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LANGUAGE CLASSROOM PRACTICES APPLIED BY NATIVE SPEAKER TEACHERS IN A PLURILINGUAL ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

PRÁCTICAS EN LA CLASE DE IDIOMAS APLICADAS POR PROFESORES NATIVOS EN UN AULA PLURILINGÜE DE PRIMARIA

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ABSTRACT

The need for learning a foreign language in this globalized world has become an essential skill, to the point English is not sufficient, but other foreign languages are required. Colombia has been reshaping its educational curriculum to achieve these foreign language skills. Though there are suggested curriculums for

English, the lack of concrete methodologies for Chinese teaching leads to unsuccessful teaching practices. This exploratory case study will observe the first grade Mandarin class in a Colombian private institution whose teachers are native and non-native. There are obstacles in the native teacher's performance since she lacks knowledge of Colombian culture and strategies to implement; she teaches Mandarin

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through English and lacks a communicative bridge because she does not speak Spanish. This research focuses on those practices to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the class development performed by Mandarin native speaker teachers and the implications and effect those practices have in first graders' learning processes.

KEYWORDS: Elementary, Learning Process, Meaningful Learning, Multilingualism, Native Speaker Teachers, Teacher effectiveness.

RESUMEN

La necesidad de aprender un idioma extranjero en un mundo globalizado se ha convertido en una habilidad esencial, al punto de que el inglés no es suficiente, sino se requieren otras lenguas extranjeras. Colombia ha estado reformando su plan de estudios para lograr estas habilidades en idiomas extranjeros. Aunque hay planes de estudio sugeridos para el inglés, la falta de metodologías concretas para la enseñanza del chino ha llevado a prácticas de enseñanza fallidas. Este caso exploratorio observará la clase de mandarín de primer grado en una institución privada colombiana cuyos maestros son nativos y no nativos. Existen obstáculos en el desempeño de la maestra nativa quien enseña mandarín a través del inglés y carece de un puente comunicativo al no hablar español, carecer de conocimiento de la cultura colombiana, y de estrategias para el curso. Esta investigación analizará las fortalezas y debilidades del desarrollo de la clase realizado por profesores nativos de mandarín y las implicaciones y efectos que esas prácticas tienen en los procesos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes de primer grado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Primaria, Proceso de aprendizaje, Aprendizaje significativo, Multilingüismo, Maestros nativos, Efectividad del maestro.

INTRODUCTION

The world's economy has lost boundaries; therefore, learning another language has become a need worldwide. Colombia has been growing economically and has extended its reach in the social and educational field, aiming at globalization. What all this "movement" has triggered is a reform based on its educational model trying to be more competitive in the market, starting with language learning and then focusing on other courses. One decade ago, the country's needs changed, and models to extend bilingualism took a prominent role in supporting one foreign language, English, but excluding others such as Mandarin.

This project aims to observe the teaching practices in a Colombian plurilingual elementary classroom and determine the implications of Chinese native teachers' approaches to the Mandarin class, the environment of these classes, the students' motivation and knowledge of the Chinese culture, and willingness to learn the language, the communication between Chinese teachers who only speak English and lack Spanish to teach the students' target language (Mandarin). In order to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the class techniques performed by native speaker teachers of Mandarin and the implications in first graders' learning processes. After that, this research wants to analyze the language barrier's implications between the teacher-learner relationship and the students' learning process.

There is an interest from the school in verifying the Mandarin classes' efficiency and checking if they are as meaningful as possible. The lack of a follow-up has motivated the institution and us to look deeper into the class development and its approach to determine the process's strengths and weaknesses and suggest a more contextualized class approach.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Chinese economic rise increases a global demand in effective teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language as Xinhua Net, reports on Nov 5, 2008. The Colombian government has claimed an interest in trading with China as an essential international partner, which led to the visit of Colombian President Ivan Duque in July 2019 (Presidencia de la república de Colombia, 2019). Since that, some private institutions have started integrating the Mandarin language to prepare students for a successful life local in a global context. For that reason, nowadays, plurilingualism at a school is a field worth evaluating as Melo-Pfeifer, (2018) states, "It provides a renewed approach to conceiving and implementing language teaching and learning at school, against the common monolingual mindset and a monolingual bias in language teaching" (p.9)

According to the institutional Chinese language project, applying a variety of communicative strategies will allow them to learn the language, as "Some of the oral activities should be conducted in the class very often such as JAM (Just a Minute), Role Play, Story narrating, Enacting, Sharing the problems, and so on. To promote their listening and speaking skills." (Radhika, 2017, p.129). Hence, CNG Confucius Classroom supports the school and provides them with human resources, native speaker teachers with a master's degree in Mandarin teaching, and physical resources, ICTs to create virtual classrooms and certified material for the Chinese testing service Hanban for international exams.

The field notes taken from the observations identified a lack of evaluation in a first graders' plurilingual class approach done by native speaker teachers. Secondly, the students' low level in English (language through which students will learn L3) does not allow a clear understanding of the activities and their purpose.

Additionally, filling the gaps in a course-book activity section does not enhance a production stage that allows them to see their progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese Native Language Teachers by Zhao Juanjuan (2016) primary purpose was to explore and understand, from a sociocultural perspective, Chinese language teachers' experiences and teaching practices when teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in secondary schools in the U.S. This study introduced the problem of combining pedagogical gaps, such as teacher-centered class vs. student-centered class, teacher-student interactions, class management, teacher-parents relationships, language barriers, lesson planning, isolation, and lack of support, need for professional development, and paucity of teaching materials. It also criticizes others' studies for the limitations in scope due to their small sample size.

Researching the problems in American western scholar culture (Zhao, 2016, p.6) shows a similarity to our context, focusing on teacher's certification programs lacking the context where the teacher will develop his/her mandarin lessons (Chmelynski, 2006, p.61). Specifically, international teachers often reflect in terms of their pedagogic skills, classroom management and discipline (Horwitz, 2005, p.60), and knowledge of school procedures and policies, curricula, and philosophies (Dunn, 2011, p.6). These experiences are somewhat similar to the ones that International Chinese Teachers meet in the Colombian elementary schools.

Meaningful learning strategies are now being improved worldwide, given that it has been clear for teachers around the globe that choral drilling does not mean a clear understanding and internalization of knowledge and language learning. Besides, meaningful Learning and its Implications for Language Education in Vietnam is relevant to this study because it

works with the importance of accurate foreign language teaching in a different culture/country as Vietnam. This study's main concern was to find how the language used could be improved in the Vietnamese educational context. It supports those ideas by using meaningful learning to organize knowledge and retain language learning. Hung (2019, p. 99) states: "It is expected from this prior knowledge to obtain some answers still if they are not adequate. The teacher must complement those answers to address the lesson correctly", which pretends to relate the new input with pupils' backgrounds to create cognitive engagement with the content taught.

The study developed by Chen & Yeung (2015) has a great similitude to our paper's focus on the teacher's development in Mandarin classes. Researchers employed a qualitative approach to explore and capture factors that influence beginning teachers' self-efficacy in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in Australian schools; the specificity of teaching tasks and contexts is of particular importance for understanding teacher self-efficacy. Its findings show "teachers using English as their second language, merely high marks in a standardized test of English language proficiency for non-native speakers do not necessarily lead to their self-efficacy in using English for language teaching purposes." (Chen & Yeung, 2015)

Furthermore, teacher performance applied by native speaker teachers has an essential influence on the learners' process. Conforming to the qualitative research studied by Shen, H. H., & Xu, W. (2015) with beginning learners of Chinese as a second language, "For Chinese language learners whose native language is English, Chinese character recognition is always considered one of their biggest challenges due to the irregular mapping between grapheme and phoneme correspondences in Chinese characters" (Shen & Xu, 2015, p. 82).

These learners with limited vocabulary and knowledge at the beginning level have reported feeling depressed as they cannot comprehend what they read. The authors suggest the active learning approach to Chinese vocabulary, such as presenting learners with clear learning goals and encouraging self-discoveries of lexical patterns (Shen & Xu, 2015, p. 90), explaining the flipped method's power in foreign language education.

As expected, this project's focal point is to identify the influence of teaching CFL performance employed by Chinese native speaker teachers in the first graders' learning process. Considering that teaching CFL is a new field in Colombia, the importance of studying the experiences and knowledge shared by the researchers quoted above will be the base for the analysis of methods and approaches used to promote meaningful learning in elementary students' native Spanish speakers.

METHOD

This investigation is a qualitative descriptive analysis. Asmussen and Creswell (2007, p.21) establish that a qualitative approach involves exploring and understanding a phenomenon in a natural setting in which we have evidenced a gap in the teaching/learning process. We identify a classroom problem concerning the Chinese Native speaker teachers' practices applied in first-graders and its influence on students' meaningful learning. It is an exploratory case study because the research question mainly focuses on what. In this case, the question to answer following Yin (2014) is: What can we learn from ___? This method is worthy of being applied as "advantageous when the research goal is to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon, or when it is to be predictive about certain outcomes" (p.10).

According to this study's objective, Loeb (2017, p. 39) explains the descriptive analysis distinguishes phenomenon answering questions about who, what, where, when, and to what extent some studies identify factual issues. We are interested in observing and analyzing how or why something has happened; in this manner, we want at the end of the research process to report the school or findings to make them reflect in their multilingual syllabus.

We are going to use the SWOT analysis to fulfilling the objectives of this study. According to Gürel & Tat (2017), "SWOT Analysis is a process that involves four areas into two dimensions. It has four components: 'Strengths' 'weaknesses,' 'opportunities' and 'threats'" it is registered as he highlights in "typically drawn out in a four-quadrant box that allows for a summary that is organized according to the four section titles" (p.995).

SETTING

This study is a descriptive analysis in a plurilingual private school located in Cundinamarca, Colombia. It aims to provide students with the opportunity of graduating as fluent speakers of English and Mandarin. As it is outside the city, the learning conditions drastically change because the most prestigious schools are there with all the classes' resources. The school has great resources and spaces; each classroom has a video beam and an apple TV modem, every teacher has a tablet with the required WI-FI, especially the Mandarin classroom, which possesses computers with academic programs to enhance Mandarin teaching.

The Confucius Classroom (CNG) provided the Mandarin language curriculum and teachers: one Colombian Mandarin teacher and two native speaker teachers who have a master's degree in Mandarin language teaching as a foreign language. They are in charge of two classrooms

with 20 first graders per course, between 5 and 6 years old. First graders have experience with the English language since kindergarten; therefore, they have already been immersed in English courses for around 2 to 3 years before 1st grade.

The type of sampling is going to be Homogenous as stated by Creswell (2002, p. 208) due to the population selected for this sampling will have almost the same characteristics in terms of nationality, mother tongue, and cultural background in the case of the Chinese native speaker teachers, and the students have in common aspects like the age and English level proficiency.

INSTRUMENTS

The data collection strategy that we will use is the observation to understand phenomena by studying teachers' and students' actions, reactions, and interactions in a natural day-to-day setting. Creswell (2002, p. 230) states that in our role as Non-participant researchers, this strategy would help gather data about interactions, body and facial expressions, and other factors involved in a natural setting environment situation.

Considering the research question we seek to answer, we have selected the field notes as a useful method for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches done in a first grade Mandarin language classroom. They are a suitable data collection method, considering that it places us with an inside look at the Native teacher's approach in the classroom and describes the strengths and weaknesses of different class tasks. We will record descriptive and reflective field notes; as Creswell (2002, p. 216) presented, field notes characteristics allow us to capture detailed information about the classroom's performance and reflect on those factors that emerge during the observation.

Afterward, we used video recording because this instrument has particular importance for

its flexibility, as the possibility of repeating and analyzing every influential factor of the class, mainly those regarding the student's behavior and teacher's class management. Susan E. B (1996) defines recording "as a way to capture everything that is taking place in the classroom, thus allowing us to postpone that moment of focusing, of decision-taking" (p.3). As researchers, we used the video recording to analyze the minimum details in the class development, those small situations that show the classes' development, study the influence of some teachers and student interactions or behaviors, and its influence in the learning process.

According to Eisenberg et al. (2010), there is a need for "fragmentation the videotaped images in units of analysis - the smallest image fragment that makes sense for the researcher"(p.257). As our objective is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the class development performed by native speaker teachers, our first procedure will be to redact those. The unit of analysis of this analysis is meaningful words, phrases, sentences, and texts that help understand the implications of the approaches applied by native speaker teachers in a plurilingual elementary classroom.

DATA ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

Colombian teacher:

Skillful in class management thanks to her prior experience and her in-depth knowledge of Colombian culture, manners, habits (positive and negative), flaws, students' attention problems, and contextualized knowledge (addresses, neighborhoods, last names), and even students' excuses. The teacher uses Spanish to address Mandarin content that facilitates students' learning process because they have a

communicative bridge to understand the target language.

Examples given are meaningful because the students understand what they are saying; in the activity of "I live in ____" every student changes the blank according to his/her neighborhood. This shows they were not just repeating utterances, but they are internalizing the structure. The interaction between the teacher and the students when they are asked to go to the board strengthens personal relationships between them; in the same way, the teacher avoids boredom and implements behaviorism and interactive strategies. Her empathetic way of talking to students seems to make them feel comfortable answering and asking the teacher's questions about the topics studied in class.

As shown in Atallah (2020), students prefer social strategies to learn a foreign language because of the "positive interaction between the students themselves, and between them and their instructors" because they promote an atmosphere of interaction and constant cooperation (p.29).

Native teacher:

The teacher provides the input most of the time in Mandarin, which allows the students to see the target language in use; as Krashen (1993) says, if the acquisition is the main point, and learning is left aside, the use of comprehensible input promotes a better second language acquisition (p.33) Based on Krashen, the exposure to the target language will for sure lead to the acquisition of it. Though there is a lack of a common language between the teacher and the students, she tried to construct a communicative bridge a few times using Spanish words and gestures. She spoke in Spanish twice, saying "aquí" (here) and "yo" (I).

WEAKNESSES

Colombian teacher:

As the teacher is not native, her language is non-native. Her accent will make the students learn Mandarin with a different accent and intonation to the original one.

Native teacher:

The teacher's class management does not fit the students' necessities due to her lack of knowledge about Colombian culture and behavior. Colombian students show an indifferent attitude because they are infants; thus, they do not follow instructions as Chinese students would; otherwise, they keep on playing or chatting after the teacher says "sit down," which is the only means the teacher attempts to use in order to stop them from talking to each other, playing or walking around the classroom.

Despite the lack of students' English skills and the teacher's acknowledgment of the problem, she does not create or apply enough strategies to break the language barrier or to make the content more comprehensible for the students. Most of the time, the teacher used choral drilling, a simple model to repeat which does not provide students real opportunities to interact. The teacher avoids interaction with students. When a student asks the teacher what they are supposed to do, the teacher keeps talking and ignores the student's request. This will have immediate effects on students who do not understand the class activities and either evidence support from the teacher.

This not controlled class led the students to get distracted, up to the point some of them left the classroom without nobody's interruption. The uncontrol affects students who left and the ones in the classroom because they got distracted looking at the others.

Though the input is in the native language, and Krashen said it would increase the opportunities to acquire it. Krashen (1993) later mentioned that the variables of acquisition are not only exposure but also the use. "We would expect a significant relationship between "use" and acquisition since use nearly always entails comprehensible input" (p.41). Students are then exposed to the input and classes, but as they do not have other instances to receive input or use it, it will affect their language proficiency.

OPPORTUNITIES.

There are many opportunities to improve class development. For instance, using the student's mother tongue as a communicative bridge to teach the target language will increase their chances of understanding the class's content. For instance, teachers in Mexico were interviewed about the importance of using the mother tongue in EFL classes. They agreed it is a "tool for explaining aspects within the classroom such as instructions, grammar, unfamiliar vocabulary, and expressions," they also mentioned they "save time and avoid lengthy explanations in the target language" (Irasema et al. 2011, p.118).

A cultural component will facilitate the students' comprehension of the target language. This cultural component can be done by first using some pedagogical alternatives to Chinese culture, such as food, music, places, and manners. Then, after providing a clear understanding of where the language students will learn is located, there will be more opportunities to understand Mandarin is a real language and is used by other communities in the way they use Spanish.

Adapting the class activities to a more active development in which students can interact with their bodies or with each other may increase the students' motivation towards the L3. As Postholm (2013) depicts, one primary aim of every lesson is to "contribute to the pupils' social and moral development, which means that it

aims to develop the pupils academically and socially.” (p.389)

Using activities or tasks in context could give the students a goal to achieve when learning Mandarin. Similarly, the production stage would provide an opportunity for students to practice and use their working knowledge in the target language.

The support in class management of a local homeroom teacher who knows how Colombian students interact and perform themselves in the class could help both the teacher in class management and the students who could communicate their needs. This goal can be achieved with dual and cooperative teaching between a Chinese and a Colombian teacher.

THREATS

Lack of motivation and external contact with the target language (Lack of cultural immersion) to be proficient in it. As De Hower (1999) states: “The environment plays an important role in learning to speak. Children learn to speak only when they hear people talk to them in many different circumstances” (p.2). Students might feel discouraged from learning or acquire another language due to the early pressure exposition in these mandarin classes and other language courses. Students may feel that achieving a proficient level of the target language is not possible as their teacher is native.

Students find difficulties in understanding the native teacher in such a different and complex language. As Wuang (2015) states, “non-native speakers may be more intelligible than native speakers when the listener is also non-native” Students feel that the speech of a non-native speaker is easier to understand than the speech of a native speaker (p.2)

The process of learning two totally different languages simultaneously, English and Mandarin, without successfully finishing any of

them, will probably cause misunderstandings and a mixture of both languages because of their isolated morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. For instance, Lee (2004) shows the verb to be in Mandarin, shi, is copula and a focus marker in an emphatic sentence; on the contrary, “be” in English is a copula form and an auxiliary form (p.213).

FINDINGS

After analyzing all the data gathered and bonded it with our experience to answer the research question, “What are the implications of the approaches applied by Chinese native speaker teachers in the language learning process in a first-grade multilingual class?” We have found that there are several implications in teachers’ approaches to the Mandarin class.

First, the vast differences between the Chinese and the Colombian teachers are clearly evident in class management. For instance, both teachers’ cultural aspects are different since the Colombian teacher is entirely aware of Colombian students’ behaviors, feelings, and understandings. On the contrary, the Chinese teacher attempted to direct the class ignoring certain students’ behaviors and manners.

Furthermore, both teachers appeal to different strategies for the Mandarin class. While the Colombian teacher uses contextualized sentences as “I live in Engativa, Suba, Teusaquillo” to show a real usage of the language, the Chinese teacher keeps saying: “I ask, you answer” and uses choral drilling as the main strategy for her class. Colombian teacher also used more social strategies, promoting interaction between teacher-student, and student-student, making them go to the board and increasing participation and attention. On the other hand, the Chinese teacher did not use either interactive strategies or active tasks that imply kinaesthetic procedures.

Moreover, empathy is a core aspect that differs both teachers' class management, and this had a huge impact on students' attention and response to the topic explanation. The Colombian teacher acknowledged and responded with eye contact to the individual student needs whenever they approached her for academic or non-academic reasons, creating a back and forth conversation between them and keeping students from leaving the classroom or looking for someone else to answer their doubts.

Secondly, there is a language barrier between the Chinese teacher and the students due to her lack of Spanish, which could be used to explain the activities, exercises, goals of the classes, and to be able to answer students' questions, requirements, doubts in a more empathetic and complete way. During the classes, it was evident that many students were not aware of the activity performed as they did not understand the teacher's commands in English. Otherwise, when there is a common language or communicative bridge between the students and the teacher, as it happened with the Colombian teacher, students understood the purpose or goal of the activity and followed it more successfully.

Third, we identify there is an impact of the performance of native speaker teachers on 1st graders. To exemplify, they are not progressing in the target language; thus, they are not learning the themes, are not being encouraged to learn with clear objectives, at the same time, they cannot see a resemblance between the target language to their own language and culture, and finally, all these might create a disinterest towards foreign languages.

First, their lack of understanding and progress is evidenced in students' different interventions in the class asking "what should we do?" "where should we write that?", "in which book?" or "I do not understand." Secondly, their lack of motivation and objectives does not state a path to follow; that is why students repeatedly repeat

certain utterances but do not understand any of them. Third, the teacher never states any relation between students' language and context; so far, they do not know much about the language they are learning, where it is spoken, which culture it is related to, and why learning it could be relevant for them. Furthermore, there could be confusion in students' language learning because they are studying two different languages simultaneously, and thus they could feel demotivated to any foreign language.

Based on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats we discussed, the class's development of both Chinese and Colombian mandarin teachers suggests a different approach. We consider that Mandarin activities require more interaction, more contextualized examples, more active learning implementing social and cultural strategies, and a communicative bridge between teacher and students, which can be a creative strategy implemented by native teachers and a local teacher who supports the Mandarin course.

CONCLUSIONS

As the information gathered and analyzed throughout the paper presents, the role of the Chinese mandarin teacher inside the classroom affects the way students interact with each other and with the target language; we consider that the pressure students have to deal with to learn an L3 through an L2, which they do not wholly understand, has an undesired effect on their motivation towards learning languages at all.

We consider promoting foreign language learning in young students a field of enormous importance nowadays. However, it is also vital to be aware of the communicative bridges between native and foreign languages. Therefore, the need for a more strategic way to communicate between the Chinese teacher and the students is evident because her few strategies to establish

communication with them do not fill all the requirements nor fulfill the objectives of creating a meaningful learning environment.

Considering the entire class development, there should be an adaptation of the Chinese teacher's strategies and approaches towards Colombian classes regarding how students behave in the classroom, the cultural differences, and their insufficient English knowledge. This adaptation is essential to better manage every class, enhance students' attention, help them understand the class's contents, and progress towards the target language.

There is room for further investigation of how external environments could enhance contact with the target language for the students to feel the necessity of learning the language or at least find some content presented in Mandarin attractive and useful. For example, the discussion on how environments at their houses, at other classes, at the school, at field trips could play a role in their motivation for learning this language.

Research on the way this same method impacts students from higher grades should be carried out to see the difference of the results with older students who have a better knowledge of the L2 used by the teacher to direct the class and see if perhaps this way to develop the classes is useful in higher elementary grades such as fourth or fifth. If that is the case, there should be a slight adaptation in first grades, such as the one proposed in the lesson plan, with more interactive and dynamic activities whose purpose is to generate interest and provide a background of the language to these children.

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