International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Developing Reflexive Discourse Competence in Bilingual Subject Teaching

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0224.0501

A B S T R A C T

Considering the characteristics of contemporary societies, which are pluralistic, glocalized, and information-driven, there is an increased need for discursive competencies and reflection on concepts and ideas from varied and opposing perspectives. In foreign language education, the acquisition of language skills one aim, another being the development of participatory social skills, which can only take place when competencies for discourse and reflection are acquired. Research in the area of discourse competence and foreign language teaching has shown that combining subject teaching and foreign languages is conducive to the development of complex reflection and discourse. Bilingual subject teaching is aimed at providing subject matter knowledge and foreign language skills at the same time, but also has the task of developing students' participatory skill in society, which is accomplished through reflexive discourse competence.

The aim of this study was to examine how students develop reflexive discourse competence in bilingual subject teaching. Firstly, the concept of discourse is examined in more detail and framed within bilingual subject teaching. Then, reflexive dimension and reflexivity staging are examined. Finally, the educational potential of foreign language reflexive discourse competence in bilingual subject teaching is presented.

Keywords: bilingual subject teaching, communicative competence, foreign language teaching, reflexive discourse competence, reflexive staging

1. Introduction

Our modern societies are characterized by migration, internationalization and the open labor market, leading to a great social heterogeneity. In addition, knowledge increasingly forms the basis of social and economic coexistence in the information age. However, the acquisition of knowledge can only take place when competencies for discourse and reflection are acquired. Research in the area of discourse competence and foreign language teaching has shown that combining subject teaching and foreign languages is conducive to the development of complex reflection and discourse. According to Zydatiß (2007b), schools should enable bilingual subject teaching, so that they learn subject matter content and acquire knowledge in a foreign language at the same time, as this is conducive the their participatory competence in society.

The aim of this study was to examine how students develop reflexive discourse competence through bilingual subject teaching. Firstly, the concept of discourse is examined in more detail and framed within bilingual subject teaching. Then, reflexive dimension and reflexivity staging are examined. Finally, the educational potential of foreign language reflexive discourse competence in bilingual subject teaching is presented.

2. Reflexive Discourse Competence in Bilingual Subject Teaching

Zee & Minstrell (1997) define reflexive discourse in a classroom as one in which students interact vigorously and the teacher acknowledges expressed opinions respectfully, allows the participants to reflect on issues by asking their own questions, and gives non-evaluative responses. According to Hallet (2007), bilingual subject teaching has a task of giving added value by developing student skills not limited to foreign language skills. Namely, any school subject should contain two elemens constituting the overarching educational goals: text-based discursiveness and critical reflection (Zydatiß 2007a). This leads to the question of how discourse competence and reflexiveness can be developed in bilingual subject teaching.

One attempt to answer that question is the competency model for bilingual subject teaching (see Bonnet et al., 2003). In it, there are four subject areas of competence acquisition: conceptual dimension, language dimension, methodology dimension and reflexive dimension. Authors of the model point out that within an integrative view of teaching pedagogy in bilingual settings the target skills are both language and subject matter skills. Therefore, such teaching requires the development of a reflexive discourse competence embedded in a foreign language, i.e., a reflexive foreign language discourse competence. Inclusion of reflexive foreign language discourse competence in subject teaching in a foreign language has been studied empirically in three ways: by focusing on the model of understanding of foreign concepts (Lamsfuß-Schenk 2011), the concept of foreign language text competence (Zydatiß

2005), and the concept of eliciting meaning (Bonnet 2004). In the following passage it is explained how discourse is involved in meaning-making and the study of subject matter in a foreign language.

While discourse as a concept has many definitions, in this study it is viewed within the framework of pedagogy, and the departing points are communicative competence of Habermas and the understanding of discourse by Foucault and Fairclough. According to Habermas (1971, p. 117), discourse serves the purpose of justifying problematic ranges of validity and authority of opinions and customs. Communicative competence, according to him, is a social utopia aimed at creation of ideal communicative situations, in which each participant is equal and communicates without intentions to attain dominance. As such, it is free from dominance and ideology, and should have the quality of ideas and claims as its aim. In Foucault's (1981, p. 115) understanding discourse is a system in which ways of expression are created and distributed, concepts are presented and dispersed, and strategic choices are made. Discourses are manyfold and exist only in a network of connections. The important question to ask is why a certain discourse becomes dominant in a society while others are marginalized (cf. Mills, 2007). A similar viewpoint is expressed by Fairclough, who says that discourses do not exist in a vacuum but are in a constant conflict with each other and with other social practices, which they continue shaping by influencing how things are seen and evaluated. In reference to the education system, Fairclough agrees with Foucault's observation that some discourses have more power than others and recognizes a significant influence of power-holding forms on education. To him, educational systems are political ways "of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 65). In addition, education as one of the social institutions contributes to the perpetuation of existing relations of power and socioeconomic hierarchies (Fairclough, 1989). In sum, discourses are a sociocultural practice inherent in any communication act (Hallet 2009:120), capable of reflecting and maintaining an existing social order. The ability to understand and generate discourse is therefore a key component of meaningful participation in society.

While discursive skills are indispensable for a participatory role in society, an added element relevant to the heterogeneity of contemporary communities is discourse in a foreign language. In the teaching pedagogy for languages, the skill of making discourse is developed within the framework of communicative competence, defined as the aware communicative action and the ability to reflect on, discuss, adapt and use a variety of one's linguistic means with the aim of improving the quality and depth of understanding (Piepho 1974, pp. 132). In contrast to Habermas' utopia, Piepho's (1974) communicative competence involves learners' dealing with utterances that require reflection and discussion, i.e., both the metacommunicative reflection and the practice of communicative competence (Decke-Cornill & Küster 2010). Piepho's notion of communicative competence has been widely accepted in foreign language pedagogy (cf. Legutke 2010), but has not been fully understood by most practitioners and has been given a simplified role in first language curricula.

In European language teaching there is no consensus of opinions whether discourse as a concept has a place in the foreign language curriculum. On the one hand, discourse is not mentioned in education standards and has been replaced with intercultural competence (Hallet, 2008). Hallet (2008) points out that due to the contradicting processes of globalized and glocalized communication, increased social diversification but also individualized cultural processes, it is crucial to have a foreign language theory of discursive competence. There seems to be a redefining of communicative competence as discursive competence (Legutke 2010), but what, then, belongs to the contemporary understanding of discourse competence? Hallet (2012) notes that discourses do not mean communicative action in a situation but are processes of negotiation through dialogue, resulting in knowledge, sense and meaning. Also, he points out that a completeness of the discursive skill in the current age presupposes its mastering in a foreign language. Then only is the individual completely able to participate in his or her social and cultural community.

While the discourse competence contributes to a person's participation in society, its contribution to an individual's development is more complex than that. Participation in society is its overarching aim, but discourse competence also provides the conceptual framework of the way in which classroom discourse and real-world discourse are connected, and enables individual reflection on communicative and discursive processes (Hallet, 2008).

Researchers in bilingual subject teaching speak about two areas in which discourse is applicable: on the one hand, it determines how knowledge is constructed, and on the other, it represents communicative action in actual situations (see Bonnet et al., 2003). Discourse as a skill therefore also means the identification of origin, perspective and purpose of knowledge and utterances. Furthermore, Zydatiß (2007a) sees discursive nature in any form of subject teaching as any knowledge based on research is distributed discursively. Therefore, when applied to bilingual subject teaching, discourse competence goes beyond the use of foreign language and distributes the mastering of the target language for discussions on complex situations (c.f. Vollmer 2010, p. 58).

According to Bonnet et al. (2003), discourse competence consists of six skill areas: general message intentions, reception of written and spoken language, descriptive or reproductive communication, explicative language production, evaluative language production, and the expression and negotiation of differences. This indicates that discourse competence is conceptualized through practice, interaction and negotiation of differences. The goals of bilingual subject teaching are divided into functional-pragmatic and reflexive-emancipatory competences, both of which have the foreign language discourse competence as its overarching goal (cf. Bonnet 2013). As the process of classroom learning includes meaning-making, it should also enable a reflection on the effects of language use. This, in return, should make students able to participate in the process with a critical and independent viewpoint. Also, it should contribute to their own cultural identity development (cf. Bonnet, 2013; De Florio-Hansen, 2000). In the next section it is examined how this process takes place via reflexivity staging.

3. Staging in Bilingual Subject Teaching

Reflexivity in foreign language teaching is primarily found in the negotiation of differences. It is not only a process of language acquisition, but also of becoming aware of different personal viewpoints and perspectives, expressing them through language, learning appropriate strategies of conflict

avoidance and conflict instigation, and creating and using an interactive space for negotiations (Bonnet et al., 2003). Reflexivity in teaching refers to the situation in which students can have a critical view toward the topics and subjects of the lesson (Bonnet et al., 2003).

Through meaning-making in bilingual subject classes, students also discuss societal differences and participate in reflexive practice of the world around them. In that sense, discourse and reflection as parts of the communicative competence are strongly represented in subject teaching in a foreign language (Breidbach, 2004). The inclusion of reflexive dimension in learning means the employment of strategies for dealing with subject specific experiences and social reflection. In this way individual attitudes of students to the subject are developed, as well as their ways of speaking about sociocultural influences on the world and the discourse approaches to subject requirements (Breidbach, 2006).

Studies have shown that reflexivity is not necessarily a given in bilingual subject teaching, but only takes place if the teaching enables a discussion and reflection on various experiences linked to the subject being taught (Breidbach, 2004). As education happens when an individual is faced with a problem that they cannot solve within their existing framework of reference, this process leads to a reflexive understanding of the self and the world (Breidbach, 2004). If education is a process of transformation, in bilingual subject teaching it happens the most when students are allowed to include their own viewpoint within those offered in a subject discussion (Bonnet et al., 2003). However, the question remains on how to create situations that cause the discursive reflection of differences and incite reflexivity, and one suggested approach is reflexivity staging.

There are different approaches to reflexivity staging in relevant research, but all agree that mere covering of subject matter in a foreign language does not always result in reflexivity. The important elements of reflexivity staging are interactive meaning-making and discursive estrangement.

Meaning-making forms the basis of competence development through interaction, and in a classroom setting the process of meaning making is complex and sometimes unpredictable (cf. Bonnet et al., 2003). It is successful when the complexity of the critical reflection framework is suitable to learners, or simply put, when they are able to express their ideas and understand others. The main aim is that meaning is constructed through interaction rather than served to students as a closed package. In such situations reflexive dimension is also conducive to the language dimension, as students need the ability to recognize discourse strategies and act independently in situations. The result is the development of discourse competence and a co-creation of worldview in a foreign language.

Experiences of differences happen then, when students in a lesson encounter interpretations that are not in line with their concepts of reality (Bonnet et al., 2003). Difference staging is also possible through social and cognitive estrangement. Social estrangement is determined by the belonging or non-belonging to a group (Bonnet et al., 2003). When learners interact and reflect on other social groups, they are not members of and they perceive as unknown to them, they experience social estrangement. Another possibility of difference staging is cognitive estrangement, which happens when polar opposites are perceived between what is known and what is unknown in a subject topic. The principle of experiences with the unknown and estranged pertain to the encounters of students with the worldviews contained in a subject discipline (Breidbach, 2006). Teaching is therefore of educational value only then, when it enables experiences of differences (Bonnet et al., 2003). Interculturality consists of encounters with discourses one perceives as unknown. Reflexive dimension enables strategies for handling subject knowledge and social differences (Breidbach, 2006). When enough room is given to the construction of relations between the individual and the world, educational processes take place. In sum, reflexive education happens via processes of meaning-making and experiencing differences.

While these experiences do not necessarily happen in regular teaching, the reflexive dimension contains education as the goal of teaching (Bonnet and Breidbach, 2007). However, reflexive dimension takes place through experiences of differences, and it is therefore important to incorporate them explicitly in the bilingual subject teaching curriculum. Up to now encounters with and experiences of differences have been exclusively dealt with in the framework of intercultural dimension. It is, however, also true that learners can encounter and conceptualize meaning in their own perspective and worldview. Thus, Bonnet et al. (2003) suggest that interculturality is not the only impetus for experience of differences. They can also be activated through historical or social aspects of a topic in discussion, or even through a subject discipline itself. Therefore, incorporating the encounters with differences through reflexivity staging as a means of developing discursive competence should be a central aim of bilingual subject teaching.

4. Conclusion

Bilingual subject teaching does not fulfill its goal if it only teaches a given subject in a foreign language. The added value of the concept in comparison to the usual foreign language teaching is found in a foreign language reflexive discourse skill, which can be developed in bilingual subject teaching. However, this is not immediately implementable, as it requires a difference staging in lesson planing. With that in mind, the teaching pedagogy needs to be practice-oriented as the development of reflexive discourse competence in a foreign language relies on practice.

There is also another element on which it relies, namely the teachers. Experiences of differences are not simply created in a classroom. This teaching requires staging of difference-exposing experiences, so that knowledge and skill can be acquired. It is reflection that enables this learning via meaning-making, which results in the construction of relationships between the self and the world. Thus, it becomes evident that the goal of foreign language reflexive discourse competence has an identity shaping and personality building role role. To sum up, through this discourse skill it becomes possible for language and content to be integrated in bilingual subject teaching.

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