

Going out on a limb?

Introducing a plurilingual perspective in a university business English subject

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Introduction

This study is intended to explore how an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) university instructor interprets her role as someone who embraces a plurilingual perspective through particular classroom discourse behaviour. As will be shown in the analysis, the instructor's discourse behaviour involves issues related to the legitimisation of her professional stance, the raising of the students' awareness of particular views about language learning and use, and the adoption of plurilingual practices both on her part and on the part of the students. The relevance of the study is that it focuses on an aspect of the instructor's task for which she was very much left to herself during the process of designing the materials for the pilot teaching intervention reported in this paper. Therefore, the analysis of the data sheds light upon the process of discourse construction that can support the introduction of a plurilingual perspective in a teaching and learning environment that has been traditionally dominated by a monoglossic perspective.

The concept of 'plurilingual competence' proposed by the Council of Europe (2001) is based on the premise that "plurilinguals have a single, inter-related, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies to accomplish tasks" (Council of Europe, 2018: 28). The development of the concept triggered the need for the adoption of "pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures", that is for "didactic approaches which use teaching / learning activities involving several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures" (Candelier et al, 2007: 7). Theoretical and empirical support for adopting a plurilingual approach to second and foreign language learning can be found in the work of Cummins (2005, 2009), from which it is possible to derive the following conclusions: the learners' knowledge of previously learnt languages is a useful scaffolding framework for the acquisition of concepts and knowledge related to a new language; translation is part of the everyday life of bi/multilinguals and therefore it can be adopted as a teaching technique to promote the learners' awareness of their increasing communicative repertoire;

a focus on shared lexical structures in different languages can speed up the learners' acquisition of an additional language.

A 'plurilingual approach' to ESP teaching

The teaching of English, as well as other foreign languages, can be said to have been dominated until recently by what scholars like Hall and Cook (2012: 275) define as a dogma of "monolingual teaching" and Cenoz and Gorter (2013: 591) see as a "policy of language isolation in TESOL". Yet, these same voices, among several others, suggest there is a need for ceasing to teach English in isolation from other languages in the curriculum. The idea departs from research in the field of plurilingual education, which has demonstrated that the mobilisation of teachers' and students' plurilingual resources, and especially the reliance on specific procedures such as code-switching, facilitates comprehension of contents taught through a foreign language, the construction of discipline knowledge and the development of that same foreign language (Duverger, 2007). In this sense, Moore, Nussbaum, and Borràs (2012) suggest that the teachers' use of plurilingual modes of communication is a resource for the management of participation, comprehension, attention and complexity. Other studies have focused on the role of learners' own language(s) as a scaffolding tool. Kerr (2019:10) suggests three main 'classroom management techniques' to include learners' own language in classroom interactions: sandwiching, bilingual instructions and own-language moments. In 'sandwiching' the teacher speaks in English, but translates and repeats in English difficult terms or expressions. In the case of 'bilingual instructions' the teacher first gives the instructions in English and asks a student to repeat the instructions in the L1. Finally, in 'own-language moments' the students can use their own language in order to prepare themselves to use the target language, to reflect about the learning process or to evaluate themselves.

Creese and Blackledge (2010) suggest that the learners' use of other languages with which they are familiar can increase their feeling of inclusion, their participation and understanding (especially of those learners who are at less advanced levels) and the development of less formal relationships (e.g. among learners and between learners and their teacher), which will facilitate the process of conveying ideas and, consequently, of accomplishing lessons. Along this line, Hall and Cook (2012) consider that since "own-language use is not only inevitable within the language classroom, but contributes positively to new language development" (p. 294), it needs to be incorporated as a pedagogic resource.

An important aspect of adopting a plurilingual approach in the context of the present study, a business English course module, is Williams' (2002: 29) idea of translanguaging practices as "a natural way of developing and strengthening both languages". In this sense, it can be assumed that the competence of first-year students in the specific 'business register' was not only low in the

target language but also in their own language(s). Thus, the introduction of a plurilingual approach can represent a transformation of the course module from business English into business communication skills in three languages: English, Catalan and Spanish.

Methodology

In this chapter, I will examine the plurilingual practices of an ESP instructor teaching at a university in Catalonia. I will focus on three aspects: (1) How does the instructor legitimise her plurilingual approach in front of students who have been mainly exposed to a monoglossic approach to foreign language teaching/learning? (2) What model of language learning and use does the instructor project through her ‘interpretation’ of the materials and her management of the teaching/learning process? (3) How does the instructor discursively enact her role in correspondence with her heteroglossically-inspired materials and ideology?

The data analysed in this section correspond to the transcribed audio-recordings of the instructor’s talk in three different sessions, which took place in weeks one, six and 12 of a 15-week term. The analysis centres on Goffman’s notion of discourse ‘move’ (1981: 24), by which he refers to “any full stretch of talk or of its substitutes which has a distinctive unitary bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants finds themselves (some ‘game’ or other in the peculiar sense employed by Wittgenstein)”. For Goffman, “a move may sometimes coincide with a sentence and sometimes with a turn’s talk but need do neither”.

This study is based on the premise that in order to fully understand the impact of introducing a plurilingual approach in language teaching it is necessary to carefully examine the communicative practices of both teachers and students. In this case, the analysis focuses on three particular types of moves or strategies adopted by the instructor, which are interpreted as aimed at legitimising her plurilingual approach, representing the process of language learning and use and enacting her pedagogic role in a consistent way with a plurilingual approach.

Analysis

Legitimation

One of the features of the instructor’s discourse that calls the attention in the analysis of the first class session is her attempt to present her plurilingual approach as a legitimate experimental alternative to what she assumes has been the dominant monoglossic approach the students have been exposed to and would expect for the subject. She first adopts a legitimisation-by-authorisation strategy (van Leeuwen, 2007), as we can see in excerpt 1. Right at the beginning of the first class, the instructor (INS) makes sure that the students understand

that they will take part in a carefully planned innovative educational experience, to which she refers as “projecte/project”, and that this experience has been approved by the Faculty (“un projecte aprovat per la facultat /a project approved by the faculty”):

Excerpt 1 (session 1). Participant: Instructor (INS)

1 INS: aquest quadrimestre per a vosaltres és una mica diferent
 2 a la resta dels altres grups de: anglès per als negocis vale/
 3 nosaltres anirem una mica per lliure perquè tenim un projecte aprovat
 4 per la facultat que és per innovar
 5 la manera com ensenyem l’anglès per als negocis (.) vale/

1 INS: this semester for you is a little different
 2 from the rest of the other groups of: english for business ok/
 3 we will go it alone because we have a project approved
 4 by the faculty which is to innovate
 5 the way we teach english for business (.) okay/

Another legitimization strategy employed by the teacher in our data is rationalisation (van Leeuwen, 2007). Thus, she makes reference to the benefits of her actions, in this case the learners’ possibility to acquire or improve specific communicative skills (i.e. writing a business letter, giving a sales pitch) not only in English but also in Catalan and Spanish. In excerpt 2 we can see how the instructor uses her personal experience (line 6) to justify her decision to include business letters in Catalan and Spanish as foundation stage for learning to write business letters in English (lines 7 and 8).

Excerpt 2 (session 1). Participant: Instructor (INS)

1 INS: una de les coses que hem plantejat per començar a: a dissenyar aquest
 2 projecte\ (.) és si els estudiants de primer d’ADE* heu fet mai
 3 alguna carta e:- dintre del context dels negocis en català o en castellà\ (.)
 4 sabeu escriure una carta\ (.) de negocis una carta e:- comercial en
 5 català o en castellà/
 ((9 seconds later))
 6 jo a la vostra edat no en sabia\ (.) vale/ llavors penso- (.)
 7 no farà mal mirar com s’escriu una carta en català i en castellà
 8 vale/ (.) per després aprendre a fer-la en anglès vale/ (.)
 9 és una un tipus d’activitat que ens trobarem\ (1) vale/

1 INS: one of the things we planned to start: to design this
 2 project\ (.) is whether first-year students of the degree in EMA* have ever done
 3 any letter e:- in the context of business in catalan or spanish\ (.)
 4 do you know how to write a letter\ (.) in business e:- commercial letter in
 5 catalan or spanish/
 ((9 seconds later))

6 at your age i didn't know\(..) okay/ then i think- (.)
 7 it will not hurt you to see how to write a letter in Catalan and in Spanish\
 8 ok/(..)to later learn how to do it in English\ okay/ (..)

9 it's a- a type of activity that we will find\ (1) ok/

* ADE stands for Administració i Direcció d'Empreses (Business Management and Administration)

Representing language learning and use

In this section, I focus on specific discourse moves through which the instructor constructs a particular model of language learning and use that she deems compatible with her plurilingual approach. This model is based on three main elements: (1) the idea that learners' communicative competence is developed when they engage in particular communicative tasks whose resolution essentially involves assembling different parts or components, (2) the relevance of the interpersonal function of language use, and (3) a reliance on the learners' capacities to transfer knowledge and skills from their L1 to the foreign language.

The task orientation adopted in the course module is reinforced by the instructor's focus on the productive skills, writing and speaking, which are necessary to carry out two specific tasks related to their academic profile in the field of business management and administration: commercial correspondence and sales pitch. The instructor envisages learners' communicative competence as the accumulation of successful performances in a series of independent tasks that form part of the communicative repertoire of a business professional. Success is presented by the instructor as a 'technical' matter resulting from assembling a series of rhetorical moves, which are realised by means of specific sentences, in a particular order. It is also interesting to point out that the instructor usually comments on the function of these discourse moves without referring to a specific language, thereby suggesting that the move structure of the communicative task is valid for different languages. In excerpt 3 we can see that the instructor presents the first move in a sales pitch by repeating the modal construction 'have to + verb' (lines 3 and 4) to emphasise what she considers to be an essential aspect of a sales pitch, which is the innovative nature of the product (line 5):

Excerpt 3 (session 3). Participant: Instructor (INS)

1 INS: i'm telling you the different steps in which we need
 2 to organise your sales pitch\ okay/
 3 so the first thing that you have to do is to say it's a new product\
 4 and you have to emphasise how new it is
 5 and how different it is from the other products of their level\ ok/

In excerpt 4, we can see that after the students have become familiar with the move structure of the text, the instructor asks them to memorise what Pawley

and Syder (1983: 191–192) refer to as “lexicalised sentence stems” (lines 1–3), that is, units “of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed; its fixed elements form a standard label for a culturally recognised concept, a term in the language”. Then the instructor switches into Catalan to legitimise, through rationalisation, the adoption of this technique (lines 4–6).

Excerpt 4 (session 3). Participant: Instructor (INS)

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1  INS: okay/ have you identified these sentences/(.) yeah/(.)
2      so now you have to study them by heart\(.)
3      so you have more sentences the day of your sales pitch\(.) okay/(.)
4      si/ totes aquestes frases us serviran el dia del sales pitch\
5      sigui que: e:- jo de vosaltres me les estudiaria\(.) ok/(.)
6      llavors\(.) em: a continuació

4  INS: yes/ all these phrases will serve you on the day of the pitch sales\
5      so +e:- if i were you i would study them\(.) okay/(.)
6      then\(.) em: below

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Apart from defining the sequence of discourse moves that are necessary for the successful performance of the communicative task, the instructor invests a substantial amount of her discourse in raising the students’ awareness of the relevance of the interpersonal function of language. In excerpt 5 we can see her pointing out in Catalan the two main components of her feedback on a students’ essay: “contingut/content” (discourse moves) (line 2) and “formalitat/formality” (interpersonal elements) (line 4):

Excerpt 5 (session 2). Participant: Instructor (INS)

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1  INS: quan us vaig corregir la redacció fa un parell de setmanes\(.)
2      la majoria d’errors que: vam localitzar van ser qüestions de contingut\ (.)
3      que la gent s’oblidava de parlar del contacte\(.)vale/ i qüestions de
4      formalitat\ (1) si/

1  INS: when i checked your essay a couple of weeks ago\ (.)
2      most of the mistakes that we located were content issues\(.)
3      that people forgot to talk about the contact\ ok/ and questions of
4      formality (1) right/

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In line with her plurilingual approach, it is possible that the instructor may also consider relaxing the prescriptive nature of language use that characterises a monoglossic perspective. In excerpt 6, for example, she discusses in Catalan different ‘lexicalised sentence stems’ (Pawley and Syder, 1983) used in business letters (lines 2–4). In the first part of the excerpt the instructor refers to the conventional nature of the opening and closing expressions that she introduces

(line 2: “això és una convenció en anglès / this is a convention in English”), but she employs a prescriptive tone by using a future tense to express obligation (line 4: “no acabarem mai amb un ‘yours sincerely’\ vale/ we will never end with ‘yours sincerely’, ok/”). Nevertheless, in the second part of the excerpt, she seems to adopt a less prescriptive tone by relativising the seriousness of the error (line 6) on the basis of the degree of tolerance of the potential addressees (line 7) or their status as non-native speakers (lines 9–10).

Excerpt 6 (session 2). Participant: Instructor (INS)

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1  INS:  us en recordeu que us vaig dir hi ha coses que són petits detalls\ vale/(.)
2      això és una convenció en anglès\ o sigui quan posem dear sir madam (.)
3      al final tendim a acabar amb un yours faithfully\
4      no acabarem mai amb un yours sincerely\ vale/ si algú s'equivoca(.)
5      i li posa- i ho posa al revés\
6      perquè això pot passar\ vale/(.)
7      l'error té importància depenent de la situació comunicativa en la que
8      estem\ si l'altra persona és tolerant cap a aquest tipus d'errors potser
9      ni se n'adona\ vale/ potser també és un parlant d'anglès
10     com a llengua estrangera que no se n'adona d'aquest tipus d'errors\

1  INS:  remember i told you there are things that are small details\ ok / (.)
2      this is a convention in english \ so when we write dear sir madam(.)
3      at the end we tend to end with a yours faithfully\
4      we will never end with yours sincerely\ok /if someone makes a mistake(.)
5      and writes it- and writes it the other way round\
6      because this can happen\ ok/ (.)
7      the error is important depending on the communicative situation in which
8      we are in\ if the other person is tolerant towards such mistakes maybe
9      he doesn't even notice\ok/ maybe he is also a speaker of English
10     as a foreign language who doesn't notice this type of errors\

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The instructor's emphasis on the interpersonal function of language, to which she refers as “formalitat/formality”, appears mainly in the session focusing on business letters. In this same session, it seems clear that her ‘technical’ approach to communication involves the assemblage of a series of ‘parts’ (i.e. rhetorical moves), as it becomes evident in excerpt 7. We can see how a student's request about the meaning of the lexical item “hesitate” (line 4) allows her to present students a closing sentence which she characterises as “xula/cool” (line 7).

Excerpt 7 (session 2): Participants: Instructor (INS), Students (S03, S06, S07 & S11).

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1  INS:  very good so we are attaching our spring catalogue\ (.) ok/ yeah/(.)
2      both mean the same\ but attached an attachment tends to be more typical of
3      e-mails\ yeah/
4  S03:  hesitate/(.)

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5 INS: hesitate\(.) anyone knows hesitate /(..) **sabeu què vol dir** hesitate/
do you know what hesitate means?

6 S11: **dubtar\(.)**
hesitate\(.)

7 INS: **està molt bé e: aquesta pregunta perquè aprendrem una frase molt xula\(.)**
very good +e:+ this question because we will learn a very cool expression\(.)

8 S06: **dubtar\(.)**
hesitate\(.)

9 S07: **dubtar**
hesitate

10 INS: **molt bé dubtar molt bé o sigui amb una carta com aquesta podem dir**
very well doubt very well i.e. with a letter like this we can say 'do not

11 **no dubti- si us plau no dubti en posar-se amb contacte amb nosaltres si**
hesitate please do not hesitate to contact us if

12 **necessita més ajuda**
you need further help
(writes on the backboard) ok/ please do not hesitate (4) do not
hesitate to contact us (5) if you need further help\ (7) ok/

The instructor's 'technical' approach to communication that I referred to above is complemented, for example, by referring to the set of formal characteristics as a specific area of the scientific study of language ("llenguatge persuasiu/persuasive language"), which requires both understanding and practice, as shown in excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8 (session 2). Participant: Instructor (INS)

1 INS: **tot aquest tipus de llenguatge és llenguatge persuasiu\ per què/ (2)**
2 **perquè demostrarem que estem segurs del producte que venem**
3 ok/ and this is something we will need to practise as well

1 INS: this type of language is persuasive language\ why/(2)
2 because we show that we are sure of the product we sell\

A third characteristic of the model of language learning and use that the instructor seems to project to the students is her reliance on Cummins' (2005:2) idea that "concepts, academic content, and learning strategies transfer across languages" and that an important role of the instructor is to promote and facilitate, rather than impede, that the students can make this transfer. This is what she expresses in excerpt 9, in which she addresses the students in Catalan to present the task of writing a letter in Catalan as a preparatory step to writing one in English (lines 2–4).

Excerpt 9 (session 1). Participant: Instructor (INS)

1 INS: **l'objectiu és e: que no ens confonguem/(.) l'objectiu principal-**
2 **el focus està en saber escriure una carta en anglès\(.)**

3 **però per arribar a escriure una carta en anglès potser no ens fa mal em:**
 4 **fer-la primer en català\(.) vale/(.) i això és una cosa**
 5 **que aprendrem al llarg del quadrimestre\ em::**

1 INS: the goal is e: not to be confused\(.) the main goal-
 2 the focus is on knowing how to write a letter in English\(.)
 3 but to get to write a letter in English it may not hurt us em:
 4 to do it first in Catalan\(.) ok/ and this is something
 5 we will learn throughout the semester em::

Interacting and modelling

Teacher talk does not only serve as a source of foreign language input for the students, but also as a model of language use. From a monoglossic perspective, the only legitimate language in the classroom is the target language and the teacher should avoid using the learners' L1 in order to maximise the students' exposure to the target language and to enact a 'good' monolingual model of use. Therefore, from a plurilingual perspective, one of the challenges teachers face is how to exhibit an appropriate behaviour for a plurilingual speaker, which entails two apparently conflicting discursive actions: presenting a model for the use of the target language and legitimising the use of other languages as scaffolding devices whenever the situation requires it.

One way in which the instructor enacts her plurilingual perspective through her talk is by means of a variation of the 'sandwiching' technique (Kerr, 2019), which involves the translation of a problematic word or expression into the students' L1 to immediately continue her discourse in English. In excerpt 10 we can see that the instructor decides to translate into Catalan the second question in her turn (lines 4–5) in order to facilitate the students' understanding of their main task but, at the same time, keeps the technical term in English to refer to the targeted type of text ("reply to an inquiry", line 5):

Excerpt 10 (session 2). Participant: Instructor (INS), Student (S04)

1 INS: how could you organise the information\(.) imagine a letter
 2 a reply to an inquiry\(.) how would you organise the information/(.)
 3 which are the main parts in which you would organise the information/(.)
 4 **quines són les parts principals en què així (.) a bote pronto**
 which are the main parts in which (.) on the spur of the moment
 5 **organitzariu una** reply to an inquiry\
 you would organise a reply to an inquiry/(.)
 6 S04: **la salutació\(.)**
 the salutation\(.)
 7 INS: very good so we start with a salutation very good yeah\

This same excerpt is also illustrative of the instructor's acceptance of the students' use of Catalan to respond to her questions in English. Yet, occasionally

we observe that the instructor seems to ‘go monolingual’, as in excerpt 11. In these cases, although she still accepts responses in the students’ own language (line 8), she resorts to English to clarify meaning. We can see that in this specific case, in order to clarify the meaning of certain expressions, the instructor resorts to ‘monolingual techniques’ such as paraphrasing (lines 4–5), suggesting synonym expressions (line 9) or engaging students in reverse translation from Spanish (line 11) or Catalan (line 21) into English.

Excerpt 11 (session 3). Participants: Instructor (INS), Student (S09)

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1  S09: take a product off/(.)
2  INS: again/(.)
3  S09: take a product off\(.)
4  INS: yes\ ((writing on the blackboard)) take a product off the market\
5  ok\ this means when e: you don't sell the product anymore\ (.) ok/
6  S09: xx
7  INS: retailer/
8  S09: no podria ser xx
      couldn't it be xx
9  INS: yeah you could say recover or refund\ (.) refund\ (.)
10      usually the term that we use is refund\ (.) a refund\ ok/(.)
11      how do you say atraer la atención\ attract the attention
12 S09: highlight/(.)
13 INS: well you could say (.) highlight\ which is a word that they use
14      here\ yeah\ highlight\ +e::+ new features\ that's what they say (.)new
15      features\ (2)ok/ or you could say broadly catch the attention as well\ ok/
16      if you want\ but basically highlight new features by highlighting new
17      features we attract the attention of the prospective e: seller\
18      (.) ok/ what else\ (3) here when we said profit rate this is the term that
19      they use in the audio file\ (.)ok/(.) you could also say profit margin\ (2)
20      ok/ yes/ so(.)it's not in the text but another e: way of saying e:
21      marge de benefici is profit margin\ you may find both\ ok/ and what else\

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The scaffolding function of learners’ own languages can be seen in the fact that they are not only allowed by the instructor as tools for communication among students in order to complete a group task, but also as a means to focus on meaning. This is what we can see in excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12 (session 2). Participant: Instructor (INS)

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1  INS: so now in small groups yeah/(.) try to answer these two questions
2      here xx in in any language of your choice\ (.) yeah/
3      if you want to discuss it in english xx if you want to: (.)
4      do it in catalan or spanish you can do it as well\ (.) ok/(.) yeah/(.)

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As we can observe, the instructor creates ‘own language moments’ (Kerr, 2019), by explicitly telling students that they can answer the task’s questions

“in any language of [their] choice” (line 2) and that they can also carry out the group discussion in whichever of the three languages they prefer: English, Catalan or Spanish (lines 3–4).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored teacher’s talk in an ESP university classroom in Catalonia, where local students are typically bilingual in Catalan and Spanish. My analysis has been aimed at describing an instructor’s personal way of responding to a relatively recent call on foreign language teaching to overcome a policy of language separation and adopt a more cognitively-realistic, contextually-situated approach to language teaching and learning that integrates the learners’ knowledge of and communicative experience in different languages.

In dealing with teaching innovation and, more specifically, with the adoption of a plurilingual perspective in adult foreign language teaching, I have implicitly introduced a sense of complexity which I see as very much in line with Complexity Theory’s rejection of the view of complex systems as rule-governed: “the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules” (Gleick, 1987: 24; cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2013: 369). I see the analysis that I have presented not only as an attempt to avoid establishing a direct causal relationship between materials design and learning outcomes, but especially as a call to be alert to elements of the teaching and learning process that perhaps cannot be fully anticipated and that have to do with the development of the teacher’s personal definition of how to do being a plurilingual teacher.

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