NEW PERSPECTIVES ON FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING: A STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIONS ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Modern society does not envisage school as an exclusive learning environment any more. New technologies and complex interaction and organisational patterns constantly challenge learning modalities and stimulate the emergence of new learning strategies. This proposal focuses on the study of secondary school students' representations concerning formal and informal learning of English in a Romanian environment.
Key words: formal learning, informal learning, learning environment, plurilingualism

Introduction

There are many reasons why formal and informal language learning is an interesting and worthy area of study. Current research has highly focused on formal learning and teaching of foreign languages showing little interest as far as "outside the school learning" is concerned. However, informal learning has a history within educational and social thought, and attitudes towards learning languages in various environments are more complex than one might expect at first.

The present paper represents a part of a wider project that investigates the constructs of formal and informal learning of foreign languages in the Banat region. I am particularly interested in English as a foreign language learnt and taught in a multilingual and multicultural environment.

I will consider the following areas: language biography, students' representations regarding foreign languages, learning within a community of practice and learning strategies. In particular, I will examine different levels of convergence and discontinuity between these areas.

The specificity of a plurilingual context of research

The research I have been conducted for about four years is situated in the Banat region. This area represents a particular example of linguistic and cultural co-habitation which has given birth to a variety of language learning approaches.

The historic and political evolution of this region, placed at the Serbian and Hungarian borders, led to a continuous reassessment of the linguistic and cultural repertoire of its inhabitants. This is the reason why the population of

this area represents the embodiment of European values crystallized through centuries and having a Latin model at its origin. Later on, Byzantine and Slavic influences reshaped the linguistic heritage. Nowadays, the four languages and cultures the most represented are: Romanian, Serbian, German and Hungarian.

However, some historical moments have to be mentioned in order to understand the turning points which caused the creation of a language and cultures *creuset* in the West of the country. The Banat region has known a powerful phenomenon of colonisations during the 18th and 19th centuries. On one hand, the Hapsburg Empire was trying to restructure its crowded areas, extremely affected by a social and economic crisis. On the other hand, Banat was meant to function as a region which should have protected the empire from possible enemy attacks. Even more, the very rich economic potential of Banat laid at the origin of the Hapsburg colonization. These social movements have also changed the social, linguistic and political structure of the local population, creating thus a new multi-ethnic and plurilingual community. These colonisations have encouraged the emergence of new mentalities and put the basis of another type of education: opened to the acknowledgement of other languages and cultures, based on tolerance and collective thinking and living. In other words, the social phenomena gave birth to an intercultural society, sensible to the foreign element and dynamic from several points of view.

This tolerant and permissive context suffered not only ideological and political transformations but linguistic too when the communist regime was installed. The status of Russian shadowed both the regional minorities' languages and other foreign languages too. However, in Banat, the former continued to be used especially in private environments, such as the family, groups of friends, etc. The linguistic policies from the last twenty years have prioritized two aspects:

- valorisation of minorities' languages and
- the importance of foreign languages learning from a young age.

The reform of the Romanian educational system has known a dynamic reconsideration between 1997 and 2000. It was characterized by the implementation of a new direction, namely from an ethnocentric educational system towards a flexible one, receptive to linguistic shifts and learners' needs.

The ecological approach of language learning in a plurilingual region

Language learning is powerfully linked to the environment where this process takes place. The historical conditions presented here have emphasized the continuity of languages in Banat due to their practice in

isolated contexts. Therefore, one has to analyse language learning processes in relation with the particularities of the context where this language is practiced.

Taking into consideration the theories of chaos and complexity regarding language learning (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2002) and perceiving the language class as a social ecosystem, the ecological approach focuses on the elements of the environment that make things happen the way they do. From the point of view of ecological linguistics, context is not only a background for language but it defines it while simultaneously is being defined *by* it (van Lier 2004). Ecology is the study of predictable and unpredictable influences that have an impact on language learning. This approach actually favours interconnections, centre-multiplicity and the in-between spaces which emerge among learning situations. Thus, the ecological approach is appropriate to our study because it does not ignore the various influences of environmental elements on the learner's learning activity.

Language learning in Banat includes not only foreign languages, taught in a formal environment, but minority languages too. Therefore, an ecological perspective fits this heterogeneous linguistic structure as language learners are gradually developing various patterns, both of action and knowledge-in-action through their interactions with others and with various contexts such as formal, non-formal and informal contexts.

The evolutionary pattern of the ecological theory rejects the linear process of language acquisition while advancing a complex view of learning:

> Ecological linguistics regards language learning not as gradual, linear acquisition, but as emergence. Emergence happens when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher-order system. The whole is not only more than the sum of its parts, it is of a different nature than the parts. The new system is on a different scale, and has different meanings and patterns of functioning than the simpler ingredients had from which emerged. (van Lier 2004:5)

According to van Lier, in terms of learning, the notion of *emergence* is tightly related to *affordance*, a term which indicates a relationship between a learner and the environment where his/her contact with the language takes place. In this paper, I will particularly discuss the formal and informal environment as potentially rich resources of language learning in this plurilingual region.

In order to summarise this part, I will mention the characteristics of the ecological approach: *relations*, *context*, *patterns* and *systems*, *emergence*, *quality*, *value*, *critical perspective*, *variability*, *diversity* and *activity* (van Lier 2004).

Formal vs. informal learning

If formal learning is commonly associated with a specific category of institutions, such as schools, colleges or universities, defining informal learning becomes a difficult task. I will borrow the characterization provided by the European Commission, according to which:

> Learning that is *not organised* or *structured* in terms of goals, time or instruction. This covers skills acquired (sometimes unintentionally) through *life and work experience*, for example:
>
> - project-management or IT skills acquired at work
> - languages and intercultural skills acquired during a stay abroad
> - IT skills acquired outside work
> - skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child).

The absence of structure and organisation and the emphasis of life experience shape the content of the informal learning. However, the latter was anticipated and developed by the representatives of social theories of education: E. Lindeman (1926), J.M. Brew (1947, 1955), J. Dewey (1968, 1969, 1978), I. Illich (1973, 1975, 1976). They globally argued the benefits of learning through experience and within a community and pointed out the disadvantages of schooling.

Minorities' languages in Banat emerged in an exclusively informal environment, supported however by a formal one starting with the schooling age. Nowadays, unfortunately, learning local languages has dramatically decreased, English being promoted as a *lingua franca* in a variety of environments. Despite this ideological linguistic and cultural shift, English too benefits both from its formal and informal support as it will be discussed in the data analysis part of this paper.

Communities of practice as informal environments of language learning

Announced by social theories and developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, communities of practice are

> re-formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Wenger, 2007)

They argue that these communities are everywhere and that we are at the same time members in several communities: within our families, at work, in various associations, etc. The students of our study also activate in a multitude of communities where there is potential for language learning: they learn them at school, they take private courses or they attend private language schools. Watching television and films, listening to music with colleagues, families or friends or joining virtual communities are other examples of groups who share the same interest and these activities may led to the emergence of learning.

Students' representations on their language biography

The results presented in this paper are issued from both a quantitative and a qualitative research. Thus, the analysed data has been gathered from 100 questionnaires filled by secondary school students on a voluntary basis. The respondents were selected from the urban and rural environment and their age is between 11 and 14 years old. The quantitative dimension provided important elements for a more thorough qualitative research consisting of 10 interviews with students who have answered to the previous questionnaires.

As far as their language biography is concerned, the results of the questionnaires have pointed out the following aspects:

- the secondary school students we questioned learn English, French and German in a formal environment;
- 38% of them named Romanian as the language they like to speak at home whilst 49% indicated both Romanian and English as favourite languages;
- when asked to give examples of languages they would like to learn, the students enumerated several languages from languages spoken at home, Serbian or Hungarian, to Korean and Chinese;
- the data analysis identified a pre-school acquisition stage: at home, in cultural centres or by media-related activities.

The interviews, on the other hand, permitted a more detailed analysis as the students felt comfortable in expressing their opinions about language learning and also about the environment they live and learn in. One of the key themes which emerged from these data was students' perceptions of the plurilingual environment of their region. If the younger ones showed themselves only aware of the rich linguistic repertoire, the 14-year old teenagers also acknowledged the benefits of speaking some of the minorities' languages: you can find a job easier; you can visit and work in the country where the language is spoken or you can understand what people speak

around you. Even more, respondents in whose families, people speak minorities' languages mentioned the acquisition of partial skills such as oral comprehension, for example: although they refuse speaking in Hungarian they understand it.

Learning languages is also a part of their participation in virtual communities: playing games in networks or communicating with foreign teenagers on common themes. Students feel that languages are tools for accessing information, knowledge in general. Their choice of languages depends both on their cognitive and emotional needs and on the demands of the environment.

English as a foreign language or a new *lingua franca*?

In this contextual framework, English has a special status, being a language specific both to the formal and informal environment. The majority of subjects included English in several categories as the language they prefer, they speak at home, they learn at school, they watch films and listen to music, etc. Teenagers have also associated English with strong emotional connotations. Furthermore, for 58% of the subjects, this language is *very important* while for 34% of them is *important*.

Not only have the students manifested positive representations regarding English but they also have a well-developed feeling of self-efficiency, indicating *good* (42%) or *good enough* (41%) when asked to appreciate their language level. The level indicators were mostly communicating abroad (87%), comprehension of films and songs (55%), grades at school (50%). They do not show awareness regarding the different types of environments where they learn the language but they exemplify means of accessing information situated in a variety of contexts.

However, the interviews put forward the relation between the feeling of personal efficiency and informal or non-formal learning. 4 out of 10 students said they have learnt more English outside school: music and films contributing a lot to their learning. They also mention private classes as extremely helpful because, in this case, the teacher focuses only on their needs and problems, a similar situation being more difficult or impossible in a formal context. These results are supported by a 2011 report which states that "*personalisation*, *collaboration* and *informalisation* (informal learning) will be at the core of learning in the future." (*The Future of Learning: Preparing for Change*)

English is not only present in teenagers' daily life but it is also promoted by teachers, media, political, economical and cultural factors which make it almost mandatory in any professional or educational area. In

these circumstances, more and more parents require English classes from an early age while, later on, formal learning of English is completed by other activities in which the language is further practiced.

Students' perceptions about the strategies they use in order to attain certain skills in English underline:

- an eclectic use of strategies which are adapted according to the environmental characteristics;
- the use of *task-related and evaluation-oriented* strategies in the formal environment;
- the preference for strategies depending on learners' emotions and needs in the informal environment;
- the development of adaptive skills at a conscious or unconscious level.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to open a wide perspective on secondary school students' perception on language learning in a specific Romanian region. The data analysis emphasized that Romanian students have positive representations about English learning. They also make use of interrelated skills and learning strategies which they adapt depending on the environment specificity. Adapted learning skills emerge in contextual diversity and reshape the learning and teaching approach. Although English detains a powerful status in students' representations, other languages are not totally ignored as they are a constitutive part of the context the students live in.

However, an excessive emphasis on English and English learning may gradually lead to the variation of the impact and importance of other languages. As long as students' perceptions of languages are influenced by others' opinions as well (teachers, parents, friends, etc.), one should pay attention to the emergence of new language mediators, especially those present in the virtual environment.

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