Foreign language as a social instrument in the European Higher Education Area

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The consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has brought forward significant changes in the conception of teaching and learning. In the area of foreign language teaching/learning those changes have been accompanied by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), which advocates for the development of communicative language competences in the context of formal instruction. This paper aims to answer whether the new EHEA language learning guidelines point to the appropriate direction and highlights the role of language as a social instrument to favour language learning and to encompass the EHEA. It also discusses the role of society, identity, and its influence to language learning.

Keywords: *European Higher Education Area (EHEA), communication, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), identity.*

1. Introduction

The consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) implies some social, cultural and technological changes in universities. The fact that Spanish universities start teaching new undergraduate degrees so that all the European universities have a similar system of teaching, learning and evaluating implies some changes. The development of autonomous learning and the relationship between what is learned at the university and social life are two of the main pillars proposed. This involves that students have to develop certain competences that will allow them to be active citizens in society. This new framework will allow students to move from one university to another easily. Needless to say that English will be the lingua franca and the main instrument for social communication in the EHEA, which makes easy to understand language as a social form of behavior. In sum, university learning goals expand further from the academic to the social sphere.

Language is a key instrument to understand society. Moreover, language is a primary semiotic system with which we engage in acts of communication in order to express different meanings (Christie 2010: 61). The primary purpose of any language is communication between speakers. Thus, knowing the language is not sufficient because the true meaning is not just in the words used to communicate but in the social knowledge that words imply, in other words, language and society are in many ways closely linked. Accordingly, this article is framed into the social-oriented approach to language as communication (Hewings and Hewings 2005; Vez 1995), and considers English language in the context of the EHEA must relate language learning and language use to issues of culture and society, i.e., to consider language as a key instrument for communication in society.

In addition, language is not only an important part of culture and of society but it is also the making of that culture or that society (Young 2009: 5). The fact that English is spreading in the European Union implies that people learn English as a foreign language and use English in the cultural contexts of other languages. In this way, English becomes a means of social interaction in world communication and it occupies a central position in all attempts

to understand and observe human beings as social communicators. Since the EHEA involves some important changes in the teaching-learning process, language teaching must also be seen from the perspective of being social. This is concerned with paying attention to the real language people use when speaking or writing for different purposes, at different times and in different social contexts.

This article highlights the importance of understanding communication as a social instrument and teaching as a social art in the framework of the EHEA. Exploring the characteristics of language and teaching as social instruments involves understanding every discourse as a social event in itself. Moreover, every discourse also has power because whenever language is used there is an effect in the context surrounding discourse. This article also points out that language occurs in context, not just the context of the text, but in a broader ethnographic context, which can be brought into language teaching to a certain extent. Taking into consideration the social context that frames communication in and outside the classroom can benefit our social encounters because speakers will be aware of the importance of the use of language to construct and maintain social relationships. The fact that language occurs always in a social context (including internet) makes of it a social vehicle to establish and maintain social relationships as well as to achieve communicative goals.

If we want our students to develop competences in order to be successful in the classroom as a social setting and in life, it is essential that they understand language as a social instrument, as the following section will point out. This will help students to develop their sociocultural competence because it deepens into the sociocultural reality expressed through language. Therefore, the teaching of a language is not possible without putting language into a sociocultural context (Corbett 2010).

The previous paragraphs make clear that this article follows a sociolinguistic approach which means: "[…] an approach that looks at linguistic phenomena from within the social, cultural, political and historical context of which they are part; one that considers language as organized not just in a linguistic system but in a sociolinguistic system, the rules and dynamics of which cannot be automatically derived from considering their linguistic features; and one that so examines language in an attempt to understand society" (Blommaert 2010: 3).

This article aims to explore the appropriateness of the EHEA's new conceptions on language learning, concretely the social side of language and its implication to teaching and learning in the EHEA. In doing so, it will be firstly expose a theoretical account of the use of language as a social instrument (section 2); then the main factors affecting the teaching-learning process will be analyzed (section 3), and it will discuss the relationship between societal factors and language identity (section 4). Finally section 5 will offer some conclusions.

2. Literature review: communication as a social instrument

Rubio and Martínez (2010) point out that some countries show higher percentages of speakers of English as a foreign language and that reveals that the learning of a language may be more societal than uniquely educational. Aprioristically, success is more related to the language used for communicative purposes rather than an isolated linguistic instrumental vehicle learnt in formal instruction settings.

Verbal communication in the form of speaking is one of the most difficult skills that most learners have to face because it is a complex cognitive process that takes place within a social environment, as Celce-Murcia and Olshtein (2000: 165) put it: "In some ways speaking

can be considered the most difficult skill to acquire since it r equires command of both listening comprehension and speech production subskills (e.g., vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, choice of grammatical pattern, and so forth) in unpredictable, unplanned situations". Since oral language is a tool serving communication, the social nature of speaking in context must always be kept alive, as Tejada Molina and Nieto García (1995: 242) make explicit: "To summarize, social interaction should be the support of oral interaction, through the point that speaking provides communication."

On the one hand, language in the abstract means the faculty of human communication; and on t he other hand, language in the concrete is a social institution, a verbal practice, a reflective practice, a medium of classroom communication, a school subject, etc**.** Following Edelsky (2006: 165), key beliefs about language and language learning are the following:

> -Language is for making meanings, for accomplishing purposes.
> - Written language is language; what is true for language in general is true for written language,
> - The cuing system of language (phonology in oral, orthography in written language, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) are interactive and interdependent,
> - Language has the potential for multiple interpretations because language use always occurs in a situation, […].

According to Halliday (1978: 27), language is understood as 'meaning potential'- what the speaker can do or mean, which implies that out of the different choices that are possible in language, the speaker selects the most appropriate according to the communicative situation or the functions that language has in context. As Halliday (1978: 34) puts it

> Language is the ability to 'mean' in the situation types, or social contexts, that are generated by the culture. When we talk about 'uses of language', we are concerned with the meaning potential that is associated with particular situation types; and we are likely to be especially interested in those which are of some social and cultural significance, […]

In a similar way, Leech (1980: 15) points out that "[…] in taking a functional approach, a linguist studies the roles performed by linguistic communication in its social context". Language is viewed as a form of behaviour, as something that humans do. In other words, language is seen as functionally related to its context of use, i.e., it is evident that language plays a very important role in everyone's lives because it involves several things: interpretation of experience and expression of meaning (ideational function), interaction with others (interpersonal function) and another function in order to fulfil these two, the textual function, which is the one concerned with the set of resources language needs to link any part of the text with the rest of it as well as to the context. Using language goes together with the unintended social, cultural, and expressive meanings stemming from how their utterances are situated in contexts.

These conceptions have also been claimed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which considers language essential in communication. Language has to be studied in its social context, in the culture and in the situation in which it appears, which implies that it has to be selected or designed according to the communicative situation, as Kress (2003: 36-37) points out:

> Communication is now constituted in ways that make it imperative to highlight the concept of design, rather than of [sic] concepts such as acquisition, or competence, or critique. This is particularly essential given new requirements of education- even if these are not at the moment (officially) recognized.

SFL explores how language is used and how it is structured for its use (Martin and Rose 2007: 1; Coffin, Donohue and North 2009: 1; Kress 2010: 240; Renkema 2009: 162). To make this clear, Halliday (1978: 110) describes three aspects of social context: field, tenor and mode. The field of discourse refers to what is happening and to the nature of the social action that is taking place. The tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, to their statuses and roles. The mode of discourse refers to what part language plays in a particular situation.

All this is highly connected to language use and language learning. As has been shown at the beginning of this section, there is a remarkable variety of proficiency levels of English in different member states in Europe, and some researchers claim that those differences occur because speakers do not understand language as a form of social behaviour. If learners do not understand English as a very important social practice that will allow them to communicate in different contexts, it is very likely that in the educational domain communicative activities are not regarded as true interaction, but simply linguistic exchanges.

Although we live in a globalised world, in which everybody seems to have the same context of culture (the general socio-cultural environment), the different contexts of situation (specific contexts) inside that general context are understood in a different way in different European countries, i.e., there are different attitudes towards learning a foreign language, its speakers and its culture and the social value of learning a different language, which goes together with learning a different culture. For example, taking the classroom as the same context of situation in Spain and Denmark, generally speaking, it can be observed that Danish students use English as a way of communication naturally for real purposes whereas Spanish students have the tendency to use their mother tongue to communicate in foreign language classrooms. These behaviours help to understand that spoken communication tends to rely on the immediate context, i.e., it is context-embedded because most of the oral exchanges people engage in are not pre-planned. In this sense, learners of English as a foreign language have to adjust to the rules of speaking English, which might be different to the ones they use in their first language.

SFL will allow to study the interrelationship between language, text and the contexts in which those texts occur because it includes a social perspective in the study of language, which is connected with issues of power, as Kress (1989: 52) makes clear:

> Because of the constant unity of language and other social matters, language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power, and language is involved wherever there is contention over and challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language may be used to challenge power, to subvert it, and to alter distribution of power in the short or in the longer term.

This approach explores how language is used and how it is structured for its use. Language is a tool to express meanings (Renkema 2004; Hewings and Hewings 2005), it is a resource, a social practice, clearly connected with social life, as Blackledge (2009: 4) puts it: "Social life can be seen as networks of diverse social practices, including economic, political,

cultural, familiar practices and so on. Social practices are more-or-less stable forms of social activity which always, or almost always, include discourse".

The most obvious application of a social approach to language and to language teaching is in achieving a better understanding of how language functions in the important role of establishing and maintaining social and personal relationships. This implies taking into consideration the broader cultural norms of behaviour and keeping in mind that texts are both products and producers of context (Thompson and Muntigl 2008: 127; Freebody and Zhang Bin 2008: 24). SFL focuses on the potential of the language system in terms of the different meanings that can be expressed in any language, in Halliday's words (1998: 6):

> […] language is as it is because of what it does: which means, because of what we do with it, in every aspect of our lives. So a theory of language in context is not just a theory about how people *use*[1] language, important though that is. It is a theory about the *nature* and *evolution* of language, explaining why the system works the way it does; but with the explanation making reference to its use.

For SFL language is functional because it is crucial to describe it in terms of what speakers can do with it; language is semantic because it is used to express meaning; it is contextualised because the meanings that are exchanged are influenced by different social and communicative situations; language is also semiotic because it is the process through which meanings are expressed when selecting among the different options in the linguistic system, in Halliday's words (1984: 6): "A systemic description is an attempt to interpret simultaneously both what language 'is' and what language 'does' (or, more realistically, what people do with it)".

Adopting a systemic functional approach to language is relevant in this discussion because of the interrelationship between language, text and the contexts in which those texts occur, and because it includes a social perspective in the study of language. As Hewings and Hewings (2005: 23) point out: "[…] context is constantly being changed by the act of communication itself. […] the participants use language to construct social contexts".

Language teaching must be seen from the perspective that sees language as social and that establishes a match between language and social context. Actually, "to teach social and cultural awareness" is one of the primary concerns to increase teachers' efficiency (Kettemann 1997: 37). For this reason, the context in which the teaching and learning process takes place needs to be considered for three main reasons (Edelsky 2006: 67): "(1) learning language in school (whether or not in a bilingual program) always happens in multiple co-occurring contexts; (2) each of these contexts has profound effects on writing inside the classroom; and (3) the contexts are complex in ways that may not be immediately obvious".

Apart from this, we are interested in SFL because it has a very clear educational application, in Coffin's words (2001: 98): "Educational applications of SFL are generally designed to teach students how to operate in social contexts relevant to their educational, social and cultural needs".

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[1] Italics in this word and the followings appear in the original text.

3. Teaching as social art. The main factors affecting the teaching-learning process

Researchers have continuously investigated what factors influence language learning, and why language success can be observed if looking at particular contexts, i.e. countries, rather than individuals. In fact, research carried out by different administrations to draw comparative analyses of citizen's use of a foreign language among European member states (e.g., Eurydice 2005; CoEC 2005 and 2006) report varied levels and ranges which denote either successful or unsuccessful results. In order to explain why these differences occur Rubio and Martínez (2010) analyzed the factors that influence language learning, to reach to the conclusion that although all factors exert certain influence, societal factors are most influential. Moreover, Rubio and Martinez (2010: 26) established the following categories of factors influencing language learning: individual (personality, intelligence, aptitude, sex, age, etc.), linguistic proximity, educational (classroom methodology, teacher training, total instruction time, etc.), and societal (history/traditions/culture/social beliefs, economic development and budget for education, number of users of native/foreign language, and form of film broadcasting).

When factorial correlations are calculated across the European countries, the number of speakers of the native language is the factor shared by *successful* countries. It seems that native speakers of minority languages develop foreign language awareness to feel connected to the rest of the world. This is the case of Luxemburg, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and other countries, in which learning a foreign language, normally English, is socially acceptable and part of the societal identity. The converse situation occurs in Great Britain, in which only 5% of the population is able to speak a foreign language (CoEC 2006); being their language a lingua franca leaves population a sense of unneeded task to learn a foreign language. That might be the cause also for Spaniards with Spanish as a widespread language.

The societal awareness towards learning a foreign language is transmitted to the educational context, where foreign language classes are focused on communication and based on real negotiation of meaning. Project-based methods and Task-based methods are usually used in contrast to other methodologies based on out-of-context grammar and lexical items, which still seems to exist in many contexts (c.f. Rubio and Schwarzer 2011). Language as a mere object of study is no longer advised: "it is assumed that the language learner is in the process of becoming a language user; language is not a neutral instrument of thought like, say, mathematics" (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2001: 19). Moreover, for students it is a normal experience to communicate in the foreign language because television broadcasting has offered original version programs since their childhood, which helps to consider the foreign language useful and natural in their social context. Now the use of internet for educational research and the development of heuristic competences are further fostering foreign language use.

All this might explain the gap it exists between Germany and Nordic countries (51% in contrast to over 80%, according to language Eurobarometers; see CoEc 2005; 2006) in the number of users of English as a foreign language. Despite language proximity and high budget on education there are some societal features which put a resistance to the language. Historical accounts play an important role in the older population who conceived English as a form of invasion to their social identity. In fact, Pennycook (1994) points out that the notion of identity is embedded in history, politics, and struggle. Furthermore, dubbing has also contributed to put a barrier to the foreign language. This is also the case of Spain, where some television stations have got very low ratings when broadcasting subtitled movies. It seems there is a social resistance to the foreign language because the population does not feel it is

part of their culture or language identity, despite the awareness to consider English as a world language and the benefits to be able to use it.

All factors to promote language learning function as a network connected to each other, and it is the societal aspect of the language the main drive for personal motivation to seek opportunities to practice and result proficient in the language. Then, it seems that success in language learning goes beyond developing competences proper to the language.

What are then the implications of conceiving societal factors as paramount to language learning and instructional practice? In a nutshell, it can be said that teaching is a social art. It is obvious that the principal resource available to teachers and students to achieve the educational goals at all levels is language. In addition, teaching practices are directly related to students' learning and to the development of their skills. That is the reason why teachers need to be constantly revising their methodology, materials, their role as a teacher and the contents of the lectures, as Wright (2002: 113) points out: "Becoming a language teacher involves a number of related processes, in particular learning to create connections between the linguistic, or 'content', and the methodological, or 'teaching', aspects of language teaching".

As regards planning oral interaction in the classroom, our aim as teachers is to design procedures to involve students in oral practice, in other words, every activity must have a communicative purpose, which involves giving students a reason for speaking. It is essential to keep this idea in mind in our teaching practices because speaking is not a skill students learn by memorising but by meaningful interaction with others, as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 176) make clear: "The most important feature of a classroom speaking activity is to provide and authentic opportunity for the students to get individual meanings across and utilize every area of knowledge they have in the second or foreign language".

One of the main responsibilities of the school environment and of teachers is to support school learning and socialization for all students. In this sense, teachers are crucial in integrating students' personal differences and students' cultural and linguistic diversity (Carrasquillo and Rodríguez 2008: 53; Gillies 2008; Liddicoat and Curnow 2009; Souto-Manning 2006).

Students' adaptation to the learning process and the school environment is connected with the way they become literate up to a certain extent, in other words: "[…] literacy involves social practices in which we are effective through our language use, social practices in which we can participate successfully. The notion is, thus, dynamic: as literacy demands change, we meet new opportunities and challenges, at any professional level". (Whittaker and McCabe, 2008: 5). Moreover, students become effective speakers if they process language in their heads and create messages that are comprehensible and meaningful, in Brazil's words (1995: 31)

> For each occasion on which we speak, there are certain requirements we must seek to satisfy. It is our perception of these requirements that lies behind our purposeful utterances: we pursue a purpose that is in some sense imposed upon us by our reading of the present situation vis-á-vis our listener's perception of that situation provides a framework within which to interpret what we say.

Everything that happens in the classroom has an effect in the teaching-learning process. For example, several studies have shown the connection between classroom interaction and the results of foreign language learning (cf. Ellis 1990: 93-129; Mahboog and Lipovsky 2009: 1-12). As Christie (2000: 184) makes explicit: "It is in the language of the classroom that a great

deal of the work will go on towards negotiating understandings, clarifying tasks, exploring sources of difficulty and assessing students' progress". By interaction we mean the interpersonal communication that takes place between teacher and students.

Understanding language as a form of social behaviour involves adopting a social perspective of every interactive interchange between individuals. In the case of classroom interaction, the teacher and the learner are social actors socially constructed, in Hua, Seedhouse, Li and Cook's words (2007: 1):

> The central pillar in the social interaction perspective is the belief that language learning and teaching are social acts- the roles and relationships of the learner and the teacher are socially constructed; their social identities are formed and transformed by the very process of learning and teaching; the knowledge of language that is being acquired and taught is social knowledge that is affected by the roles, relationships, attitudes and ideologies of the learner and the teacher.

4. Discussion: exploring the relationship between societal factors and identity

Preceding rationale advocates that teaching is strongly related to social art, which encompasses the EHEA guidelines for teaching and language learning. The implications of conceiving language teaching and learning a social entity should also be considered under the individual sphere. In this section the relationship between societal factors and the genesis of language identity is explored.

The CEFRL (2001) sets out two main competences for language learners to develop, namely, general and communicative competences. In chapter 5, it is discussed the importance of acquiring declarative knowledge as part of the general competence personal schemata. To develop knowledge of the world is important insofar "the way communities conceive the world in which they live and encode their collective experience in language varies significantly". It is in those differences where individuals create their language identity and become part of a distinct culture, since "language is a central aspect of the culture of its speakers" (CEFRL 2001: 26). Therefore, individuals' culture defines their identity: "Language is a central feature of human identity" (Spolsky 1999: 81). Modiano (2009: 213) also highlights the importance of culture in identity creation: "One fundamental concern in language education is the 'culture' of specific speech communities (with culture playing a central role in the construction and perception of identity)".

Thus, it seems that foreign language learning is favoured when it is part of an individual's identity. However, it is precisely here where distinctions are drawn to understand the implications of identity to language learning. The literature recognizes four identity categories: master, personal, interactional and relational. The master identity is a social relatively stable and unchangeable trait, such as ethnicity, gender, country origin or age. Personal identity is likewise stable, but unique, such as personality traits (stubborn, extroverted, overbearing, etc.). Interactional identity refers to the role individuals take on in a communicative context with different groups (role with family, friends, colleagues, etc.); therefore, it is social in nature and dynamic when circumstances lead to role change. Relational identity refers to the kind of relationship that an individual enacts at specific situations and people. It is personal and changeable.

Accordingly, different specific identities seem to apply to language learners. Successful learners have the foreign language as part of their master and personal identity,

i.e., their country origin and its linguistic culture (master) together with a bilingual or ESL trait (personal) form a social and stable identity; whereas less successful learners have it as part of their interactional and relational identity, i.e. they use language merely in the school context, EFL (interactional) or in certain unrelated occasions (internet queries, etc.), which defines an unstable and dynamic identity.

This idea is supported by many studies which describe insights of CLIL experiences in these contexts. It seems that "Nordic countries are developing from EFL to ESL countries" (Taavitsainen and Pahta 2003: 3); therefore moving from the expanding circle inwards. For instance, Nikula (2007: 206) finds that

> CLIL students claim ownership of English by the way they confidently use it as a resource for the construction of classroom activities. Students' code switching practices are another indication that they ascribe to an identity as users rather than as learners of English.

The concept of language learning in education seems to be moving to the concept of language use, i.e., language learning by language use, which supports our argument that language competences are developed when real negotiation of meanings are produced in social interactions.

We do not claim that individuals or communities should change their identities in favour of a foreign language, but we support that when a language is part of one's identity learning is facilitated by an increase of intrinsic motivation to use the language and feeling part of the community. We do not think that having a second or foreign language as a layer of one's identity modifies feelings towards one's national identity, which is formed strongly by other features, namely, demographic, cultural and historical ones. Therefore, we conceive language learning as competences individuals need to develop throughout real use within a social paradigm to foster better communication, to widen one's culture, and to interact successfully in a globalized world.

5. Conclusions

We can now conclude that the EHEA's language learning guidelines are going on the right direction, i.e., fostering language learning for language use within a social paradigm. The review of the literature has confirmed that language cannot be separated from the individual, nor its social sphere. Therefore, language learning should be conceived as a social art. Real negotiation of meaning tasks should overtake those that deal with language in an isolated way, whose main purpose is to prepare and pass exams.

The new generation of university students is familiarized with a globalized world in which information may come from any part of the world. Thus, they are used to finding and processing information for their own needs. Language learning should encompass and take advantage of these attitudes and behaviors towards the use of the language.

The article has also supported that language learning is more successful when the context accepts the language as part of their social endeavors. That is the case of some Nordic countries in which English has become an element within their culture of knowledge. For instance, English is used as a main vehicle of study in university classrooms. Having observed that globalization consolidates in the world, minority language countries have found English as an instrument for development and possibilities of expansion.

In the end, as this article has explored, language use is strongly connected to language identity, which despite being influenced by the social sphere, is ultimately fostered in an individual basis. It is here where differences between successful and unsuccessful users of a foreign language can be found. Language is acquired optimally when it is part of someone's master and personal identity, i.e., it is part of the culture and takes a form of a personality trait (for instance, someone could describe him/herself as "bilingual"), which altogether are stable and unchangeable processes. Conversely, language learning is not successful when it is part of someone's interactional or relational identity, which are unstable behaviors used at different times with a slight weight on personal identity.

There is sufficient data to ascertain that the conception of teaching a language as a social art benefits language achievement. The CLIL method, where students use the foreign language as a means of understanding and using knowledge, or the Task-Based Method, that involves students in real negotiation of meaning to accomplish tasks, have been revealed as successful approaches to language learning in which the individual, discourse and the social sphere act together. Separation of any of these elements seems to corrupt the process of language learning.

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