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The role of universities in the development of plurilingual repertoires: the voices of non-traditional adult students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a study on the non-traditional adult students' (NTAS) perceptions concerning the role of university in the development of their plurilingual repertoires. Data were collected through biographical interviews with NTAS with fewer and more plurilingual experiences. The results show that NTAS with more plurilingual experiences are more aware of their plurilingual repertoire and acknowledge higher education as an opportunity to further develop it. It also appears that if university promotes a favourable environment for the development of plurilingual repertoires, there may be a change in NTAS' perception regarding lifelong language learning.

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1. Introduction

The role of the university should entail the promotion of Lifelong Learning (LLL) and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2012). University also ought to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of the communities and the region in which they are located: the 'Universities' third mission (Soeiro, 2009). In this sense, university should respond to new lifelong educational and training needs, clearly appealing to its social responsibility, by "reassess completely its objectives and priorities, particularly its entry requirements, its method of working and its assessment and qualifications structures" (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15). Universities are also asked to contribute to "the European integration and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in

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Europe” (European Language Council, 2001: 3) by becoming multilingual spaces, promoting plurilingualism as a value and a competence (Beacco & Byram, 2007).

Therefore, this article focuses on the important mission of the university in promoting plurilingual individuals and plurilingual contexts. The article is based on a study¹ which is being carried out at the University of Aveiro (UA), within a PhD project entitled “The plurilingual repertoires in a lifelong learning process: a case study with non-traditional adult students in the University of Aveiro”. The aim of the study presented herein is, on one hand, to understand how non-traditional adult students (NTAS) perceive the contribution of university to the development of their plurilingual repertoires (Beacco, 2009; Beacco & Byram, 2007). On the other hand, the study intends to clarify whether these perceptions (regarding the impact of higher education on the development of NTAS’ repertoires) are influenced by the more or fewer plurilingual experiences lived by NTAS throughout their life (Franceschini, 2005).

In order to achieve these goals, a biographical approach (West & Merrill, 2009) was used, namely biographical interviews (Demazière & Dubar, 2009).

This study intends to emphasise the importance of understand if attending university may be perceived as another plurilingual experience which contributes (or could contribute) to the development of individuals’ plurilingual repertoire, from a lifelong learning (LLL) perspective. It is also important to underline the significant role that university plays in NTAS’ perceptions regarding lifelong language learning.

In the first part of the paper, the theoretical framework of this study is presented, namely adult education at university, specifically NTAS (Section 2) and the plurilingual repertoires as indexical biographies (Blommaert & Backus, 2012) (Section 3). In the second part of this paper, the empirical study is presented and discussed (Section 4 and 5) and some final considerations are presented (Section 6).

2. Adult Education at university

According to Powell, Smith and Reakes “adult education has deep historical roots, [but] the necessity for an individual to continue learning throughout life is a more recent concept.” (2003, parag.14). Nevertheless, it has now become widely accepted that adult education (AE) is part of the LLL process. LLL is seen as “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all routes, circumstances, and environments.” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 22). Therefore, AE is linked to the necessity - or desire - to learn continuously during an individual’s lifetime due several reasons and in different contexts. One of these learning contexts is Higher Education Institutions, i.e. universities. The Declaration of Bologna signed in 1999 brought many great changes to university structures, and an increasing awareness of new challenges, demands and publics. In this sense, LLL is perceived both as a cornerstone of the Higher Education European Area, and as one of the main vectors in university reconfiguration (EUA, 2008). The reconfiguration of the university implied a complete review of its objectives and priorities (Longworth & Davies, 1996), since “In order to ensure that lifelong learning contributes to the European agenda on social inclusion and learning societies, universities need to develop educational offers that are attractive for different groups of European citizens to access and participate in throughout their lives.” (Smidt & Sursock, 2011, p. 18). This means that higher education should be accessible to all. Universities should create more flexible learning pathways, and recognise previously acquired learning, either in formal or informal contexts. Moreover, “the challenge of lifelong learning for universities is to view lifelong learning as an opportunity to expand their activities in all fields and to understand, and respond positively to, the very different needs of their new customers” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15), namely non-traditional adult students (NTAS).

2.1. Non-traditional adult students

The presence of non-traditional adult students (NTAS) at universities becomes a reality in Europe. Various authors and studies have focused on these students, thus providing us with an international (Field, Merrill, & West, 2012; Johnson & Merrill, 2004; RANLHE, 2011), and a national perspective (Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá & Simões, 2014; Amorim, Azevedo, & Coimbra, 2010; Correia & Mesquita, 2006). Both emphasise the characteristics shared by these NTAS : i) age – NTAS are over 23/25 years of age, ii) attending formal education – adult students were

outside the formal education system for a while, have no university experience, and are usually the first family generation to undergo this type of education, iii) professional experience – adult students have greater work experience than traditional students (with little or none), and are usually in full or part-time employment and iv) attitude as students – NTAS are more determined, committed and concerned with the application of knowledge, since the decision of attending university is very often made with the view to pursue a career or update knowledge for career advancement. Regarding Portuguese universities, as from 2006, special HE access and admission criteria were created for NTAS, who must be over 23 years old and do not have the qualifications traditionally required for accessing and attending that level of education. However, they possess the knowledge and the necessary competences, acquired during their personal, professional and social trajectories, which are assessed of their eligibility for attending HE (Decree-Law No. 64 of 2006).

In this sense, universities should respond to new lifelong educational and training needs, clearly appealing to its social responsibility. Universities are also asked to contribute to “the European integration and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe” (ELC, 2001: 3) by becoming multilingual spaces, promoting plurilingualism as a value and a competence (Beacco & Byram, 2007). Therefore, universities should be prepared for new demands and challenges, such as receiving new publics which do not fit in the category of traditional students, and contributing to the development of their plurilingual repertoires (Beacco, 2009; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2013). Throughout their lives, NTAS lived plurilingual experiences in different contexts and consequently have different degrees of interaction with languages. These plurilingual experiences are embodied in their plurilingual repertoires (Blommaert & Backus, 2012), mirroring the various ways individuals interact with languages throughout life in various contexts. Thus, attending university may be perceived as another plurilingual experience which contributes (or could contribute) to the development of individuals’ plurilingual repertoire.

3. Plurilingual Repertoires as “indexical biographies”

As stated above, it is within their pathways that NTAS have more or fewer plurilingual experiences as a result of their LLL process, complying with the idea that ‘it is impossible to predict the practical and personal communicative needs people may have after leaving education and training.’ (Mackiewicz, 1998, p. 4).

This plural language learning process is embodied in the plurilingual repertoire, which is developed in a continuum process that occurs throughout life in a variety of contexts and through the contact with several people, continuously remodelled according to a variety of circumstances (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009; Vigner, 2008). The plurilingual repertoire is influenced by the plurality and unpredictability of an individual’s pathway (Blommaert & Backus, 2012), acquiring new elements which transform or complete pre-existing ones from various contexts, in view of the necessary adaptations to professional, geographical or family displacements, but also to the personal evolution of interests (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Therefore, a plurilingual repertoire is not stable ; it gains new elements which transform or complete pre-existing components obtained in various life contexts, even because “Entrant en contact avec divers environnements linguistiques, ces locuteurs se constituent des répertoires langagiers fondés sur compétences aléatoirement distribuées selon les langues en contact, plurilinguismes constamment remodelés selon les circonstances de la vie” (Vigner, 2008, p. 42).

In this sense, plurilingual repertoires are seen as ‘truncated repertoires’ since “no one knows all of a language” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 103). They are based on the principle whereby each one is able to learn languages according to the emerging needs throughout life, either due to personal/affective, professional or cultural reasons, or simply because it is the individual’s wish, defying the hegemony of a single language. Developing a plurilingual repertoire is a very personal process since different individuals have different experiences and interactions with languages. This means that “language learning is actually a process that each individual perceives and processes in different ways” (Franceschini, 2005, p. 121). Thus, plurilingual repertoire is the result of biographically organized complex resources which reflect the rhythms of the individuals’ lives (Blommaert & Backus, 2012), closely linked to life history and biographical trajectories (Thamin & Simon, 2010). Plurilingual repertoires are therefore, understood as ‘indexical biographies’ (Blommaert & Backus, 2012) since they embody the plural linguistic and cultural experiences lived by individuals, who manage the command of several languages on a personal, educative or professional contexts (Thamin & Simon, 2010). In this sense, enrolling in a university may be perceived as another

plurilingual experience, which contributes (or could contribute) to the development of individuals' plurilingual repertoire.

As stated before, plurilingualism is a value to be promoted and a competence to be developed (Beacco and Byram, 2007) and universities have “leur responsabilité de continuer à développer les compétences linguistiques de tous les étudiants” (Beacco, 2009, p. 66-67). Universities play an important role in the construction of a European citizenship that demands the development of plurilingual competences (Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2013). By promoting plurilingualism, universities contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of the communities and the region in which they are located and therefore, they contribute to achieve or at least to foster social cohesion.

4. Empirical study

4.1. Aims of the study

A study was undertaken at the University of Aveiro (UA), Portugal, with the aim to understand (i) NTAS' perceptions of how university contributes (or can contribute) to the development of their plurilingual repertoires. The study intends to (ii) clarify whether these perceptions (regarding the impact of higher education on the development of NTAS' repertoires) are influenced by more or fewer plurilingual experiences that NTAS have experienced throughout their life.

4.2. Methods

In order to know NTS' perceptions and their plurilingual repertoires, a biographical approach was used (West & Merrill, 2009), specifically biographical interviews (Demazière & Dubar, 2009) since plurilingual repertoires are closely linked to the life history of individuals and biographical trajectories (Thamin & Simon, 2010). In this study, NTAS' interviews were divided into two groups: group A comprises two NTAS with fewer plurilingual experiences, and group B includes the remaining two NTAS, who have more plurilingual experiences. This analysis enabled us to compare two perspectives regarding their representations of the role played by universities in the development of their plurilingual repertoires and, therefore, to understand the influence of plurilingual repertoires in the lives of NTAS. These plurilingual experiences are biographical indicators (Ind.) - they reflect the diverse interactions individuals have with languages throughout life in various contexts, such as personal, professional and educational (to read more about the methodological design: Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá, Simões and Simon, 2011).

4.3. Participants

Group A comprises one 48 year-old male (NTAS_A1) and one 47-year old female, (NTAS_A2). They have one indicator of plurilingual experience prior to attending university: formal language learning; Group B consist of one 43-year old female (NTAS_B1) and one 28-year old male (NTAS_B2). These NTAS had several plurilingual experiences throughout their life, in different contexts: personal, professional and educational. (See Figure 1).

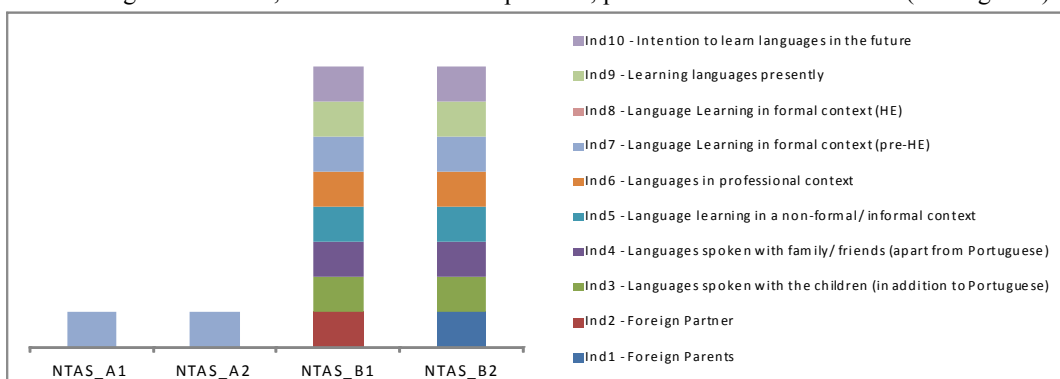


Fig. 1. NTAS' plurilingual experiences

5. Presentation and discussion of the results

5.1. NTAS' perceptions of how universities contribute (or can contribute) to the development of their plurilingual repertoires

According to the data analysed, NTAS' perceptions regarding university contributions to the development of their plurilingual repertoires are found in the following assumptions:

a. University promotes contact with foreign languages and that is seen as an opportunity to develop plurilingual repertoire:

"I usually choose more maybe the Spanish, it is something you read, you understand quite well or French, which I also understand and translate well. And now even better." NTAS_A2

"When I finish my degree and things settle down at home, I'm going to learn English, I'm going to a language school" NTAS_A2

"Yes...I think I have improved my English, no doubt. Even though I don't work in Education, now I need it constantly at work... English is essential, at this point is essential." NTAS_B1

"[because he/she already had some knowledge of English] In the first year I had an English course, it went well, it went very well." NTAS_B1

"After this [university]...although I contact with languages and can speak more than one language, I'm aware that I have much to learn, even I have a very long way to go." NTAS_B1

"In my context, at university, it was a good thing to know English [...]our library has many books and most of them are in English. And in other languages too. But many in English. And so, with English is easier. [...] for me, learning a new language was very helpful. Because I could read and study, without any problems. It was easy ... it helped me with university, which I really needed at that moment." NTAS_B2

"All the English knowledge I already had was called into action in the course [...] and, of course, I improved it." NTAS_B2

Most NTAS in this study (3/4 NTAS) are aware of the role played by foreign languages at university, especially in what bibliography is concerned (Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá & Simões, 2014). These students also acknowledge the importance of previously acquired language knowledge, underlining the direct link between lifelong learning and the development of plurilingual repertoires. This mirrors the desire expressed by NTAS when stating that they intend to learn more languages in the future. These three NTAS believe that attending university improves their language knowledge and, therefore, it contributes to the development of their plurilingual repertoires.

b. University promotes contact with foreign languages, but that it is perceived as an obstacle to succeed in university:

"... I don't have to master the language, I have to master the content ... I won't do a presentation in English or Spanish, I'm not in a language course." NTAS_A1

"Actually, I was faced with extremely complicated papers ... philosophy is already complicated to read in Portuguese, to read it in English is a mess ...sometimes...I was so frustrated." NTAS_A1

"Who like me left school 20 years ago is faced with difficult situations ... and the command of the language is ... you find yourself slightly embarrassed." NTAS_A1

"[regarding software programs in foreign languages] it was a problem... I didn't even risk wasting time to understand how to do it." NTAS_A1

This last NTAS appears to have some difficulties concerning language use at university. It seems that NTAS do not acknowledge the importance of language knowledge in higher education. The NTAS does not think necessary to have that type of skill. In addition, this student associates negative feelings, such as frustration and embarrassment, to the moments when language knowledge was needed. For NTAS_A1 attending university has no relation with the development of his plurilingual repertoire.

c. University changes NTAS' perception regarding language and their role in NTAS' life:

"I have totally changed my perspective regarding languages and language learning. I'm fascinated, I find the history of languages fascinating, their origins, and evolution, I find it fascinating. I find it very wonderful." NTAS_A2

"It was really cool. I think I became fascinated by languages and I did come to the conclusion that the more languages you

know the better. There is no 'I already know one or two languages and I say that's enough', no. The more languages you know, the better...in fact my next step is going to be learning English." NTAS_A2

[asked about the course "Early Foreign Language Teaching"] *"It was very interesting...I never thought about it before... it was very interesting, they taught us strategies on how we could teach a language to children, so that was very interesting, I quite liked it"*. NTAS_B1

In relation to how attending university can or could contribute to the development of plurilingual repertoires, there was a shift in NTAS' perceptions regarding lifelong language learning. Apparently, if NTAS have the specific inputs concerning the role of languages in life, they may change or strengthen their perceptions and, therefore, develop their plurilingual repertoire. In light of these findings university plays an important role in NTAS' perceptions regarding lifelong language learning.

5.2. The influence of plurilingual experiences on NTAS' perceptions

The analysis of these four NTAS' interviews shows a connection between NTAS' plurilingual repertoires and their perceptions regarding the contribution of attending higher education to the development of the repertoires.

On one hand, NTAS with fewer plurilingual experiences (Group A), such as NTAS_A1, are more reluctant to accept the inclusion of languages in their courses; they showed a hint of aversion to improving their language skills. This reluctance to learning languages could also be related to negative experiences that NTAS may have gone through in other situations. With regards to NTAS with more plurilingual experience (Group B), such as NTAS_B1 and NTAS_B2, their plural and diverse background had a major influence on their perceptions. They see plurilingual repertoires as a lifelong learning process. On the other hand, the study shows a change in the perceptions of NTAS with fewer plurilingual experiences, such as NTAS_A2, who have been exposed to language use and lifelong language learning. These NTAS believe that attending university contributes to the development of their plurilingual repertoire. It is also important to emphasise that NTAS of Group B, such as NTAS_B1, who have lived in environments conducive to language and lifelong learning, are open to strengthen their perceptions and reinforce their opinion regarding lifelong language learning.

6. Final considerations

With this study we intended to emphasise the development of plurilingual repertoires as a continuum process in the lives of individuals, especially NTAS. The study also aimed to explain how NTAS perceive higher education regarding the development of their plurilingual repertoires. On one hand, it promotes the contact with foreign languages. It is understood as an opportunity to develop NTAS' plurilingual repertoires. The results show that NTAS with plural and diverse plurilingual background acknowledge the positive impact of higher education on the development of their plurilingual repertoires, which they perceive as a lifelong learning process. On the other hand, the contact with languages at university, and the difficulties associated to language use, could be seen as an obstacle to succeed as a university student. The NTAS with fewer plurilingual experiences in his repertoire (NTAS_A1) seems more reluctant to accept the inclusion of languages in university. This NTAS shows a slightly hint of aversion to improving his language skills and does not acknowledge any importance to his plurilingual repertoire.

It is important to stress that universities could play a major role in changing negative perceptions regarding lifelong language learning. Regarding to this NTAS with fewer plurilingual experiences his reluctance to use languages could be related to negative experiences that he may have gone through in other situations. University could develop language support programmes to help NTAS in these situations. Another perspective was given by NTAS_A2, who also belongs to Group A, had a positive experience at university regarding the contact with languages. In fact, her perception regarding languages and their role in her life has changed completely. This change is due to attending higher education where a productive environment regarding lifelong language learning is fostered.

This study presents limitations, for instance the relatively small number of interviews analysed. Nevertheless, this study could be seen as a starting point for further research on the pivotal role played by universities in supporting LLL, namely the development of plurilingual repertoires.

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