

# Teacher identity construction and plurilingual competence: a longitudinal study about language teaching in multilingual contexts

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## Abstract

This article is part of a thesis dissertation focused on cognition and belief systems about prior language learning experience, teacher education and classroom practice. This document examines teacher identity construction in relation to plurilingual competence.

We want to study a dynamic identity, which is constructed in the here and now. We use the European Council contents for language teaching.

The central purpose is analysing belief systems in relation to the teaching of languages in plurilingual contexts. We focus our analysis on teacher understandings of their new social challenges and how they respond in and to these situations.

The interactional data was gathered from five focus groups of ten teachers from different educational stages. Prior to this, we collected recurrent questions which had emerged in reflective narrative and individual interviews. Data was analysed using a qualitative approach. Activity theory is the conceptual framework to identify which tensions appear when we identify not only the theoretical discourse, but also the everyday practical classroom reality. For this reason, we distinguish between dilemmas, conflicts, critical conflicts and double binds. The impact of this proposal can be summarized in relation to the following results: urgent necessity for teacher training, sharing experiences to help developing professional identity and transferring positive experiences in schools.

## Keywords

Plurilingual competence; language learning; self-confrontation; reflective training.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. New terms for a new reality

The elimination of physical frontiers is the removal of mental borders. Learning to live with linguistic and cultural diversity would be a laudable purpose but an insufficient one if coexistence is understood as being close to each other, without bridges which cultural and linguistic differences can cross. Navigating to find and contrast each other's cultures and from contrast, enrich oneself. This is one of the greatest challenges of the world we have built.

We are not referring to an epidermal issue, but to a new situation that is changing the world in which we live. Challenges generate concern in what is already known. Moreover, they generate new expectations which must be faced from new conceptual frameworks that give meaning to the new cultural, social and linguistic orientation.

Aware of that, the institutions in charge have developed documents that affect all the areas of the social activity and, in a specific way, the educational one. These documents certainly create new perspectives on what is already known, and provide when necessary, a new terminology for the emerging social situations. Thus, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) focuses on the concept of plurilingual competence and defines it as:

the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures (CEFR, 2001, p. 168).

The ability to communicate and participate in an intercultural relationship that must characterize the formation of citizens, social partners, must go with a personal and collective decentralization process. The prefix "inter" of the term intercultural leads us to

the idea of living "inside of", "in" or "between". Regardless of what is understood, the purpose is clear: the overlap is not the answer to the contact of languages and cultures; the answer is being less focused in order that each social agent understands that their culture is not the culture, that their social customs are not the social customs and that their language is not the language. The response to diversity only makes sense if we value this diversity.

## **1.2. The discourse of the teachers, a good mediator**

The formulation of new concepts cannot be understood as a static way. We are not talking about immutable principles; we are talking about the desire to give meaning to what happens through new formulations that will help to guide it. It is a dynamic process of formulation and reformulation of perceptions that can begin in the depiction of new documents by the European Commission, and from here, follow a long way to the impregnation of these perceptions in social institutions, including schools. Yet, this is not to stay, but to give feedback to the general intention to formulate with terms what is happening and what is preferable to happen. In order to do that, reflective training (Van Lier, 1996) might be a good choice.

Teachers, people who are living inside the complexity of the multilingual and the intercultural immediacy, are key parts in the spiral trip that helps to generate a discourse on the new social and educational contexts. As the psychologist Michael Cole (1998) said, the term context as "that which surrounds" is represented as a set of concentric circles that represent different levels of context. These levels, which describe interconnected systems, start with a microsystem as a main point. Regarding education questions, teachers and students are the main point of it.

It is often not firmly stated that teachers are the ones who work in the front line of the conflict. They are the ones who have seen how different cultures and languages met in their classrooms. The ones who have had to consider how to treat the families who are



unaware of the simplest institutional routines, the ones who consider what is necessary to tolerate and what is not. The ones who have seen how their role of teaching has gone back in front of a new one, more focused on mitigating the social conflict.

Therefore, it is necessary to approach teachers in order to know how they live their personal experiences in schools with an important linguistic and cultural diversity. This approach will only be possible if we listen to their words, the discourses generated from their experience. It is in the analysis of these talks where we can detect how they anticipate what can happen based on their impressions (Lahire 2011).

There are differences between what is mentioned by CEFR and what the teachers think; between what they say and what they do; between the social exclusion and the political discourse; between the educational purposes and the resources that schools have. Teachers' speech filters and covers this mismatch and it is from here that it gives meaning to their performance. However, not every action is translated into speech. As noted by Cicurel (2011) not everything that is real is assimilated in the verbal expression. It is possible they act without knowing the reasons, but what it is found in their talks is the intention to give a general meaning to the action.

Teachers' discourse acts as a mediator since it evens out the disagreements detected between what they say and what they do, but it also acts as a mediator between the concepts formulated in a general way and its implementation in schools. A vertical perspective would avoid this evidence. The training processes, according to Freeman (1996), Elbaz (2001), Hargreaves (1999), and Woods (1996), must give priority to teachers to know how they re-conceptualize their world and how they act in it. This voice can provide feedback on the spiral process we have talked about, on the construction of a conceptual framework to be in the new multilingual and multicultural contexts, and guide them. In this field, self-confrontation defines the re-elaboration of experience, both pertinent and shared in an inter-subjective space, which allowed participants to construct knowledge in order to act in the activity.

### 1.3. Learning about contradictions in a collective way

Without the intention to do an exhaustive literature review, there are many authors who have studied contradictions. Yrjö Engeström and his colleagues, within a methodological framework based on the dialectical tradition of cultural-historical activity theory, have been doing a lot of research in this field. Regarding their research, contradictions cannot be observed directly, only within their manifestations. Here, is an example of their thoughts:

Contradictions are often mentioned as significant factor behind organizational change. However, the meaning of the term contradiction is commonly left vague and ambiguous. Almost any tension or aggravated problem seems to qualify as contradiction. Similarly, related terms such as paradox, conflict, dilemma and double bind tend to be bundled together or used interchangeably in an ad hoc manner. Such ambiguity and looseness of conceptualization are detrimental to research. There is a risk that contradiction becomes another fashionable catchword with little theoretical content and analytical power (2011, p. 368).

In front of the change we have talked about, there are three options: a minimum adaptation, an escape or a transformation. According to Bourdieu (1997), there is a tendency to avoid major crisis; in all likelihood this trend is associated with the first two options. But the demands of the context are such an important matter nowadays that it is impossible to hold minimizing or decreasing attitudes in a past, which is often idealized. The only thing we have is the need for a transformation that requires addressing disagreements from a holistic perspective.

Accordingly, our purpose is to promote this transformation. Therefore, the following two issues should be considered. Firstly, the specification of disagreements always goes with a certain kind of tension. Secondly, transformation moves both in a vertical and in a

horizontal level so it affects the individual as well as their social environment and the people who are part of it.

Terms like conflict, tension and contradiction have been used a lot in the field of training. D. Woods (1996) consolidated in his research the concept “hotspots” which was defined as:

It is at points in a text where there seems to be a conflict between what is and what is believed, that beliefs stated more clearly and less consciously appear (Woods, 1996, p. 71).

The interest of Woods’ studies is to detect conflicts which emerge in the same teachers’ discourse when they refer to what they think and what they do. Other studies focus their attention on the practice because they are based on the premise that teaching practice is always performed in moments of tension. Altet (2008) considered that the role of the teacher could be defined as:

the management of uncertainty and the tension due to constant, mutual and interactive adjustments (Altet, 2008, p. 48).

Taking into account the terms used to refer to all types of misalignments, Engeström and Sannino (2011) verified that a definition in a theoretical level was necessary. Their proposal is based on this idea, on specifying how contradictions are manifested in the discourse as a prior step to categorize them. For this reason, they suggested to distinguish between “dilemma”, “conflict”, “critical conflict” and “double bind”.

A dilemma is "an expression or an exchange of inconsistent evaluations, either between people or within the discourse of a single person" (Engeström and Sannino, 2011, p. 373). Conflict involves opposition, disagreement and even obstruction between actions of different people. Furthermore, a critical conflict appears if the situation leads to misunderstanding and paralysis related to the capacity to act. Finally, these authors (2011, p. 374) use the term double binds to refer to the processes in which people aware of the

contradictions and the need to solve them ask themselves “what can we do?” instead of “what can I do?”. This is because the double bind processes involve the transition from the individual to the collective.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Procedure and intervention**

Our analysis is concerned with teachers’ beliefs in relation to language teaching in multilingual contexts, and the need for both initial education and in-service training in this field. Data was gathered in two phases and it involved ten teachers from different educational levels: one of pre-school, four of primary school and four of high school. In addition, our study included a specialist in the area of didactics of linguistic diversity as all participants have been exposed to language and culture diversity in their classroom.

The first phase of the process consisted of reflective narratives (Bertaux, 1997). These samples were personal analyses of their own linguistic history and specific situations of their language usage. They were followed by an interview with each of the participating teachers. Although the researchers led the interviews, the participants responded according to their needs and interests. Through these methods, the participants could express their experiences in relation to multilingualism. Their analysis allowed us to perceive conflict situations, and deal with the construction of teaching identity from a dynamic point of view.

At the same time, this first set of data allowed us to detect recurring issues that guided the second phase of the project, the group sessions. Five sessions in total were carried out. In the first one, the researchers pointed out issues from a more introspective approach and allowed the teachers to manage them on their own. In the other sessions, we focused on a process of self-confrontation, which consisted of the following: teachers were asked to film and record a session of class where some aspects related to both linguistic and

cultural diversity appeared. From this point onwards, they chose a five or ten-minute sequence to comment on with the rest. The other participants, in a very protected environment, expressed their views and comments without any intention of reaching a consensus, only deepening speculatively in the topic raised.

Immediately after each session, the members of the research group met to discuss its development. In these meetings, they basically considered methodological issues. However, it is necessary to note that the researchers, who were kept in the background in the joint sessions, had in that moment a space to give their opinions on the thoughts expressed throughout each session. Moreover, they also expressed their views on the degree of involvement and interest that the participants had shown. Text and context were mixed in these first comments characterized by immediacy and spontaneity.

Engeström (2001; 2010) points out that people live immersed in multiple activity systems, in multiple spheres where individual and collective activities converge. In the analysis we present, two activity systems act together: the researchers, who have pursued researching objectives, and the participants, whose objectives are their students' learning and their own training. While the two systems consist of different purposes and activities, it is also true that they are permanently linked by the sense and meaning of the teaching practice.

In this article we will focus on the session groups in which the teachers had the leading role. It is about focusing on an activity that is collective and systemic (Engeström, 1999). For this reason, we take into account multivocality, which we define as multiple points of view in interaction, as not solved points that are faced through the collective debate. We will refer to the speech that the participants generated in relation to plurilingual competence. Our intention is to determine how they lead the speech and what doubts are raised in order to detect structural problems that allow us to design new training devices. The results that we will present arise from the analysis of the last session, which dealt



with emerging issues in narrative literature, from the interviews and from the different self-confrontation exercises that were carried out.

## 2.2. Data analysis

At the beginning of this paper, we said that the conflict often appears when there is a contradiction between what teachers believe and do (or they state they do). For this reason, we explored how contradictions were manifested and which differences appeared when the experience faced the collective discourse. The starting point we considered was that the way in which participants confront and resolve contradictions offers us a new and dynamic vision of reality. This was our reasoning for taking into account both the personal and the professional history of the participants as well as the ability to put into their knowledge and experiences into play when dealing with new areas of confrontation.

Once the interviews and literature narratives were analysed, data showed that key concepts such as multilingualism, plurilingual competence and linguistic repertoire lacked any consistency in the discourse of teachers. They either referred to them in a confusing way or these key concepts were simply not part of their repertoire at the time they conceptualized the phenomenon. Constant tensions appeared when they tried to reflect how they had put these concepts into practice in their classrooms. It was also found that the performance in the classroom responded to a wilful, but rather improvised performance. In short, the design of activities was not maintained in clear criteria and was agreed by the teaching teams. Taking this information into account we oriented the collective discussion groups. The purpose was to interpret the conceptual and emotional state of the teacher working in multilingual classrooms in order to detect needs related to the processes of initial education and in-service training.

The data was analysed in a qualitative approach, following the criteria established by the research group on Multilingualism and Language Learning (PLURAL) from, among others, the contributions by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005) on the analysis of the speech in

interaction. Our aim is to analyse the marks that the subject leaves in what she/he says, focusing mainly on thematic and referential aspects.

Following Engeström and Sannino (2011), contradictions cannot be observed directly, but it is necessary to locate them through their manifestations. In this case, we analysed them through the speech generated among all the participants. As we have mentioned before, we will classify them into “dilemmas”, “conflicts”, “critical conflicts” and “double binds”. In this paper, the analysis of the data focused the discursive manifestation of contradictions.

### **3. Findings**

We will make reference to the results focusing on the three issues already targeted that emerged from the analysis of individual data.

#### **3.1. Multilingual competence: from concept to action**

Among the teachers who took part in the focus sessions there is a widespread agreement at the time of conceiving language as an instrumental area. Furthermore, we realized that they were in favour of language learning. In this field, their beliefs and practice were always in coherence, without contradictions and thus without conflicts. As a vehicle of communication, they also agreed on taking into account the continuous involvement of all educational agents.

Considering the new multilingual reality of the classroom in which they work, the participants expressed the need for change to the educational and methodological approaches of the linguistic and communicative education. The dilemma arises at this point. On the one hand, they were aware of this need, but on the other hand, they also manifested that a lot of mistakes were made in the way that language is taught to beginners; as their native language does not have any presence in the classroom and thus,

they become invisible. At the same time, however, there were constant contradictions, manifested as double binds. They required the change as a collective way, as spiral learning where this change arises by the common conscience. For this reason, the individual data allows us to conclude that participants perceive a structural change. With this, we mean a societal change which goes beyond the current moment. As a consequence, in front of this situation, they try to give answers and find solutions as an individual way.

On the other hand, in general they believe that the collective teaching is aware of the dilemma and that a lot of schools seek spaces to think about it. Participants explained that this is a topic of on-going debate in teachers' meetings and assemblies. The problem is in the gap that exists between the theory and the practice, maybe because it has never been taught to them. In their own words:

there are those who talk about multilingualism but the theory is the theory and that's all

This gap between theory and practice, between what they believe and do, emphasises the lack of guidelines they have to think and design actions in the classroom. The focus does not lay on ways of doing it that go in opposite directions. The participants, above all, brought up the need to know how they can arrange specific didactics which have the new multilingual and multicultural reality that characterize their classrooms as a starting point. Again we see that the dilemma appears as a lack of reflection.

They perceive the lack of experience of many teachers who want to change the situation but do not know how. Although they insist on the need to change many attitudes, they also feel the need to reassert themselves. Here, is an example:

I think schools are doing pretty well eh!

but I am optimistic I think:: schools are in this way and there may be major changes.

This willingness to face the problem and promote transformation processes allows us to consider that its manifestations respond to a double bind. None of the participants introduced himself/herself against any of his/her colleagues, so the contradictions do not become disagreements. Moreover, none of the participants expressed a feeling of paralysis or helplessness in front of the difficulties, but they always suggested new alternatives. Here, are three examples:

But I think but I think that it isn't only the language but also the fact that they know that their identity is important and that we don't have to eliminate it by the reason that they arrive in a completely different society

Actually there is an attempt to:: rethink- |ahm| rethink isn't there? what is the current:: situation:: of immersion at schools and what's the treatment of:: languages [...] to gathe::r more stories and more experiences

Yes I believe that there are many schools that are on the right path:: to know how things should be done don't they? There's reflection and yes I mean I'm optimistic I think: that schools are on this way and there may be important changes

### **3.2. From action to systematization**

Participants agreed that every society has to respect students' cultures; origins need to be very present, especially in the learning environment and in the classroom. However, in class they talk about sporadic activities not to forget the languages. If they had to fill in a grid with the activities they carry out, they say that "we would have it quite full" at primary school and "virtually empty" at high school. We can also see a clear example of inner conflict, as a result of tension:

In my specific case because they are:: such faraway cultures as |mhm| references there are few models regarding Urdu or:: Bengali or Chinese or:: my ignorance is

total and I suppose that if I knew something more it would be easier to find points in common and:: but yes I admit that as a high school teacher it's an issue I have to continue working on

The lack of systematization is another important dilemma that stands out through the teachers' manifestations. Once again, this dilemma is not in a cul-de-sac, as it has a possible exit: training. When the researchers asked the participants about their experience of taking part in these sessions, their opinion had a clear consensus: they said that these sessions had helped them to realise the importance of training, they considered them extremely important if we are to make progress in a true multicultural education. Once again, it becomes clear that we should not look for contradictions in the difference of opinions, but in the lack of information. The fragment that follows exemplifies this perception:

A lot of teachers that sometimes don't start with it no because they don't want- don't want or have a bad attitude but because sometimes they don't know how start with this topic you know? [...] for the experience that I have in schools I don't see bad attitudes among the teachers right?

They say that after these sessions they have become aware of the large amount of resources and strategies that can be used:

Realize:: that there are other ways that there are many:: ways to focus on my job Making use of the students' linguistic repertoires, which are very complex and often unknown, is an ideal way of immersion in other cultures, they say. Resources like these, which deal with language in its maximum functionality, would reduce the situations of hatred, rejection, the stereotypes and the negative representations that concern the participants. The sessions they have shared with other teachers have helped them to understand that we always need to consider the language and the communicative situations when we use the language, especially in multilingual environments.

The fact of having shared successful experiences is the best way to move forward. Getting to know colleague situations and daily contextualised practices promote reflection and, as a consequence, the construction of knowledge and new forms of actuation in this field:

from a doubt we ask and learn don't we?

The participants also insist on the importance of these experiences for the students. Making them part of learning, through practice and reflection, is the best way to develop communication and multiculturalism. Never before, had anybody made them think on their own languages. A participant explains:

I have realised that it has worked with them. Talking about their own languages has been a spectacular breakthrough".

### **3.3. Contradiction and transformation: need of change**

There is always a reflection between what happens in the classroom and what happens later. We have realized that this reflection covers the previous experience and the daily practice, what is individual and what is social. We have already commented that conflict appears when there is contradiction and this is the beginning of change, of transformation. Through this study, in which we can see how horizontal learning opens new ways of change, some tensions disappear as a consequence of sharing experiences and thoughts. The collective overtakes the individual when it comes to share dialogue, to reflect and build common knowledge. In this regard, the need of training appears in all the participants, not only regarding plurilingual competence but also in practical training.

We would need to give something such as a handbook or a series of ideas of to formulate and to act and to put them into practice and then |ehm| see how how it works right? I mean going beyond p-put like:: like a series of experiences that:: after all we all agree on the same thing don't we?

I believe that sharing experiences is good you know! Successful because in this way with a few clear examples teachers see it and then it is as if they became confident to say let's start? Let's try it!

#### **4. Conclusions**

At the beginning of this paper we talked about the didactics of languages and cultures and cultural and intercultural teacher awareness as ways to understand new situations of inclusion and learning in multilingual environments. In order to develop the conceptual framework which guides this thesis dissertation, we asked ourselves which contradictions are appeared and in which four kinds of discursive manifestations are they expressed when the participants share their previous experience and daily practice in multilingual environments?

Although the analysis of the whole data is not finished yet, throughout this part of the corpus we point out the need for teachers to make sense of the social changes they live in first person; participants can only do it in contexts where speech is controlled by themselves. This, regarding discursive manifestations, implies some considerations. One the one hand, tensions become dilemmas in personal situations, in ways where the individual action is translated into speech. Their daily practice involves dilemmas, as well as the self-confrontation between what they believe and do. On the other hand, we identify double binds when participants try to give a general meaning to the action, which often becomes an unbalanced situation. The current agreement, the collective awareness and the need of change is the first step, as a dynamic field, to make the necessity of creating new formative devices explicit. We also highlight that conflicts and critical conflicts are indeed less frequent than dilemmas or double binds, maybe because participants do not manifest disagreements or resistances in their thoughts and actions or maybe because they understand other participants' experiences, a key signal of current need for change. For all these reasons mentioned, more data has to be analyzed in order

to investigate around these hypothetical agreements deeply. However, we are considering a possible contribution in this field. The responses to these situations and the construction of new interpretative frameworks are never individual. For this reason, it is more likely that there are more double binds than conflicts. Dialectics appears when we contradict what we are saying and, in that moment, we evolve when we deny what we previously said.

Finally, both in this particular paper and in all the research the asymmetrical relation between researchers and teachers world, who are in real contact with multilingual diversity is often perceived. In this field, reflective training seems to be a good alternative to decrease these differences. Participants need to share their individual experiences, which are only expressed in environments where they feel completely comfortable. Teachers need to be asked to wonder their daily life and confront their own believes with beliefs of the others who are in the same situation. Overall, the transformation processes, always motivated by remarkable contradictions, should be seen as horizontal learning, emphasized when heterogeneous groups are created and their voices are collected.

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