Teacher Training and Linguistic Diversity:
Methodological and Outcome Analysis of an Online Course

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This research aims to delve into sociolinguistic content in the context of teacher training itineraries at the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain). Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the presence of sociolinguistic content will be justified. Likewise, we will analyze the contents and methodology of the subject based on the access data to the materials and the evaluation of the students. The results obtained refer both in terms of the importance of dealing with linguistic attitudes in class and of assessing the tool itself and some of the students' work habits, which we can extrapolate to others similar training environments, in order to extract good practices.

Keywords: teacher training, language teaching, sociolinguistics, online learning, computer-assisted teaching

INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a complex phenomenon, a prism with several faces that need to be understood and explored in depth when implementing new tools or improving existing ones. Correct linguistic learning undoubtedly involves issues that go beyond the code, and that have to do with cultural elements, social use, attitudes, etc. As indicated by Ballester and Mas (2003, p. 8):

> Language learning necessarily involves the acquisition of aspects that go beyond the linguistic code: thus, sociolinguistic competence is the ability to adequately implement the norms of social use of a language based on the social and individual beliefs regarding the language and the attitude of the speaker him/herself.

In order to establish objectives in language learning, we must therefore speak of linguistic competence, but also of sociolinguistic, cultural, pragmatic or strategic competence. On the other hand, and for decades, several authors have stressed the undisputed fact that negative linguistic attitudes obstruct language acquisition and proficiency (Cassany, Luna and Sanz 1993, Ballester and Mas, 2003).

In the case of the Valencian Community, it has a peculiar sociolinguistic situation due to language contact: from the 15th century and especially from the 16th century onwards, the Spanish language was superimposed on the Valencian language (Ferrando and Nicolàs, 1993, p. 58), creating a situation of diglossia that has been perpetuated in the attitudes and beliefs of the population. Thus, regardless of the co-officiality established by the Statute of Autonomy, the laws that today guarantee the equality of languages and the special protection of the native language, it continues to be seen in some environments as something

unnecessary, and all the human and economic efforts destined to it, a waste of money. In many cases, and especially in more urban environments, the problem is not a question of knowledge of the language, but of usage. Following Van Dijk, the different linguistic attitudes crystallize in the habitus that Bordieu established in the 1970s (Císcar, González and Pérez-Ledo, 2002, p. 3). All this, applied to the Valencian reality, results in a situation generally determined by the difference of uses at home and in the street.

The Valencian Community also has two linguistic areas, which the Law 4/1983 *d'Ús i Ensenyament del Valencià* (LUEV) calls respectively of Valencian linguistic predominance and of Castilian linguistic predominance. There are several historical and political reasons for the dominance of the Castilian in the areas where it is the majority, and to this we must add that in many cases the ascription of some areas as predominantly Valencian is merely symbolic, as would be the case of the cities of Valencia or Alicante. This recognition of two areas, together with the traditional asymmetrical bilingualism existing in the Valencian Community, results in the vast majority of Spanish-speaking Valencians finishing their compulsory and even university studies without a minimum proficiency in the co-official languages. In the teachers' case, the situation is more worrisome, since they must be proficient in both languages for their teaching or for the vehicular use of both languages.

This situation of linguistic conflict and minorization of one's own language implies that, even when basic tools have been acquired, a teacher profile that does not feel motivated to teach in a language he or she does not identify with is an obstacle to linguistic normalization (Cassany, Luna and Sanz, 1993); Therefore, if the work on linguistic attitudes is necessary and urgent at all educational levels, it is much more so in teacher education and training, assuming in addition the idea that, even more so in a situation of linguistic conflict, the language learning process implies aspects that are extra-linguistic: the challenge when planning the training course that was the subject of this research was for the students to perceive that the knowledge and use of their own language is a personal enrichment, that their own language is useful and necessary, and that they would also be able to transmit this in their teaching role, since these are fundamental bases for the correct preservation and transmission of endangered languages (Mollà, 2007).

The Language Training Degree

The recycling and pedagogical updating of teachers is a necessity that is beyond any doubt: there is a consensus on the ethical implications of carrying out a process of updating throughout professional life, which enables meaningful, relevant and adequate teaching work for the student body (Camargo *et al.,* 2004). The circumstances generated by COVID-19 have also had an impact on this certainty and have determined both the need for professional recycling in terms of teaching resources and an in-depth reflection on teaching itself, accompaniment and care (Mystakidis, Berki and Valtanen, 2021). As a consequence, online teaching has been promoted, and it does not seem that this trend will stop with the end of the pandemic; thus, online training is reinforced as one of the most promising possibilities in the permanent updating that teaching demands (García-Peñalvo *et al.,* 2020). This teaching/learning modality certainly has great advantages, but also some disadvantages, such as those derived from the management of the student's own autonomy, the lack of face-to-face contact with the teacher or the lack of digital skills of a good number of teachers and students.

In the Comunitat Valenciana there are -as we have seen- two co-official languages; in order to guarantee the correct development of the different curriculum that manage multilingualism, the teaching staff of the different non-university official educational levels needed to accredit a didactic-linguistic training in their own language. Since 2018 it has been possible to access teaching only with the C1 level certificate, so the training course has become a postgraduate course itself, which counts as a merit and not as a requirement in the teaching competitive examinations.

In order to meet the demands of the student body, from 2014 to 2018 the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (UPV) offered the possibility of obtaining this training through an online course, the degree of University Expert in Professional Competence for Teaching in Valencian (EUCPEV), a training of 24 ECTS credits (*European Credit Transfer System*) that filled a gap in the supply of this type of training aimed at professionals of the UPV profile. Approximately 2,000 students have taken the course in its four

editions, a volume that requires an analysis of the success obtained and the extraction of good practices both from the course itself and from the treatment of diversity and linguistic attitudes in subject 7.

Each course edition was held over one academic year (September to June) and consists of 12 subjects with a teaching load of between one and four credits each. Among its main objectives, the review of the regulatory framework in which non-university education is situated, the reinforcement of linguistic-communicative contents for teaching activity and the deepening of the didactic methodology known as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). In order to access the course, students had to have a university degree and an official certificate of proficiency in Valencian at level C1 (functional level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

TABLE 1
SUBJECTS AND TEACHING LOAD

SUBJECT	Cr.
1. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: incorporating the European dimension in education and European programs in the educational field.	1
2. Legal framework of multilingual education in the Valencian Community: multilingual education programs	1
3. Approaches, methods, concepts and terminology related to second language learning.	1
4. Approaches, methods, concepts and terminology related to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	2
5. Phonetic-phonological and orthographic aspects of the language	2
6. Morphosyntactic and lexical aspects of the language	2
7. Pragmatic-discursive and sociolinguistic aspects of the language	2
8. Specialty languages	2
9. Strategies for the comprehension and production of oral texts for the teaching activity	2
10. Strategies for the understanding and production of written texts for the teaching activity	2
11. ICT in the design of activities for CLIL: resources and sources	3
12. Creation of didactic units for the CLIL classroom. Evaluation system design	4

Source: developed by the author, 2022.

In order to obtain the Degree, all the subjects that make up the course had to be passed, through several written and oral tests. In addition, at the end, the students had to prepare an original didactic unit, related to their field of specialty, applying the CLIL methodology and present it before an examining board.

The course was taught according to the *e-learning* or electronic learning methodology (Cabero, 2006); specifically, it is a tele-training system using all the resources made possible by technology through the Internet, which provides a large number of advantages related to flexibility and the possibility of carrying out both synchronous sessions and asynchronous activities, so that the acquisition of knowledge is facilitated, along with various skills and abilities (Acevedo, Torres and Tirado, 2015; Hernández, Rodríguez and Vargas, 2012; Esteban *et al.,* 2018). Thus, a whole series of characteristics of e-learning resources are fulfilled (Devece, 2013): it is produced in a network, it has immediate updating, storage and information retrieval, there is the possibility of distribution and sharing of content, it is accessible through a computer, it has interaction and interactivity possibilities, it uses Internet technology standards and provides a wide range of learning solutions, beyond the traditional training paradigms.

All course activities were carried out through the UPV's virtual learning environment, a multilingual and multiplatform environment (*PoliformaT*), based on Sakai technology. It is an open and free software that has numerous tools for learning, classified into resources for communication: agenda, announcements, news, chat, videoconference, e-mail, forum and wiki; and resources for information: content editor, repositories, tests, video notes, polls, etc. (Romero, Oltra and Pardo, 2019).

Pragmatic-Discursive and Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Language

From the beginning, we wanted the course to focus not only on linguistic content, but also on the communicative competence of our students, who were or were going to be teachers of / in Valencian. At the same time, the aim was for students to acquire sociolinguistic competence, that is, the ability to adequately implement the norms of social use of a language based on social and individual beliefs about the language and the speaker's own attitude (Ballester and Mas, 2003, p. 8).

Based on the assumptions and concerns previously mentioned, we propose the need to place special emphasis on subject 7, related to pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects. Thus, it was proposed to the students the development of a module more focused on the attitudinal aspect than on the strictly linguistic one. In this way, the student completed his/her training with a broader knowledge of the sociolinguistic situation of the Valencian Community, while at the same time working on different contents, enhancing the reflective and dialogic aspect.

Objectives

The module proposed to students a reflection on basic aspects of sociolinguistics, and the analysis of correlations between linguistic phenomena and social phenomena based on practice. The contents include the acquisition of the conceptual framework necessary for sociolinguistic research, as well as its didactic application.

In terms of procedures, the module program highlights the students' ability to link sociolinguistic analyses with others related to social structure and change, referring to languages in general and specifically with regard to the Valencian case. Finally, the attitudinal contents to be worked on revolve around the reflection on different phenomena that affect the normal use of languages, such as prejudice and linguistic discrimination, and the promotion of positive attitudes towards diversity and the students' awareness of the need to take care of this heritage.

Program

Regarding the module's syllabus, we began with a block of three units which we generically called Introduction to Sociolinguistics. Our objective in this first part was that students who had taken subjects related to sociolinguistics during their university studies would recover the basic conceptual apparatus, and that those who did not have these references would acquire the basic tools that they would have to use throughout the course. In addition to explaining the contribution of sociolinguistics to linguistics, concepts such as bilingualism and diglossia, linguistic conflict, linguistic substitution and linguistic standardization were explored in depth, always from a practical approach and through class discussion based on real texts, both from classics of sociolinguistics (Weinreich, 1953) and from press reports or various articles. In this section, a first approach to the bilingual or multilingual realities of countries such as Canada, Belgium, Switzerland or Israel and also to the Valencian reality was carried out. The first block concludes with a forum discussion based on the concepts of stereotype, prejudice and linguistic discrimination (as well as their treatment in the educational environment).

In the second block of contents (entitled Les llengües al món) we aimed to take a journey through the existing languages in the world and their classification, the approach of certain related concepts, the debate on minoritized languages and on the disappearance of languages in the world. In this way we arrived at the class work on the Romance languages, their origin and evolution, the influence of the pre-Roman substratum, the passage of the Germanic peoples, the Arabic influence, etc.

Finally, in the last section (The linguistic variation) it was explained what is the linguistic variation and its typologies, to finish investigating and making contributions to the forum in relation to the Valencian language within the Catalan linguistic diasystem.

Methodology and Evaluation

As mentioned above, the work methodology proposed from the project's beginning was based on constant interaction (Cots, 2007). The teachers proposed an active methodology through resources such as forums (Labrador, 1999), in which participants take collective responsibility for the development of all

activities (Oltra and Pardo, 2016). Therefore, it was considered essential for the acquisition of the competencies both the connection and the participation of the students.

Therefore, from the very beginning we considered the presence of activities and works in which there was interaction among the students (especially through the forums) and between the students and the teacher to be fundamental. In this sense, we take as a starting point the reflections of Ballester and Mas (2003) regarding the treatment of linguistic stereotypes and prejudices in the classroom, emphasizing direct and lasting intergroup contact, recategorization and cognitive interventions, and always focusing on the language in use as an essential element in learning. In this way, we intended to carry out attitudinal work as proposed by several authors (Martínez, 1999), through the consolidation of the group atmosphere and respect for diversity and for all situations in terms of language proficiency, in order to improve linguistic competence through use.

Among all the tasks that were performed, the evaluation tests and the research work that each student carried out on a language with minorization problems, or related (for commercial, historical or immigration reasons) to the Valencian Community stand out. Students were provided with a series of links to web pages where they could find reliable and relevant information, with a working system in many aspects close to that of WebQuests (Oltra and Pardo 2008). The following is the proposed orientation scheme for this research:

1. Language location
2. Language family and branch
3. Special features
4. Number of speakers
5. Literary and popular tradition
6. Sociolinguistic status
7. Legal status
8. School status
9. Language policy proposals
10. Related didactic proposals

Research and Results

In order to know the opinion of the students about the subject, they filled out a questionnaire of 10 questions (three of them open-ended and the others in the form of a Likert scale) regarding different aspects of the subject, such as which were the most interesting contents, whether their perception of minority languages had changed, whether they had learned important things, or whether the research on an endangered language had been relevant. Regarding the evaluation of the results, first of all, it should be noted that the students showed a mostly positive attitude towards the development of the subject and its contents. A large percentage (63%) of students acknowledged that the module reflection made them rethink their previous positions regarding the situation of historically minoritized languages and specifically their attitudes towards the language of the Valencian Community. In many cases, and sometimes independently of the student's L1, they acquired this "awareness" of the situation and of the need to protect endangered languages from the research carried out on a language in a minority situation, which led them to see the problem in perspective and to face the Valencian situation from a different point of view: thus, some of the students' comments insisted on the idea of the discovery and better assimilation of sociolinguistic concepts not so much from theory but from the research of diverse linguistic realities in the world.

Also remarkable were the percentages of students who found the course contents interesting (90%), those who considered that the course helped them to reflect about languages and speakers on a personal level (93%), and those for whom the module provided interesting knowledge on this topic (95%).

Concerning the research work, the students considered it a very rewarding experience, if we consider the answers to questions such as the interest for Valencians of the approach to other bilingual realities (94% of "agree" or "strongly agree" answers), if the research on a language was positive (87%), or if the specific work carried out meant a personal enrichment (87%). The percentages of students who selected "disagree"

or "strongly disagree" ranged from 2% to 0% depending on the questions, while the "indifferent" response ranged from 5% to 13%.

Regarding the answers obtained in the open questions, we also observed a positive attitude of the students towards the subject and its development: in relation to question number 5 (What is the most interesting thing you have learned?), the answers are very varied and refer to different topics covered in the subject. Given the coincidence in the responses, it is worth mentioning that the most attractive aspects have been those related to language contact and conflict. Thus, a repeated response has been the interest in conflict situations and how they help to understand social dynamics. Linguistic history, knowledge and configuration of one's own language, knowledge of other linguistic realities and the disappearance of languages are, in this order, the following aspects that have aroused most interest in the students.

Concerning question 9 (what is the most interesting thing you have discovered about the language you have researched?), most of the answers highlighted aspects such as the characteristics of the language studied (origin, cultural uses, forms of writing, literary tradition...), secondly, the most frequent answers referred to a better knowledge of the European reality, of the linguistic variety and of the struggle of many people in the world to preserve their language, their roots and their cultural heritage.

Finally, students were asked to highlight positive and negative aspects of the module: regarding the positive aspects, they highlighted the clarity and the effort to avoid sterile scholarship in the explanation of the concepts, the research work and the various activities. The aspects that could be improved (taking into account that 32% of respondents stated that there were no negative aspects) were the length of the syllabus (15%), the possibility of holding debates and discussions (13%) and greater participation in the activities by all students (10%).

Discussion and Conclusions

The implications of the analysis are undoubtedly numerous, both in terms of the importance of language attitudes in learning and in terms of future curriculum design. Regarding the study's limitations, these are mainly due to the size of the sample and the fact that the students are teachers or future teachers conditioned by the obligatory nature of the training degree in order to be able to practice.

The research results in the subject are fully in line with those of the degree program as a whole (Romero, Oltra and Pardo, 2015; 2019): in terms of the success rate, more than three quarters of the students obtained the degree: however, considering these results, it is clear that it would have been necessary to design reinforcement strategies to reduce the number of failures and to implement motivational resources to reduce dropouts. In terms of the most used resource, the document repository was the one that received the most access, while the tools related to communication and collaboration received far fewer visits, a fact that points to a traditional learning style, based on the assimilation of content on an individual basis.

In reference to subject 7, the participants highlighted aspects such as clarity, although an important element for improvement would have been the impact on motivation, which could have compensated in part for the feeling of lack of time, too much teaching load or insufficient participation in the group.

Despite the permanence of some traditional models, it is clear that online training is an excellent opportunity to meet the continuing education needs of today's society. The course we have analyzed maintained a high level of demand and results, among other reasons because of the online methodology and its ability to adapt to different student profiles and learning styles; as regards sociolinguistics content, the assessment is also necessarily positive.

In conclusion, the experience confirms the importance of sociolinguistic contents and the need to maintain or even enhance them, given their value in the work of language attitudes and their impact on learning itself.

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