Bridging the Language Gap

Language problems encountered in teaching linguistically diverse classrooms

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L'insegnamento multiculturale è la logica conseguenza dell'unificazione europea nel quadro di una veloce globalizzazione. Di conseguenza, anche nella pratica quotidiana dell'insegnamento emergono le differenze tra le competenze linguistiche degli allievi. È possibile che queste differenze siano più pronunciate nei corsi a carattere linguistico, tuttavia, ritenuta l'importanza della lingua, esse si manifestano anche nell'insegnamento di materie non linguistiche. Nella prima parte dell'articolo si presenta un modello di interazione linguistica per un insegnamento in contesti socialmente diversificati. A seguire poi l'elaborazione della nozione di competenza linguistica con riferimento alle capacità e alle conoscenze acquisibili in contesto scolastico. Infine si espongono i risultati di un'inchiesta sui bisogni degli insegnanti condotta in Olanda.

While the multicultural society has been declared dead or at least a failure by various prominent European politicians, both teachers and pupils find themselves confronted on a day-to-day basis with considerable differences in students' language backgrounds and a host of problems issuing forth from this (McPake, *et al.* 2007). Pupils not only differ in the languages they use at home; there are also vast differences between them in their proficiency in the language in which they get taught at school. This language is often referred to simply as 'school language', but because of its high level of abstraction it is also known as "academic language". To do well in class, to have any hope of success in the educational system as a whole, a good command of the school language is indispensable. The question addressed in this study is to establish if, as is often claimed, multicultural classrooms do indeed show more of a mismatch between the expected (desired/required) level of pupils' language competences and the level actually found than is the case in monocultural classrooms.

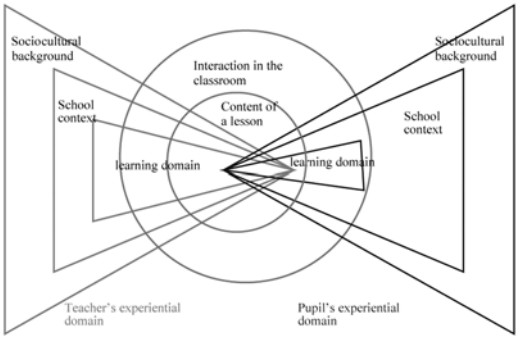
Linguistic interaction in a teaching context

To ensure a broad perspective on the issue, the framework we present (see Figure 1) is based on two very different paradigms. The first starts from a social-constructivist perspective (Cobb, 2006), with the following premises:

1. Learning is seen as a social activity. Interpersonal behavior is the basis for new conceptual understanding.
2. Learning is integrated. There is a strong relation between oral and written language.
3. A prerequisite for learning is interaction and participation in classroom activities. Engaged pupils are more motivated and have the best chances of being successful at school.

The second perspective is that of a communication model (Fill, 2002) which focuses on diversity in cultural backgrounds and indicates how diverse social systems (identified as areas of experience) affect linguistic interactions (content of the lesson and interaction in the classroom).

Figure 1: A model of linguistic interaction in a socially diverse teaching context.



In the framework presented, as summarized in Figure 1, learning is the result of interaction (visualized as circles) between two persons of different cultural backgrounds. In this case, in Figure 1, these are a teacher and a pupil, but it could also be two pupils. According to social-constructivism, all experiences (in all social domains; in lessons, at school in general, in society as a whole) add to the competences,

skills and knowledge a person brings to the social context and shape the linguistic interaction. In Figure 1, the experiences are visualized in three triangles.

The learning domain

In the first (smallest) triangles we find the experiences in the learning domain, consisting of subject-specific proficiency, competences, and personal experiences with the subject taught. The linguistic interaction taking place in this domain revolves around knowledge specific of the 'school subject' taught and the competences related to it (Gibbons, 2002).

The school context

The second, somewhat larger triangles comprise the broader social context of the school, where we find experiences, ways of doing things, and language use that extend beyond the subject classes but that are still school-specific. The linguistic variety in which pupils are taught is part of this broader social context, and is known as the school language register or as "academic language" (Schleppegrell, 2004; Aarts, Demir, & Vallen, 2011).

The sociocultural background

The third and largest triangle stands for the broader sociocultural background, which includes the experiences (including customs and values) and language use (including street slang) typical of this broader social context (home, the neighborhood).

Figure 1 shows a situation in which there is a considerable difference between the pupil's linguistic, social and cultural background (on the right) and that of the teacher (on the left). There is little overlap between the domains that indicate the register, the school context and the sociocultural context. In a situation like this, the interaction between the pupil and the teacher is bound to be very problematic because there is little overlap between their literacy competences, their subject proficiencies and their experiences.

The experiential domain of the teacher will be reflected in the language register they tend to use in teaching their subject, as well as in the examples they will choose to illustrate the lesson content and in their elaboration on these examples.

Content of a lesson

In presenting the content of their lessons teachers will draw on their own experiential domain and try to take into account the average knowledge, competences, and experiences of the pupils in their classrooms. This is illustrated in Figure 1: the centre of the circle indicating the lesson content is located slightly more towards the teacher. If the triangles of the experiential domains have little in common, teachers will have to adjust their lessons accordingly. This becomes problematic if the pupils in the classroom differ markedly in their cultural backgrounds, school careers, familiarity with the subject domain, and literacy competences. However, as Figure 1 also shows, the interaction in the classroom, is more a matter of the individual pupils, which is why the centre of this circle is located slightly to the right of that of the smaller circle of the lesson content. Pupils will interpret the content of a lesson from their own experiential domain. Teachers can give additional feedback if it turns out that a pupil did not get the content right. If pupils have little experience with the subject the classes are about, they will not be able to make use of the relevant register for that subject. They will most likely make use of the register of a related area of expertise, of the more general school register or of the register that is based on their own experiential domain (home, the street).

Interaction in the classroom

What teachers in an educational setting want to achieve, and what Figure 1 is meant to illustrate, is to get across to their pupils a certain part of the proficiencies and competencies specific to a particular learning domain. In this process, the linguistic interaction is bound to be determined or at least influenced by the experience domains of the teacher, which the pupils for the most part do not share. In this linguistic interaction, literacy competences other than those specific to the learning domain will also play a role, competences that originate from the broader educational context or that are embedded in a particular sociocultural background. Naturally, if pupils' literacy competences lag behind the competences expected by the teachers, these teachers will experience problems explaining and illustrating the content of their lessons and the pupils will experience problems interpreting the lesson content, resulting in a situation in which the learning process is seriously impaired.

Literacy competences in a school context

Every discipline taught at school uses abstract concepts and specialist terms to describe specific phenomena without referring to specific situations or cases. Besides this, these descriptions will generally be quite precise, and should be understood and interpreted as such by the pupils in the classroom. To be able to do so, pupils will have to possess the necessary meta-cognitive skills (literacy competences) that are typical of linguistic interactions in an educational context. To get an idea of the kind of

competences we are talking about, we take recourse to the meta-cognitive skills found to be involved in expressing meaning and understanding written texts. For the domain of reading, these meta-cognitive skills are conceptualized in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, Mullis *et al*. 2006: 3):

1. Finding the information explicitly given;
2. Making straightforward inferences;
3. Interpreting and integrating ideas and information;
4. Determining the purpose of the text and adjusting the interpretation of the text accordingly.

Competence 1: Finding the information explicitly given

The first type of competence focuses on the information contained in the content of the lesson. What is the lesson about, and what is being said about it? Pupils should be able to recognize the intended information in the text or in what is being communicated. Questions that can be answered at this level of comprehension are: who does what, where and when? This level of competence is to do with vocabulary and meaning analysis at the sentence level.

Competence 2: Making straightforward inferences

In the second type of competence, pupils not only make use of essential information in a particular part of a text, they can also combine information that is given at difference places in a text in order to establish the chronological sequence of events, simple causal relationship between events, or a line of argumentation. In addition, pupils can draw straightforward inferences that allow them to fill in gaps in the line of reasoning. These competences are essential, since they cover all kinds of meaning that are not expressed directly or explicitly in communication.

Competence 3: Interpreting and integrating ideas and information

In the third type of competence, the interpretation process is supplemented with 'extra-textual' information. Pupils interpret the information gathered from a text and integrate it with their own ideas, knowledge and experiences. The resulting interpretation is idiosyncratic since every pupil takes part in the communication process starting from their own domain of experiences (social and cultural background). Important inferences that are made here include the implications of the information for the pupil or the extent to which ideas expressed in the text are consistent with ideas in other texts. Pupils reflect on what is communicated in the light of their own experiential domain (experiences, knowledge, norms and values).

Competence 4: Determining the purpose of the text and adjusting the interpretation of the text accordingly

In the last type of meta-cognitive competence, pupils are able to take a bird's eye view of what is presented to them. The interpretation of the type of text is evaluated in the light of the type of text. In doing so, pupils use their knowledge of linguistic conventions, genres, textual structure, and familiarity with the author's point of view (the source) to arrive at a critical appraisal of the text. On the bases of this kind of competence, pupils can adjust the meaning of the text, or look at it from the right perspective.
The above-mentioned types of meta-cognitive competences allow us to describe literacy competences more precisely. We are dealing with procedural knowledge, and thus with necessarily vague boundaries. The order in which these competences are applied may be context-specific (e.g., educational context, persuasive context) or depend on the purpose of the interpretation (e.g., learning for an exam). Thus, if a pupil wants to trace specific information in a text fast, for instance, being familiar with the genre of the text and the specific structure that is characteristic of that genre can be a great help.

Needs analysis among Dutch teachers

In order to explore the presumed effect of literacy competences more closely, in the Netherlands a needs analysis survey (n=169) was conducted among primary and secondary school teachers in the school year 2009/10 (Broeder & Stokmans 2011). Taking into account the school type at which they taught (primary, secondary and upper-secondary school), the opinions of teachers who mainly taught multicultural classes (pupils with Dutch as a second language) were compared with the opinions of those who mainly taught monocultural classes (pupils with Dutch as a first language). In the needs analysis survey, the following literacy competences were distinguished based on the PIRLS study (Mullis, et al., 2004):

- Listening – knowledge of common and uncommon words typical of the discipline;
- Understanding – finding information explicitly given in the text and drawing straightforward inferences;
- Comprehension – interpreting and integrating ideas and information not necessarily given in the text and interpreting the purpose of the text.

Disturbing findings

The general outcome was that all the teachers that took part in the investigation reported severe difficulties with regard to all literacy competences of their pupils in daily teaching practice. However, the problems appeared to be more serious for teachers of multilingual classes than for those teaching predominantly monolingual pupils. The problems turned out to be most noticeable in primary and lower secondary education. In addition, the disturbing findings were

not limited to language courses, as comparable observations were also reported by teachers of the social and natural sciences, and to a lesser extent by those teaching mathematics.
Regarding the presumed effects of literacy competences, we looked at the perceived level and the level required to finish the course successfully.

Perceived literacy levels

With respect to the perceived level, the teachers of linguistically diverse classes reported that their pupils performed below the grade-expected level on all literacy competences. Furthermore, compared to teachers with a larger percentage of monolingual pupils in their classes, they reported a lower overall achievement level on all literacy competences. With regard to these findings, no differences were found between the three school types.

Required literacy levels

The last findings relate to the level required to finish the course successfully. According to teachers of linguistically diverse classes, fewer than 60% of their pupils attained the required level on the literacy competences to complete the course successfully (except for vocabulary). For all literacy competences this percentage was lower across the board in linguistically diverse classes. A detailed account of the results of the needs analysis among Dutch teachers is given in Broeder & Stokmans (2011).

Perspective

Most of the studies that focus on (under) achievement of migrant pupils relate them to general socio-demographic or specific psychographic (such as literacy climate at home) characteristics of pupils (for instance, Au, 1998; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Stokmans, 2007).
We strongly support to focus on the teachers' perspective by analyzing their perceptions, their opinions and expectations, since it is the teachers that are responsible for dealing with the diversity in literacy competences and can indicate what competence levels are required.
The Dutch needs analysis study indicates that teachers of linguistically diverse classes report that the literacy competences of their pupils are low and that this has a decidedly negative effect on school outcomes. Surprisingly, these teachers indicated that topics related to linguistically diverse classes were rarely dealt with if at all in the courses they took in pre- and in-service training.
In spite of the need for all European teachers to be qualified in dealing with the particularities of language in heterogeneous learning settings (Roth, et al., 2010), none of the European member states has an integrated way to address these needs. Even in countries with a longer migration tradition and a great many (fragmented) initiatives to tackle the underachievement of migrant pupils, common (main) programmes in teacher pre- and in-service training only very marginally deal with the issue of language, additional languages and academic language.

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