

**PROMOTING PLURILINGUALISM IN THE FOREIGN
LANGUAGE CLASSROOM THROUGH THE USE OF PUPILS'
HOME LANGUAGES**

**LA PROMOCIÓ DEL PLURILINGÜISME A L'AULA DE
LLENGUA ESTRANGERA A TRAVÉS DE L'ÚS DE LA LLENGUA
FAMILIAR DELS ESTUDIANTS**

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1. Introduction

Multilingualism is currently present in many primary schools in Catalonia. Many immigrant families already speak two or three languages, while the children of these families learn Catalan, Spanish and English at school, alongside the languages spoken at home. More often than not, the presence of children from immigrant backgrounds is regarded as an impediment for overall academic performance in schools and as a way of slowing the learning process, rather than as a positive resource for promoting language skills.

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This paper is based on a project recently carried out in a primary school (Year 6), with 9 different mother tongues coexisting among pupils. It considers ways in which the foreign language classroom can be seen as a positive context in which to promote intercultural communicative competences, plurilingualism and general academic improvement through the use of translation as a learning tool to encourage the use of home languages.

Extensive research has been carried out on the advantages that bilinguals and multilinguals have with regards to language learning in comparison to monolingual speakers (Baker, 2006; Cenoz & Genesse, 1998; Cummins, 2000; Lasagabaster, 1997). Moreover the use and visibility of home languages can become a useful resource for learning other languages (Cook, 2003; Cummins, 2005). Translation used as a learning strategy to promote the home languages of all the pupils in the class, especially when the languages are not part of the environment where its speakers live (Hélot, 2010), seems also especially relevant. Finally, language teaching within an intercultural dimension helps learners to acquire linguistic competence but also develops their intercultural competence (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

In this paper, I will argue that multilingual classrooms should be regarded as highly beneficial both within the education system in particular and for society in general and that having a high level of intercultural competence and being plurilingual can have very positive effects on foreign language learning.

2. The context

The project was carried out in the state infant and primary school 'Castella' in the Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona, where 92% of the pupils are of foreign origin.

This sixth grade primary school classroom consisted of nineteen pupils. Only 2 pupils were born in Spain, the other 17 had been living in Catalonia for different periods of time. Pupils came from 10 different countries and 9 different languages coexisted in the classroom.

For the purpose of the study, language background of the students was divided according to language use: home languages (used at home on a regular basis); social

languages (used in a social context on a regular basis) and school languages (those learnt at school).

3. Development

The starting point to this project was based on the following data: the language background of pupils¹⁴ was compared with their marks in the three school languages (English, Catalan and Spanish). In all three languages, multilingual pupils obtained higher marks than monolingual pupils. Multilingual pupils seemed to also show a higher intercultural competence than monolingual pupils.

The aim of the project work was to create stories in English in multilingual groups and translate them into pupils' home languages as a way to:

- Develop a positive attitude towards languages and make all the cultures visible in the class through the use of the different languages pupils spoke.
- Increase motivation towards language learning.
- Improve academic performance in English.
- Increase intercultural communicative competence.

These stories, addressed to P3, P4, P5 pupils, would be read in English and in all the home languages of the group on the day of *Sant Jordi*.

Pupils were read three stories as a starting point and were grouped according to:

- Different home languages.
- Foreign Language Competence.
- General academic performance.

Pupils were given an outline of the steps they had to follow: main characters, plot, specific vocabulary and design of the pictures and a draft to complete.

¹⁴ Pupils were grouped as multilingual (2 or more home languages) or monolingual as there were no significant differences between multilingual and bilingual pupils. More research is required.

Texts in English were revised and pupils started translating into their home language: pupils were given guidelines to facilitate translation and were encouraged to ask parents and family. Pupils designed each of the pages of the storybook. Once the story was finished, pupils in class rehearsed the storytelling and an activity was planned to carry out with the younger children.

On the day of *Sant Jordi*, stories were told to P3, P4, P5 pupils in English and in all the home languages and the activity was carried out. The storytelling was recorded and a blog was created by the pupils (<http://blocs.xtec.cat/englishceipcastella/2010/06/>). Finally, each pupil was given a copy of the story.

4. Conclusions

Implementing the story book project in this Year 6 classroom was a very positive experience for these pupils. They learnt to use languages in meaningful situations; they enjoyed working in groups, trying to understand what their peers had written in their own home language. They benefited from being creative and enjoying themselves a lot while learning through and with languages.

There was an overall academic improvement in language competence in all three languages and in intercultural competence, which could suggest that the presence of multilingual pupils may be highly beneficial in classes in schools at present.

5. Future proposals

Using stories as a starting point to involve other areas of the curriculum (IT, Arts & Craft, Science, etc.) taught in English (CLIL) in multilingual settings could and should also have very positive outcomes. A similar experiment could also be carried out in settings where languages involved are all prestigious in order to study whether the same procedures are involved.

All in all, the foreign language classroom of a primary school with many multilingual pupils seems an ideal setting for promoting language awareness and use, as it can contribute towards the development of a more intercultural and plurilingual society.

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