Teaching and learning foreign languages in multicultural and plurilingual contexts

A critical and intercultural approach to Foreign Language Education

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Double perspective

- **teacher**
  - I teach English as a Foreign Language to adolescent students from different linguacultural and social backgrounds in an urban context.

- **researcher**
  - In the years 2010-2012 I conducted a qualitative research study on cross-linguistic interactions among adolescents.
“No knowledge, no language and no pedagogy is ever neutral or apolitical”
(Alastair Pennycook 1994)

“Foreign language education is the prime promoter of the foreign perspective”
(Claire Kramsch 2009)

In an era of unprecedented contacts between languages and peoples, what is the role of language education in a critical and intercultural perspective?
A walk on the Critical side

- critical is a **problematizing practice** connecting **micro** and **macro** relations observing “how the classroom, text or conversation is related to broader social, cultural and political relations” (Pennycook 2001)

- critical as observing in particular the **relations** between **language** and **power, structure** and **individual agency**, with the intent **not only to unveil** these relations but also to **challenge** them to **equalize** opportunities

- critical as “discovering how **processes** work in specific sites and moments (...), identifying which **resources** are circulating and the **conditions** that make them available (...) and figuring out the **consequences** of these processes” (Heller 2011)
The Critical and FL

- **FLE can:**
  - foreground several issues connected with a **critical view** of what is usually taken-for-granted of **individual** and **collective linguacultural identities**, as well as of **language ideologies**
  - dismantle **pregiven narratives** and representations of individuals and groups also investigating how **languages** and **language practices** manifest **asymmetrical status of power** (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004)
The Intercultural space

- the notion of the Intercultural as the questioning of one’s identity in relation to others, so that the mutual practice of being able to meet and interact with other cultures becomes the exercise of problematizing one’s own(s) too

The Intercultural space and FL

“The experience of the foreign always implies a reconsideration of the familiar” (Claire Kramsch)

- The experience of a Foreign Language:
  - changes the perception and representation of the self and others

- ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 2006); apprentissage de la diversité (Abdallah-Preceille 2008);

- redefining the self and the others, the experience of a FL is also connected to a different emotional perspective and representation (Dewaele 2010)
The ‘strange’ case of English

**THE CRITICAL**

- English(es) in the world: **linguistic imperialism** or a wider opportunity to **speak back**?
- English as **instruction top-down** and English as **appropriation bottom-up: global and local phenomena**
- The **EFL/ELF debate**
- Is still **English a Foreign language** or rather a **global L2**?

**THE INTERCULTURAL**

- “In recent decades we have witnessed significant **geographical, demographic and structural changes to the English language**, and this requires us to revisit notions as ‘language proficiency’. I think no matter how we define language proficiency in today’s world, **intercultural communication skills** should be at the heart of it” (Sharifian 2016)
- is English as international language a **post-**, a **multi-** or an **inter- cultural language**? (interconnection with the ELF/ELF debate)
qualitative study aimed at investigating into what happens when speakers from different mother-tongues leave their L1(s) to adopt a common language for their communications
The study

**hypothesis**

- the experience of a foreign language as a way to approach Otherness from within and between

**aim**

- the intercultural potential of a language equally foreign for both Italian and non-Italian students
- whether the spontaneous cross-linguistic practices were isolated episodes or there were recurring patterns, and which were the characteristics of these patterns
- what these patterns can tell us as teachers and educators about the dynamics of foreign language use and how they can inform and direct our teaching practice to engage students towards a critical language acquisition
### The study

#### context
- two high schools in Turin, NW of Italy, different for curricula and for the students’ socio-cultural background

#### methodology
- field observation of cross-linguistic practices (Englishes/other languages)
- quanti-qualitative linguistic questionnaire
- back-talk focus groups

#### participants and conditions
- 62 students of both Italian and non-Italian origins from different linguacultural backgrounds
- English as not the dominant or target language for anyone
- voluntary participation, no compensation
- none of the students was or had been one of my students or former students
The study: some findings 1/3

**quantitative data**

**45** students out of **62** (72.58%) do **not** consider English as a **foreign language**, but rather as a **contact language** used to communicate between individuals from different linguacultural background and to talk about common interests and passions (hip hop, online blogs and games, TV series, social networks, etc.)
The study: some findings 2/3
 qualitative data

- “When I want to cut out my mother from what we are saying, I speak with her (his girlfriend) in English. My mother does not understand English” (couple Romanian-Italian)

- I speak English with my mother when I want nobody around us to understand what we are saying”

- “If something happens in real life and I recall a sentence in English from comics, I use the same expression to create a feeling with other people: you can understand it only if you know the same comics”

- “As young people we very often use English expressions as everyday we get in contact with a multicultural reality where the English language serves as an important unifying factor among people from different mother tongues”

- “On the web we use English to comment a video on Youtube, play online games, get information, etc.”

- “A foreign language makes you feel a different person and this can make you feel more confident than in your own mother tongue”

- “I can open up more when I speak English”

- “I can express my feelings better when I write in English”

- “I often use English as a way of breaking the rules, as a way of transgression when I’m with my friends”

- “The English we learn at school is not meant to favour a communication between us”
The study: conclusion 3/3

- **the circle**
  - (the others)
  - deciding inclusion/exclusion
  - creating new belongings

- **the mirror**
  - (the self)
  - perceiving/performing a new self
What do these data tell us about the students’ relation with other languages?

- the experience of a foreign language emerges as an intercultural practice from below
- students use the Foreign Language to adopt a series of strategies:
  - they learn to negotiate between conventions and dominant uses VS individual appropriations
  - they reflect, but also play, on the liminal spaces between their personal and social role
  - they are aware of the opportunities, new voices and roles offered by the FL
What do these data tell us as language teachers?

- A much needed critical and intercultural approach to FLE

- To help students recognize and critically analyze all different elements that constitute the comprehension and the production of linguistic actions in context and how these elements are socio-culturally (re)produced.

- To encourage students to understand how “culture ... permeates and shapes behaviour, interactions and language choices” (Holmes 2014)

- To focus on the intrinsic intercultural quality of Foreign Language Education.

- To observe how identity and alterity are (re)produced as well as they can be reshaped or subverted by the languages and the styles available.
New openings and new responsibilities; new challenges and opportunities:

- **macro context**: “(...) the application of cultural linguistics methods to varieties of English is of immediate relevance to the field of **intercultural communication**” (Polzenhagen & Wolf 2007)

- **socio-political issues**: “**just teach the language**” is not an option as “language policies shape **classroom practices** and practices, in turn, shape **policies**” (Ramanathan & Morgan 2009)

- **meta-cultural competence**: “Speakers of English as an International Language **need to develop (...)a meta-cultural competence**, based on exposure to various cultural conceptualizations” (Sharifian 2007)
to identify specific characteristics of English (the EFL/ELF debate, a critical approach to global English (es), top-down instructions vs bottom-up appropriations, etc.)

to foreground the fact that English is exposed to various cultural conceptualizations and is in/formed by different cultures, so that it can offer the opportunity to develop a meta-cultural awareness which can at turn favour an intercultural communication

to realize complexity and the post-normative condition
Main References


