Language Learning and Intercultural Communicative Competence: An Action Research Case Study of Learners of Portuguese

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Abstract

This paper is the intermediary report of an ongoing case study into the learning of a new foreign language (Portuguese) from beginner’s level by first-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, National Research Tomsk State University. Adopting an action research approach, with the teaching staff and learners as co-participants, the study focuses on the first year of teaching a new foreign language, examining pedagogical practice and learner motivation. The results of the study emphasize the importance of learning through communication and culture, enabling learners to identify with both the target language and culture, while making use of a wide range of foreign language learning activities.

1. Introduction

In the current climate of globalization, Russian universities are faced with the task of internationalizing their educational and research activity (Susitsyna, 2005). One key element of this task is that of improving language education in order for Russian students to take advantage of new opportunities for academic mobility (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2014). Against the background of these reforms, the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Tomsk State University has added a new foreign language – Portuguese – to its repertoire. It is perhaps a sign of this language’s novelty in Russia that a lecturer had to be specially recruited from Brazil in order to teach it. In the absence of

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Portuguese-teaching experience and considering the dearth of language learning materials in comparison to not only English, but also other Romance languages traditionally taught in Russia, it became necessary to establish a system from scratch for teaching Portuguese as a foreign language. Evaluating the success of this system, and understanding what to modify where appropriate, was the basis for this study. For the purposes of this study, we define “success” as the extent to which the learners develop intercultural communicative competence.

Yang and Fleming (2013: 297) relate how “the goal of English language teaching has gradually changed from a narrow focus on linguistic competence… to communicative competence [to] intercultural communicative competence.” Intercultural communicative competence is an extension of language communicative competence, which takes account of the intercultural aspect of foreign language use; it being found that “knowledge on aspects, such as organizational behaviour, educational systems, civic studies, anthropology or psychology influenced the success of business, military and diplomatic personnel on placements in foreign countries” (Mughan, 1999: 62, cited in Coperias Aguilar, 2009: 248). Byram’s (1997, 2009) model of intercultural communicative competence, for example, categorizes the skills and knowledge relevant to the acquisition of intercultural competence: knowledge (savoir), attitudes (savoir être), skills of discovery/interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), skills of interpreting/relating (savoir comprendre) and critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager) (cited in Yang and Fleming, 2013: 297).

According to Byram (1997), there is an inextricable link between ability to function effectively in a language and intercultural communicative competence. Despite this, even teachers who exhibit high intercultural competence often lack effective approaches to “culture learning” (Johnstone Young and Sachdev, 2011: 81). Added to this is the problem that achieving both intercultural and communicative objectives can be challenging, to the extent that “even when language teachers recognize the importance of developing students’ intercultural competence, they often drop intercultural aims in planning their courses, since they feel that ‘language and culture cannot be taught in an integrated way’ (Sercu et al, 2005: 164)” (Borghetti, 2013: 256). Nevertheless, gaining intercultural competence is beneficial for language learners since “their developing intercultural competence informs their language choices in communication” (Kramsch 2009: 244). Finally, empirical research has found a strong correlation between learners’ intercultural communicative competence and foreign language learning motivation (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013).

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical background

Action research is “a distinctive approach to inquiry that is directly relevant to classroom instruction and learning and provides the means for teachers to enhance their teaching and improve student learning” (Stringer, 2008: 1). Action research is “an enquiry which is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate and then to change, in order to improve educational practice” (Bassey, 1998: 98). Action research can be viewed as a self-reflective cycle, which can be summarized as: 1) plan, 2) act, 3) observe, and 4) reflect, leading back to a new cycle (Kemmis, 1997). This self-reflective cycle is aimed at solving a given problem. The main purpose of action research is “to improve practice – either one’s own practice or the effectiveness of an institution” (Koshy, 2010: 9).

The idea of teacher-researchers being action researchers is supported in research literature (McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Burns, 1999; Ellis, 2008; Stringer, 2008). Writing on the study of second language acquisition Ellis (2008: 689) concludes that “some educationalists might feel that research undertaken by professional researchers will always be of limited value to language teachers and that a more worthwhile and exciting approach is action research, where teachers become researchers by identifying research questions important to them and seeking answers in their own classrooms.” Teacher reflection makes use of action research to understand students and their learning (Edge, 2000).

Much action research is written up as case studies, which are a powerful means of capturing real data which can serve as a basis for action (Koshy, 2010). Case studies can allow us to penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis (Cohen et al, 2007). The benefits of carrying out case studies are that they enable us to explore the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of events, being both exploratory and descriptive (Yin, 2009).

Being a study into the effectiveness of language teaching in terms of developing intercultural communicative competence, the research question was formulated as follows: What features of the learning and teaching process are
conducive to the development of learners’ intercultural communicative competence?

2.2. Participants

As practitioner-researchers, examining first and foremost our own practice and that of our students, this study was limited in scope, focusing on a group of our students. The participants, therefore, were ourselves as teachers and a group of first-year students (6 language learners) taught primarily by one of us. The research took place at our own timetabled classes with the given group at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, National Research Tomsk State University. It was conducted over the course of the academic year 2014-15.

2.3. Data collection

When selecting data collection methods, we had considered using post-study language tests as a measure of the effectiveness of teaching, but eventually decided against this. It is impossible to say whether the participating group would have made as much (or, indeed, even more) progress if other (or even the previous) teaching methods had been used. Additionally, it would have been extremely difficult to control the many inevitable variables, e.g. the make-up of students, including individual ability and motivation levels, etc. (see Stringer, 2008). Compounded to this is the fact that test results are not particularly revealing in explaining the reasons behind student progress McBeath (2006: 55). In our view and based on the action research literature, the research design must take particular account of the participants’ perspectives on the effectiveness of the employed teaching method in the teaching and learning process.

To this end, during the study we employed participant observation, keeping a teacher’s diary to record what happened during classes in terms of student reception and participation, which also enabled refinement of the approach. The observation was semi-structured and therefore hypothesis-generating (Cohen et al, 2007), which would allow for subsequent clarification in the course of the study by means of the other data collection methods. Upon completion of the study we conducted interviews and a focus group with the students to obtain data on issues such as motivation of students and their personal perception of their progress in Portuguese during the study. In order to keep track of each student’s development throughout the course of the research, each student was given a participant number against which data on student responses were entered.

We were relying on the interviews to provide richer, more detailed data than would be possible to gain from a questionnaire. We therefore chose to conduct focused interviews in which the interviews may remain open-ended, but the researcher generally follows a certain set of questions, “a major purpose of such an interview might simply be to corroborate certain facts that you already think have been established” (Yin, 2009: 107). The questions were designed to understand the students’ preferences in the teaching and learning process, and also to check our correct interpretation of student responses from the observation, for purposes of validity.

Given the small size of the group, we conducted interviews with each of the participants. Interviewing all of the students, rather than a selected sample, meant that each participant’s perspectives were recorded and listened to, which helped to reduce the possibility that a person’s views would be missed or discounted. This, in turn, served to increase the validity of the research. Nevertheless, in interviewing, the qualitative data obtained might be interpreted by different researchers in different ways (Kvale, 1996). One way to minimize this, and provide a moment for reflection, was to conduct a focus group, in which all the participants would collectively review the data obtained from the teacher’s diary and interviews. It can be said that this is useful “where a group of people have been working together for some time or common purpose, or where it is seen as important that everyone concerned is aware of what others in the group are saying” (Cohen et al, 2007: 373). The focus group allowed for discussion of these data. Again, given the small group size, the focus group comprised the whole group. This, as for the interviews, had the advantage of not excluding any of the participants, thus ensuring that everybody had the opportunity to voice their views.
2.4. Interpreting the data

To gain understanding of the data obtained in the course of the study, interpretive analysis was employed in the manner proposed by Hatch (2002: 181), making use of the various data collection methods used. Firstly, the data were read in order to get a sense of the whole. Impressions previously recorded during the study in the teacher’s diary were reviewed. The data were then coded where interpretations were supported or challenged, prior to being clarified with the participants at the interview stage. The data from the interviews were then reread and coded before being clarified again in the focus group. Finally, excerpts supporting the interpretations were identified and referred to in the write-up.

It is coding that “leads you from the data to the idea” (Richards and Morse, 2007: 137). This research being a study of student response and language development, the codes were ‘positive response’, ‘negative response’ and ‘use of language’. Subcodes, in turn, were ‘specific, observable types of realistic action related to the codes’ (Saldaña, 2013: 12) (italics in original). For example, a subcode might be ‘engagement’ of a learner in an activity, which would be coded as a positive response.

3. Results and discussion

Positive responses were recorded in the teacher’s diary, interviews and focus group as to the atmosphere during classes, which was co-created by the teacher and students so as to be conducive to developing intercultural communicative competence. Chan (2013) notes the important role of the teacher in promoting interactional authenticity in the foreign language classroom, which cannot be achieved via a textbook. The teacher’s diary records that adjusting to a student-centered interactive way of learning required some time initially. Yet when the students became accustomed to the new approach it was felt to be particularly effective by the class teacher, who used meaningful interaction to introduce the learners not only to language, but also to the culture of Portuguese-speaking countries. In their interviews, this was noted specifically by the majority of students (5 out of 6 learners) and confirmed unanimously during the focus group as being motivating in their language learning. This interaction was also marked as being effective use of language and key to the learners’ developing intercultural communicative competence over the course of the academic year.

Regular practical activities – creating and practicing dialogues, and also tests involving communicative grammar tasks – were responded to positively as attested to in the teacher’s diary. This was supported by the interview data (5 out of 6 learners). Such practical tasks as tests found a unanimously positive learner response in the focus group and were deemed important for effective use of language, enhancing the benefits from the interaction described above. These various activities allowed the students to take ownership of their learning, enabling them to learn in their own particular ways, making use of their individual abilities (Wrigley, 2007). One learner demonstrated a negative response to group work. This response, as explained by the learner, was due to a personal preference in learning styles (McDonough and Shaw, 1993), i.e. a preference for working alone. Irrespective, however, of learning preferences regular practical activities enabled regular checking of students’ progress which in turn assisted the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Gardner (1985, cited in Dörnyei, 1998: 122) conceives motivation in language learning as subsuming three components, namely, motivational intensity (effort), desire to learn the language (want/will) and an attitude towards the act of learning the language (task-enjoyment). In interaction and when completing practical tasks, the learners displayed the task-enjoyment described in Dörnyei (1998). The students’ ownership of their learning was also motivating, as noted in the literature (Ehlers et al, 2006; Kocher, 2007). Motivation was further enhanced by the students learning language and information that they could apply immediately, as per the interaction and practical tasks (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The students adjusted to the new way of learning very well, as seen from their responses and continued engagement throughout the academic year. There emerged intrinsic motivation, from the way tasks were presented (Dörnyei, 2001), in addition to the already-existing extrinsic motivation of studying hard in order to graduate.

The collaborative talk among the students in this study was particularly useful for their language development, where they were ‘scaffolding’ each other’s talk. In the course of the study, the students’ scaffolding occurred through co-construction, other-correction and continuers, as opposed to comprehension checks, confirmation checks
and clarification checks, which concurs with the findings of Foster and Ohta (2005). The utility of such collaborative talk in task-based teaching in terms of “providing support, structure and focus” (Ibid) is noted in empirical research (Ohta, 2000; Swain and Lapkin, 2001).

Negative responses were recorded in the teacher’s diary for lengthy translation tasks; toward the beginning of work with the group, certain long translation tasks were given which did not adequately correspond to the students’ level of Portuguese. The interviews confirmed the negative response from 3 learners, whose responses were subsequently supported in the focus group. Two learners suggested in their interviews that more attention could be paid to translating oral as opposed to written texts, and that this could be better integrated into the teaching and learning approach. Such ideas gained support from the learners in the focus group. The importance of students’ perception of tasks being relevant and meaningful is noted in the foreign language teaching literature (Widdowson, 1998; Rivers, 2007). Compared to other tasks, such exercises were less motivating and less conducive to developing intercultural communicative competence. It must be noted that, following an early review of pedagogical practice, activities became better adapted to the students’ language level and made more relevant to their immersion in language and culture. Thus, such negative responses were recorded only during the initial stages of studies.

Overall, the learner response demonstrates the greatly positive influence on motivation and development of intercultural communicative competence of learning through a combination of communication and culture. Indeed, it is the activities that develop skills and knowledge in both that proved to be recognized by all the participants as being most useful to their education.

4. Conclusion

Learning a foreign language at university from beginner’s level is never easy, particularly when one is simultaneously studying other subjects. This study focused on the first year of teaching a new foreign language, examining pedagogical practice and learner motivation. Adopting an action research approach, with the teaching staff and learners as co-participants, the research demonstrated the importance of learning through communication and culture while providing the students with ownership of their learning (Ehlers et al, 2006; Kocher, 2007). It is this combination of varied activities that makes the learning process motivating and enables learners to identify with both the target language and culture. Moreover, after one academic year the teachers and students both noted satisfaction with the latter’s development of intercultural communicative competence.

Bearing in mind that, even in a small group of students, there might be a variety of learning preferences, it is incumbent to take account of students’ individual learning trajectories by making use of a wide range of foreign language learning activities (Sysoyev, 2014a, 2014b). The study shows that such a multi-strategy approach in an interactive, motivating atmosphere allows students to develop intercultural communicative competence.

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