practice, which means presenting knowledge in a context and involving the students in practical and socially significant activities by engaging in educational projects. Project-based work (see, for a theoretical foundation, [Camps, 2003](#); [Perrenoud, 1999](#)) is considered a useful tool, in the sense that it positions the students as part of a research team ([Lambert, 2012](#)) who follow a path to attain an end product (or several products), with the idea of it being presented to other people to spread this knowledge beyond the classroom.

A project naturally integrates subject learning and the linguistic activities necessary to access the knowledge in question: the use of technological resources to search for information, the reading of written texts and multimodal documents; social practices in and outside the classroom, and, of course, the use of different language resources. A project-based approach allows different languages to be adopted (the meso-level regime, according to [Duverger, 2007](#)) depending on the phase of the project. Thus an interview might be prepared in Spanish; a text on the internet could be read in English; and a report, as a final product, might be drafted in Catalan and contain sections in different languages.

This organizational flexibility reflects the concept of the class as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which the students participate in different ways, according to their abilities, to acquire the expert skills that will enable them to act in different contexts (Hall, Cheng, & Carlson, 2006).

Figure 4 shows a diagram of a project sequence. The core activities can be done naturally in plurilingual modes, given that the environment in which they take place is plurilingual. The final product, however, can be done in a single language to demonstrate the academic skills required by the curriculum.

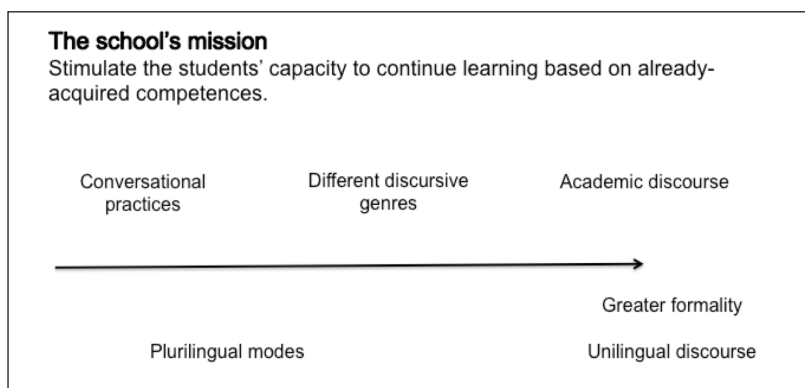
Figure 4. Diagram of an educational sequence



Our approach, the result of data analysis and collaborative reflection with teachers, trainee teachers and research interns, lies in the prior observation of and discussion about the initial competences of the students, their regular social practices, and the role of the school in their plurilingual education. Our starting point is the inclusion of flexible plurilingual modes, especially for the treatment of educational knowledge in classroom interactions taking various different formats (teacher-student, student-student). In each didactic sequence we also undertake an in-depth examination of different discursive genres encountered

– depending on the agreed final product – through the use of texts either in hard copy or online, and in the different outputs of students. These stages lead to the construction of a final unilingual product which should fulfill the formal educational requirements of academic discourse. **Figure 5** illustrates the process.

Figure 5. From plurilingual modes to unilingual academic discourse



This radically plurilingual approach seeks to take advantage of every possible resource to create bonds between the social use of language and school-based practices.

5. An example of collaborative research

Our work is illustrated³ with the case of a school in Barcelona, located in a neighborhood with a significant percentage of people from very different geographic and sociolinguistic backgrounds. More than 90% of the children at this school have family trajectories of immigration. Although the vehicular language of the school is Catalan, students use Spanish to communicate with their peers and it is also used in personal relations between adults in the neighborhood who do not share the same native language, a very common

3. Those interested in the collaborative teaching proposals described herein can refer to <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/en/content/materials>

situation in the metropolitan areas of Catalonia (Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2006). This sociolinguistic situation means that children perceive the learning of Catalan as an educational requirement that is not very useful in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the school also has to teach students with a very wide range of skills: a high percentage of them enroll at a late stage and hence do not have the same skills as the children who have received regular schooling.

At the start of the project⁴, aimed at a group of fifth-grade primary school students, the team formulated two main goals based on the circumstances described above:

- making the students aware that Catalan is a language that is used regularly in other geographical and social contexts;
- promoting significant oral and written use of the language.

Both goals led to the need to open up the classroom to observe the social uses of Catalan in other contexts in which students might take part, using their linguistic resources and observing the ways they act in different environments from the school one. We also planned to take into account the students' very diverse skillsets so that all of them could get involved in putting together a significant project.

Based on the curricular content (the counties of Catalonia), the project proposed to integrate a range of curricular objectives: the exploration of the region (its geography, history, natural resources, economy, population, professions of its inhabitants, media and cultural manifestations); the use of different procedures to obtain and store information (interviews with other students and adults, internet research, the use of video and audio recordings, etc.), and the use of different forms of representing information (maps, graphs, etc.). At the end of the process, students would need to produce a radio report for the school radio in order to disseminate their experience to other students at the school and to other schools.

4. The project was designed by: Montserrat Colet, Victor Corona, Violeta García, Luci Nussbaum, Adriana Patiño and Pepa Rocha, with the advice of Montserrat Oller and Angels Prat.

The project was structured over four phases (see [Corona, Nussbaum, & Rocha, 2008](#)). The aim was to enable students to learn working methods that could be extrapolated to other situations, as well as putting them in an active role as researchers of physical and social situations. In one of the phases, students made contact by means of a virtual forum with students at the same grade from two schools in different geographical regions to gather information on the counties of their counterparts. In another, students met up with their virtual counterparts to gather more information.

Through the project, the students were able to see that the use of Catalan was a regular part of everyday life in some places, and they were able to use the language for practical purposes, including to construct a final product using standard spoken Catalan. Having said that, the use of other languages was integrated naturally in communicative and learning practices for collecting information and in spontaneous interactions with other people outside of the classroom.

The implementation of the sequence, which lasted several weeks, allowed us to gather data that were very important for both the teaching team and the research group: recordings of team discussions; of the class work, during the process and during the recording of the final product; recordings of interviews with the general public and with other children at the schools visited; documents written by the students, etc. The collection of data was done ethnographically, thanks to participant observation during the whole process.

This body of work was used later on in team discussions (evaluation of the educational proposition, discussions of aspects that could be improved upon, etc.) to jointly construct didactic knowledge with other people from the GREIP group with an interest in finding out how language and communication skills are built and rebuilt in highly diverse sociolinguistic contexts. In analyzing these data, conversation analysis procedures were used. The results of the analyses were disclosed at various meetings with other teachers and researchers and served to a large extent to provide arguments in support of the efficacy of plurilingual approaches to increase the unilingual skills necessary to take part in certain social encounters.

6. Concluding words

The overall aim of the GREIP group is to document the plurilingual uses and learning of students in contexts of significant language diversity. A fieldwork approach – knowledge of the schools, the classrooms, the communication practices used in the school, the opinions of the students with regard to language usage, etc. – constitutes a necessary condition to be able to undertake, in conjunction with the teaching staff, significant teaching proposals for the students.

We view language learning as a social activity that is essentially carried out by interacting with other people (teachers, parents, family members, etc.) and with texts, within and outside the educational environment, as well as through the mediation of technology. For this reason, in our research we put a very high priority on the data obtained from interactions, given that it is these data that enable us to reconstruct situated cognitive processes.

In this text we have tried to articulate the collaborative work of the research team and the teaching staff in the schools in the interest of contributing to language education anchored in specific educational contexts. This collaborative work, enshrined in action research, makes use of ethnography, which allows a closer perspective on the everyday life of classrooms and helps understand, from within, the linguistic practices among the subjects of the study, as well as promoting the development of their competences through efficient teaching proposals. The study of the processes generated by didactic interventions, by means of a meticulous analysis of the interactions that take place in them, allows us to take a critical view on teaching approaches and plan for new challenges.

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Websites with resources mentioned

Educational material

Material produced by the GREIP group in collaboration with teachers: <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/en/content/materials>