

BELIEFS, ASSUMPTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE OF SPANISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ABOUT SLOVAK LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

Nowadays, no one denies the importance of language learning for the training of the individual and for the progress of societies. In Europe, the idea of multilingual European citizenship has been consolidated in recent decades in relation to the perspective of exchange and mobility within the European Union. However, in many cases linguistic learning can be complicated by several factors that are basically extralinguistic. At times, prejudices and linguistic stereotypes persist, mainly because of the ignorance of European linguistic and cultural reality and the possibilities of the own language learning for people's lives and for the development of territories. Research and reflection about beliefs, ideas and representations about languages, their importance and their treatment in the classroom, at all levels of education, is presented as a relevant research field in the current European context: in this line, we present a research on the ideas, beliefs and expectations about languages and their learning in the European framework of the students of the Faculty of Teaching of the University of Valencia. The responses of the group of the students to these questions reaffirm us in the idea and invite to a reflection in depth on the treatment of any kind of diversity, and specifically on the linguistic attitudes and their presence in the programs of language teaching.

Key words

Linguistic attitudes, Slovak language and culture, classroom research, university students

JEL Classification: M53, Z13, I25

1. The importance of languages attitudes in language learning

It is a commonly accepted fact that a language is something more than a neutral code or system that serves to communicate: languages are not only objective and socially neutral instruments that convey meanings, but are closely related to the identities of human groups, and as a consequence the evaluation of languages and attitudes that these cause will be in many cases conditioned by this identity element: "If there is a relationship between language and identity, this should manifest itself in attitudes of individuals towards these languages and their users" (Apple & Muysken, 1996, p. 30).

There is no doubt about the importance of these attitudes, beliefs and expectations about languages for their learning. Also, beliefs about bilingualism or multilingualism will decisively influence the learning results: for a subject who considers "normal" to speak an only language, the meaning of language learning will be very different from the meaning that this same process will have on students who have grown up in multilingual contexts or who have in some way experienced in practice the advantages of knowledge and the use of different languages. Different theories, such as the affective filter, teach us that, ultimately, we learn what we want to learn. In our teaching

practice we have been able to see how negative linguistic attitudes hindered the acquisition even of linguistic competence. Thus, from the basic idea, to which we referred above, that we learn what we wish to learn, it is quite understandable that linguistic learning is different when the target language is perceived as superfluous, unnecessary and forced by the teaching program. If we add to this linguistic conflict, social conflict between human groups, perception of threat of the own language, perception of imposition of another or other languages or a recent story perceived in a negative way and associated with a specific language or languages, the result can be even worse. Such as Ballester & Mas stand out (2003, p. 15):

In cases of linguistic conflict, it is undeniable that the negativity load of those concepts regarding the reduced language will affect not only the social acceptance in the use in all areas, but also the learning itself, as it is accepted commonly from Lambert's conclusions about the determining role of attitudes in school achievement.

Solé, in addressing the issue of attitudes and motivation, points out that beliefs produce linguistic attitudes, and insists on a series of interdependent and complementary factors that influence linguistic learning and that can be summarized in motivation, perception and use. The differences in this aspect

between the learning of the L1 by a child and the linguistic learning in adults are evident (Solé, 2001, p. 165-166):

There are three factors that influence the learning of a language: motivation (reasons, desires or interests for the use of a language), perception (ability and process of capturing the functioning of the language that is learnt) and the exercise of the linguistic use. The three factors are complementary and interdependent and are related to each other as three communicating vessels. (...) the child parts from the use, while the adult parts from the motivation or the prior interest in the language, for reasons that can be very different: cultural, professional, educative, political, family, religious, environmental, personal, etc. (...). If it is an adult with insufficient level of internalization of motivation to learn a language, there will not be sufficient impulse to acquire the perception, and the insufficient perception will make the effective use impossible so that, a use vacuum will occur. This inability will cause that the initial lack of motivation goes back.

In other words, the teaching-learning of languages has to do, in many cases, with extralinguistic factors, and sometimes with constructions on certain social groups and their respective languages that are created in the students' minds, and that are closely related to stereotypes and linguistic prejudices. There is no doubt that this complicates learning, and much more in situations of contact/conflict of languages. As Ferreira & Kajala points out, the current trend in research on beliefs is not focused on what students and teachers believe about the process of learning languages, but is focused on how beliefs "develop, fluctuate and interact with actions, emotions, identities or possibilities and how they are built within the contexts of learning and teaching of languages micro and macropolitical" (2011, pp. 281-289).

2. The Common European Framework of Reference and the multilingual reality

The multilingual reality of Europe has raised the need for politicians and educators to strengthen the profile of a multilingual European citizen. Indeed, one of the challenges to achieve an effective union in the continent is the linguistic issue. In this sense the CEFR of languages (2001) is an international standard for measuring the level of both oral and written comprehension and expression in a language. As it is well known, a series of levels are established for all the languages from which the comparison or

homologation of the issued titles by certified entities is favoured.

In this way, various indications of the Council of Europe were followed in relation to the heritage of the different languages and cultures of Europe, which is a very valuable common resource that must be protected and developed. Likewise, and because of the above, it is very important to carry out an educational effort so that this diversity stops being an obstacle to communication and becomes a source of mutual enrichment and understanding. Only through better knowledge of modern European languages will be possible to facilitate communication among Europeans and encourage mobility in Europe, mutual understanding and collaboration, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.

It is a multilingual approach, which tries to go beyond multilingualism understood as the knowledge of many languages or the coexistence of different languages in a determined society. *Multilingualism* can be fostered by diversifying the languages offered in a school or educational system, ensuring that students learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication; However, the *multilingual approach* emphasizes the fact that as the linguistic experience of an individual expands in the cultural environments of a language, from the familiar language to that of the society in general, and then to the languages of other peoples (whatever the way of learning them), the individual does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separate mental departments, but it develops a communicative competence to which all knowledge and linguistic experience contribute and in which languages interact with each other. This plurilingual profile is intended for all the European citizenship and seeks to promote through various educational and cultural measures.

3. Information and approach of the study

In general, the profile of the sample is formed by students of the Faculty of Teaching, who have Valencian as L1 and who are in the third year of the Degree. The sample has been taken taking as context the *subject Development of communicative skills in multilingual contexts*.

Valencian has been official language since 1983 in the Valencian Community; it is the official language of the University of Valencia and it is compulsory that the students of Teaching, in finishing the Degree demonstrate a linguistic competence of C1 level in this language, since it is a requisite to be able to compete for the public examinations to teachers (in compulsory levels of non-university education). And

according to data from the Ramon Llull Institute, if we consider all the territories of linguistic area where the language is spoken (with their different names) they number more than 13 million speakers.

In previous studies on beliefs, representations and attitudes about the teaching and learning of languages in Slovak students (Pardo-Coy & Oltra-Albiach, 2013), through the completion of a questionnaire, conclusions were obtained in which students expressed their opinion about the importance of teaching foreign languages for their training and future work. In addition, they did not perceive any type of threat or hostility towards their own language (this question was related to the existing prejudice that relates the "important" languages to the majority languages or, also, to the language-state relationship).

In this paper, we try to see what kind of reality we face, if it is the same and to what extent. That is why we included questions about what knowledge they have about Slovakia and its language; if, for example, Valencian students consider English as the most important language for any type of communication and if the languages considered the most relevant are the most important; and what impact this could have for the different regional or minority languages that exist and are legally recognized within the EU. Based on a series of questions, we wanted to know what the view of the respondents about linguistic diversity is in the European context and their motivation and interests when learning languages.

4. Valuation of the results

The study has been carried out through a survey, previously mentioned, focused on the issue of linguistic attitudes in University students. We have a total of 97 samples collected in two University classrooms of the Faculty of Teaching, as we have indicated. The survey presented a total of 15 questions divided into 3 blocks: A. Objective data; B. Knowledge and beliefs about Slovakia and Slovak; C. Knowledge and perception of the European linguistic reality.

Within one of the blocks we can find questions with a different type of answer (multichoice, open answer or yes/no). Next, we will comment on the most appropriate or relevant results obtained in relation to the objective of this study.

4.1 Objective data

As objective data, we highlight the sex of the participants, the age, the origin (number of inhabitants of the populations of origin), and whether they had

studied other native and foreign languages both inside and outside the school or high school.

It should be noted that the study population is mainly female (73%), with an average age of 21 and comes from populations (82%) that comprise between 5000 and 50000 inhabitants. In this block we also asked if students had studied any other languages, either native or foreign in school or high school. The answer was affirmative in a 100% and the same result was obtained regarding the question of which language was: English.

Also, we have found interesting the result on whether they have studied a native or foreign language outside the school or high school. The answer is not unanimous, although most have done so. The one that does coincide is the fact that English continues being the language of majority study, followed by French and Italian.

4.2 Knowledge and beliefs about Slovakia and Slovak

In this block we introduce different questions related to Slovakia and its population (geographical position of the country in the European physical map, characteristics of the Slovak character, if they could point out some historical events related to the country, with what they would associate it, what is the majority religion; if they know a Slovak person and why). There were also questions about the language (Slovak linguistic family; if they know any morphological or syntactic characteristic; how many speakers use it, if they think knowledge of Slovak would be important and why).

Practically equal, between 80% and 90% of the answers obtained in these questions show an almost total ignorance of Slovakia, its language and its reality. With the aim of grouping answers, so as not to be repetitive of these, we can summarize that they do not know how to place Slovakia on the European map, since, mainly, they place it more to the east of Europe than its real position is. Even some answers still speak of Czechoslovakia. They do not know which linguistic family Slovak belongs to and when, once the questionnaire is completed and we talk to them, they recognize that as a Slavic language they only know Russian. That is why they are not able to answer the question about the type of alphabet that is used, whether Latin or Cyrillic. They think that the most important religion is the orthodox one, we suppose because of all the interferences already indicated with the Russian culture. Nor can they say how many speakers Slovak has. They calculate that more than Valencian, mainly, because of the stereotyped association that relates language and state. As

Slovakia is a Member State of EU, its language must be majority respect others. Our students do not know many Slovaks and the few that do is because of the Erasmus programs (either because they have gone to Slovakia, because they have coincided with Slovak students in other countries or have met here in Valencia).

4.3 Knowledge and perception of the linguistic reality in Europe

We start from the question of whether students consider teaching other languages important apart from the L1 and the answer has been affirmative 100%. In addition, it is intended to find out if students know what the CEFR is, if they know how many languages are spoken in Europe, how many of these are official in the EU and finally, how many languages a European citizen should know.

It is hopeful to see how more than 80% of the students have answered that they know what the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages is, although only the 50% of them do not know exactly how many languages are spoken in Europe. Still, we consider that if we take into account the result of the subsequent questions, we can remain optimistic. Above all, we would like to highlight that 80% of students consider that a European citizen should know, at least, three languages.

5. Conclusions

Once analysed and commented the answers given by the students to different questions of the

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questionnaire, we can draw some general conclusions. We have found many points in common with previous researches, for example, the consideration of English as the most important language for any type of international communication or the fact of considering that a European citizen would have to know, at least, three languages. But we would like to point out that it is clearly visible how Valencian students have little knowledge (and possibly little interest) about Slovakia and its socio-cultural and linguistic reality.

This result reinforces our hypothesis of how the idea that relates language and State is very present in the mind or in the definition of a language as majority or minority. It is well known that languages tend to have the name of the place where they come from, so if there is a country called Slovakia and language known as Slovak, this language is recognized and accepted regardless of the number of people who speak it. Nobody questions if Slovak can be, despite the recognition, a minority language at European area.

We believe that is related to the fact that, although we believe that we must learn or know other languages, we always think in those that may be more useful from the labour point of view. It is not a personal learning, it is a clearly a multilingualism used as a tool. In fact, the few students who proved to have some knowledge or any reference on the Slovak reality, were because of the contact which cause the Erasmus program. We think it is positive and reinforces the idea on the fact of having different lines of contact to establish and strengthen relations among people and cultures not as far or as different as it may seem at first. The solution to the lack of knowledge among cultures is very close.

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