3 Investigating one's own teaching practices using action research

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1. Introduction

The aim of the research described below, which is an example of action research, was to contribute to new curricular and professional definitions based on a systematic analysis of the possibilities and limitations that arise when working with the intercultural dimension of foreign language classes for adults.

The action research method has been defined in many ways (cf. Bizquerra Alzina, 2009; Cohen & Manion, 1990; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Latorre, 2007; van Lier, 2001). Goyette and Lessard-Hébert (1988) point out various epistemological differences that

> "convergen en torno a tres elementos básicos: a) desde el punto de vista del objeto (el qué); b) desde el punto de vista de la metodología (el cómo) y c) desde el punto de vista del investigador (el quién)" (Rizo & Romeu, 2008, n.p.)[2].

Both Suárez Pazos (2002) and Latorre (2007) warn that for decades the concept behind action research has been greatly distorted in its application.

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2. "converge around three basic elements: a) from the point of view of the object (the what); b) from the point of view of the methodology (the how); and c) from the point of view of the researcher (the who)" (Rizo & Romeu, 2008, n/p).

"Atentos a las distorsiones más usuales, situaremos en primer lugar lo que no es la [investigación-acción…]. (a) No es lo que habitualmente hace un profesor cuando reflexiona sobre lo que acontece en su trabajo; como investigación, se trata de tareas sistemáticas basadas en evidencias; (b) no es una simple resolución de problemas, implica también mejorar, comprender; (c) no se trata de una investigación sobre otras personas, sino sobre uno mismo, en colaboración con otros implicados y colaboradores; y (d) no es la aplicación del método científico a la enseñanza, es una modalidad diferente que se interesa por el punto de vista de los implicados, cambiando tanto al investigador como a la situación investigada" (Suárez Pazos, 2002, p. 43)[3].

It is possible to pick out some common features among all the definitions: (1) it is (usually) a qualitative research method; (2) it focuses on what happens during everyday teaching activities (in education, mainly with regard to classroom interactions); and (3) its main objective is to identify which aspects need to be improved and how to change them (see Nussbaum, this volume).

To summarize, it can be said that the proposition of action research is based on the need to integrate research with the job of teaching in order to gather data and results that can be used to transform it (Bisquerra Alzina, 2009; van Lier, 2001). Action research is aimed at analyzing actions and social situations susceptible to becoming problematic and which are open to change. Although it starts out with an initial description (initial state), it is an intervention discipline directed towards modification (final state).

Generally speaking, the introduction of the concept of action research was attributed to Kurt Lewin, beginning in the 1950's (Lewin, 1973), but up until the 1970's no movement adopted the concept as a systematic approach

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3. "In considering the most common distortions, we firstly detail what [action research] is not […]. (a) It is not what teachers would normally do when reflecting upon what happens in their work; as research, it is about systematic tasks based on evidence; (b) it is not the simple resolution of problems; it also implies improvement, and understanding; (c) it is not about research into other people but into oneself, in cooperation with others involved and collaborators; and (d) it is not the application of scientific methods to teaching, it is a different approach that takes an interest in the opinions of those involved, changing both the researcher and the situation being investigated" (Suárez Pazos, 2002, p. 43).

to qualitative research into teaching practices. Led by Lawrence Stenhouse (1984) and John Elliott (1993) in Great Britain, the idea began to become accepted that teachers themselves are the most appropriate people to conduct research and improve their own performance. Later, in the 1980's, Stephen Kemmis, together with Wilfred Carr (Carr & Kemmis, 1988) put forward the view that action research is not only a process for changing the way individual teachers act, but rather a process of social transformation to be carried out collaboratively with participants and stakeholders in these contexts (students, other teachers, researchers and the immediate community; see Nussbaum, this volume; Unamuno & Patiño, this volume).

This type of research is based on a diagnostic phase that shapes the design of the intervention, the monitoring of which results in the interpretation of the transformations. For those taking part, action research implies reflecting on their own performance and that of others, giving a central role to the dialogue between the theory, the researcher and the situation being investigated.

It is a spiral process, in which the periods of problematization, diagnosis, the design of an intervention proposal, its application, assessment, etc. all start over again in a new version of the circuit.

The design of this type of research involves taking into account the following steps that are characteristic of action research:

- *Problematization*: this involves establishing a problematic area defined by a certain level of 'social disturbance' deriving from some or all of the participants in terms of difficulties or limitations in acting in compliance with individual or institutional objectives.

- *Diagnosis*: following the problematization and the definition of the focus of the research process, a clear diagnosis of the situation becomes necessary. To do this, it is important to obtain information, organize it and analyze it in order to understand the initial situation or the starting point for the research.

- *Drawing up an intervention proposal*: after identifying the problem in question and analyzing the starting point, the intervention and its monitoring tools are designed.

- *Applying the intervention*: here consideration is given to the process involved in executing and observing the intervention.

- *Assessment*: the information gathered from recording the results of the intervention is collected and systemized at this point in the process. The assessment also provides a means of redefining the problem, based on the information provided by the analysis.

All these steps involve data triangulation; i.e. collecting, analyzing and comparing different types of data (videos, transcripts, student output, official documents from the educational center, etc.). Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used in the collection and analysis of data in this study. Following the terminology used by Morse (2010), mixed methods were used with a QUAL+quant design (qualitative and quantitative). To a large extent, the study is based on the systematic observation of classroom interactions and on other qualitative data. Nevertheless, quantitative methods were also used, such as questionnaires, which will be explained further on.

In today's society, there is increasing pressure on teachers to be innovators, especially in response to scientific and technological advances and new demographic landscapes. There is a general sense of dramatic change and consequently an increase in demands for social challenges to be met through education. Old conceptions about the role of educational institutions and the processes of teaching and learning are changing (see Dooly, this volume). In this respect, there are many authors who regard action research as the most appropriate methodology for tackling these challenges.

> "La complejidad de la práctica educativa hace necesario que el profesorado asuma el papel de investigador; que esté atento a las contingencias del contexto; que se cuestione las situaciones problemáticas

de la práctica; que dé respuesta a las necesidades del alumnado y trate de buscar nuevos enfoques. La enseñanza es un proceso donde tienen lugar simultáneamente múltiples elementos en interacción, lo que hace difícil su indagación y conocimiento" (Latorre, 2007, p. 12)[4].

Accordingly, this chapter begins with a study of the educational context that not only serves to understand the place in which the research described was applied but also provides important data for the analysis of the complex initial situation from which it began. It is a diagnostic study that permits a clearer and more objective definition of the initial problem and the requirements for transformation.

2.   The study: the development of intercultural competence in foreign language classrooms

For decades, official policies on language teaching have advocated greater integration of language learning with culture (Council of Europe, 2001). This concept of language teaching implies a criticism of approaches which, based on an instrumental conception of language – concentrating exclusively on acquiring linguistic skills – have marginalized the cultural and intercultural aspects of many centers. This was the case in the context of the study described here: an Official Language School (Escola Oficial d'Idiomes or EOIs) in Barcelona.

For decades now, experts in teaching foreign languages have been pointing out that students need not only to develop grammatical competence, but also communication skills that will enable them to use language in a socially and culturally appropriate way (Council of Europe, 2001). It is in this respect that language learning cannot be conceived as a separate process from the

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4. "The complexity of educational practice obliges teaching staff to take on the role of researchers; to be aware of the eventualities that can arise in this context; to question problematic situations in the practice of teaching; to respond to the needs of the students and to seek out new approaches. Teaching is a process by which multiple elements of interaction come together simultaneously, making it difficult to investigate and understand" (Latorre, 2007, p. 12).

development of the necessary intercultural competence for users to participate effectively in culturally meaningful contexts.

Incorporating an intercultural dimension in language teaching implies a reassessment of the profile of the student. If the teacher can be viewed as an intermediary for access to languages and cultures, students begin to see themselves as speakers who, on the one hand become plurilingual and on the other, intercultural. This new student profile entails a radical redefinition of teaching-learning concepts.

In order to contribute to new curricular and professional definitions based on the systematic analysis of the possibilities and limitations presented when working with the intercultural dimension in adult foreign language classrooms, it was decided to conduct an investigation of the researcher's own practice of being a teacher and of the context. The study qualified as action research given that it originated in a problem relevant to the researcher, to foreign language teachers in general, and to students, and that the results could be used to transform the practices and contexts analyzed.

3.   Objectives of the study

As an introduction to this research, we firstly proposed exploring the specificity of notions of communicative competence, intercultural competence, intercultural awareness and the intercultural dimension of the process of teaching and learning languages. It was felt that defining and rationalizing these concepts for pedagogical intervention were equally important in both research and practice.

We began from the basis that studying the development of intercultural competence and the intercultural dimension of the process of teaching and learning languages entails a systematic analysis of the context. As already mentioned, it is not simply a matter of describing the place where the practice of teaching and research is introduced, but rather an analysis of the variables

articulated in the definition of the initial problem on which my research was based.

Consistent with the general approach of this research, the first objective was to explore and describe the institutional, teaching and student aspects of the context. Specifically:

Objective 1. Describe the institutional, teaching and student aspects of the socio-educational context, taking into consideration:

- the cultural and intercultural elements of the current French curriculum in the EOIs (Official Language Schools) of Catalonia;

- the categories that relate to intercultural sensitivity; and

- intercultural practices declared by the teaching staff.

In line with van Lier (2001), action research involves including in the study the design and assessment of material specifically created to impact on students' linguistic and intercultural competence. This was precisely the second objective of this study.

Objective 2. Analyze the intercultural dimension of the process of teaching and learning languages, based on a didactic intervention aimed at jointly developing the intercultural and linguistic competences anticipated in the fourth level of the EOIs (use of language, oral and written expression, oral and written comprehension).

- Observe the interrelationship between materials, activities and teaching practices.

- Observe how students perform in the teaching-learning process, paying specific attention to its intercultural dimension.

- Analyze the relationships between intercultural and linguistic competences in this process.

Although the indicators used to assess linguistic competence were those applied institutionally by the EOIs, no standard indicators existed for intercultural competence. Therefore, based on an analysis of different proposals from numerous previous investigations (for example, Byram, 1992; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Candillier, 2007; Meyer, 1994), I also decided to develop my own proposal based on the results of the research context I was working on. Thus, Objective 3 of this investigation was:

Objective 3. Based on a critical analysis of the different proposals available, to evaluate intercultural competence in foreign language classes, to develop a set of indicators applicable to a French class for adults, and to apply them in order to measure their relevance and functionality.

- Compare and analyze different proposals for assessing intercultural competence in a foreign language.

- Prepare a set of indicators that could be used to assess the development of intercultural competence in a foreign language class with adults.

- Measure their efficacy and functionality by applying concrete data extracted from the natural dynamics of socio-educative intervention.

Once these indicators were prepared, they were put into specific action. To do this, Objective 4 concentrated on analyzing the impact of the didactic intervention in developing intercultural competence according to the indicators established. Specifically:

Objective 4. Measure the impact of a didactic intervention directed at the intercultural dimension of the teaching-learning process of languages in the development of intercultural competence.

- Develop a proposal of indicators designed to assess the most relevant aspects of intercultural competence developed in a language class.

- Compare the results relative to the intercultural and linguistic competences of two comparable activities, developed by the same student body at two points in the teaching-learning process.

- Verify the results obtained based on these activities using a target group (participant in the didactic intervention) and a control group (not exposed to the aforesaid intervention).

4. Data collection: a variety of resources to triangulate the results

Conducting an analysis of the institutional dimension made it necessary to develop research tools to determine the presence of cultural and intercultural content in the curriculum, in the syllabus of teacher training courses, and in textbooks. Firstly, in order to obtain numerous data in a limited time, it was decided to use questionnaires and to compare two groups (a target group and a control group) to measure 'the initial intercultural profile' of the participants. This initial diagnosis also served to measure the objective of the research more accurately, i.e. the impact of the didactic intervention on developing intercultural competence. Next, the didactic intervention was designed and observed for a more in-depth qualitative analysis. Each phase is explained in more detail below.

4.1. Questionnaires

The teaching dimension (see Objective 1) was explored using two questionnaires designed to obtain, on the one hand, general information on categories related to raising awareness of the agents involved in education

with regard to the intercultural dimension of pedagogical practices and, on the other, descriptions of these practices by the teachers themselves. Our approach to the student dimension was based on developing an open questionnaire aimed at collecting individual descriptions of their linguistic and intercultural experiences, and a cultural stereotype test. These tools were also used in this research to collect data on the development and impact of the didactic intervention proposed.

The questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale giving a value of one equivalent to strongly disagree and five to strongly agree. There were 30 questions in total, which felt to be sufficient to achieve an overview of the attitudes of teaching staff and the student body towards the teaching of intercultural competences without it becoming too cumbersome and lengthy to respond to (see Canals, this volume, for more information on questionnaires). Some examples of the statements include:

- Learning foreign languages has helped me change my attitudes and beliefs about other communities and cultures.

- Intercultural activities can help improve a student's ability to communicate.

- Learning about civilization and language enables students to become intercultural spokespeople.

- It is important for students to reflect on their own culture and to analyze it from an external perspective in order to better understand others.

4.2.   Test for cultural stereotypes

A test was conducted with the control group and target group before and after the didactic intervention. An example of this follows (Table 1).

Table 1. Example of cultural stereotype test

Use the following scale of values to indicate if these adjectives describe more accurately people of your own nationality (Column A) or native French speakers (Column B). Scale: 1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = occasionally; 4 = frequently; 5 = very often.		
Adjectives	**A**	**B**
Emotional		
Arrogant		
Serious		
Friendly		
Self-confident		
Logical		
Generous		
Calm		
Lazy		
Efficient		
Impatient		
Stubborn		
Honorable		
Competent		
Cheerful		
Timid		
Hardworking		
Noisy		
Tolerant		

4.3.   Didactic intervention

The analysis of the context was accompanied by a period of intervention, the objective of which was to design, apply and assess a didactic intervention directed at aspects of intercultural competence.

The teaching intervention was contained within a series of materials specifically developed to work on the intercultural dimension of language teaching. Based on the assumption that the intercultural dimension is interwoven with linguistic knowledge, both the design and the analysis of the impact of the didactic intervention were undertaken from a perspective in which intercultural and

linguistic aspects came together. It could be argued that if foreign language teachers are to have a role in developing intercultural aspects as part of teaching language skills, this cannot be separated from what is implicit in their role in guiding the all-round development of communication skills.

The preparation of intercultural teaching materials took into account elements that form part of students' everyday lives and their previous knowledge. The activities were diverse, including simulations, debates, critical analyses of a variety of press articles, etc. These materials had previously been used and ratified by the working group Aplicación y Evaluación de Materiales de Educación Global (Application and Assessment of Global Education Materials) coordinated by the NGO Intercultura, set up as part of the agreement between this NGO and the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport and concentrating particularly on skills related to reading comprehension and oral expression.

Monitoring classroom intervention was done by systematic observation, supported by an observation template for making a rapid description of some important contextual elements, including the physical distribution of those taking part, how classroom participation was organized, and the general ambience during the activity (also see Canals, this volume). The systematic observation of classes was undertaken with the assistance of an external observer. Using the observation template, various aspects of student behavior were recorded as they worked with the material, paying particular attention to the constants and the changes. Table 2 shows an extract from the observation template focused on pedagogical relationships in terms of teaching a foreign language and cultural competences in an integrated way.

Table 2.   Extract from the observation template

Observation	Always	Sometimes	Never
The teacher asks questions that call on the students' previous knowledge and experiences (with reference to intercultural situations encountered or to everyday life).			
Organizes students and shows them how to work as a group.			

Goes around the groups and gives instructions.			
Broadens the scope of the activity, providing more information.			
Relates their own experiences or ideas that influence the opinions of the students.			
Encourages students to relate to each other and freely express their ideas.			

Observations were made over a period of two-and-a-half months, during which time the classroom work of each group was simultaneously recorded on video throughout a variety of activities. These recordings were then transcribed (see Moore & Llompart, this volume). In order to compare moments from the initial and final periods of the language skills acquired by students involved in the research, we opted for two methodological strategies: on the one hand, we made a comparison between two comparable oral and written activities, one before and one after the intervention that was the subject of the analysis, and on the other we compared these activities against those carried out with a group/class with which the aforementioned didactic intervention had not been undertaken. Data were also obtained from student self-assessments at the end of the didactic intervention.

The transcripts were useful for further investigation into the interactions observed in the videos and to compare and contrast the answers given during the initial survey. To achieve this, the transcribed fragments were categorized according to themed topics that corresponded to the most noteworthy observations, and intercultural profiles were collected from the initial questionnaires. Next, these categories of themed units were checked against descriptors of different stages of interculturality from the monocultural stage (minimum profile), up to the transcultural stage (high profile). Table 3 shows an example of these categorizations.

Table 3.   Example of data according to the intercultural stage – average profile

III. Is your position flexible in a situation of intercultural conflict?
oh that depends, it's complicated… you have to look at each case, but it's true that it's an increasingly common situation… what I mean is that the world is destined to become a melting pot (AOF-SO)
there are several solutions… one could convert to Islam and then do whatever one likes at home (AOF-CG)

5.　Results

One of the most important aspects of this research was analyzing the data obtained before, during and after the didactic intervention. Analyzing the data as a whole allowed us to draw conclusions on the changes facilitated by the didactic intervention in the students' linguistic and intercultural competences. As explained, this was an integrative proposal, which means that it had the parallel objective of developing students' intercultural competence as well as fulfilling the linguistic objectives of the fourth EOI course. This double goal meant that we were not only concerned with changes in profiles and intercultural competences, but also particularly with the relationships between these elements and linguistic factors. This fulfils the requirement that, as a French teacher in an EOI, there is certain content that must be complied with and students must be assessed in the same way as all the others.

Therefore, the analysis of the didactic intervention that we designed for this research needed to consider if this intervention was successful in allowing both aspects to be worked on (linguistic and intercultural) in an integrated way. It was also important to take into account the data obtained from the students' self-assessments upon completing the didactic intervention: if they saw this integration as something new to them or not. The objective of the analysis was, on the one hand, to describe the impact of the didactic intervention on changes in profiles and linguistic and intercultural competences through comparison with the other fourth level group who did not follow the didactic intervention (known as the control group in this research); and on the other, it also sought to evaluate the students' perception of the intervention, especially in terms of what they had learnt, taking into account the relationships between language skills and intercultural skills.

From the data stemming from this research it can be deduced that developing intercultural competence is a singularly complex process, extremely difficult and lengthy, but at the same time necessary and unavoidable. One factor that emerged clearly was that developing intercultural competence does not typically take place in language classes, but classes could still be considered as a favorable setting for such development to take place.

For this to become possible, it is necessary to thoroughly review traditional attitudes to the relationship between language and culture, which are aimed at creating and perpetuating stereotypes. This research shows that these attitudes towards language and culture persist in EOIs despite the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), which establishes intercultural competence as one of the skills that must be developed in the teaching of languages.

The analysis of questionnaires applied to EOI teachers reveals that, while they recognize the importance of including intercultural aspects in their teaching methods, what they present is a vision of culture as a product; that is, as a collection of individual or collective products legitimized by a state. In the case of teaching and learning French, culture is presented as equivalent to the traditional concept of 'civilization', i.e. knowledge of the institutions, times and the most notable cultural and artistic output of the target culture.

This is consistent with the selections made by the textbooks used by the teachers surveyed, in which activities relating to culture were limited to teaching about cultural products and to descriptions of groups associated with France or, to a lesser degree, to French-speaking countries, which are generally presented as a homogeneous group. The few references to other collectives or cultural groups were limited to Europe. This content, along with the manner in which teachers present it, contributes to perpetuating stereotypes and consolidating them in the collective imagination of students.

According to the teachers' accounts, their teaching methods are limited to aspects of what is traditionally referred to as 'French civilization', without including activities in which consideration is given to the culture of the student body or the cultural diversity of the class. Thus, one of the fundamental aspects for developing intercultural competence is excluded, which is to add acceptance of one's own cultural identity to the knowledge, recognition and acceptance of someone else's.

The study also provided information on what type of activities may have an impact on the development of what we have defined as intercultural

competence, and the possibilities of integrating such activities into foreign language classes. Nevertheless, the teaching guidelines extracted must be considered as part of a proposal that is open to modification in terms of other contexts.

6.   Concluding words

The difficulty of measuring the transformation of people's intercultural competence is one of the great obstacles to investigations such as the one described in this chapter. For example, although the answers obtained from anonymous questionnaires merit attention, the possibility should be considered that, for many reasons, they are not always reliable. This possibility led us, in this study, to develop a set of indicators and instruments to collect different data that could assist in making the changes observed more objective and triangulate the results. The strategy of adopting mixed methods, with a QUAL+quant design, was useful for comparing data from the questionnaires, observations made both internally and externally throughout the process, and other data collected.

While it is true that the conclusions drawn are not definitive given the limited nature of the analysis, they remain illustrative and illuminating mainly with regard to developing intercultural competence in language teaching classes, and to the potential offered by adopting a bifocal approach to language and interculturality in programming the teaching-learning of foreign languages.

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