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THE VALUE OF LANGUAGES IN LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY.
TEACHING EXPERIENCE WITH LOW-EDUCATED UNACCOMPANIED
MULTILINGUAL MINORS¹

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ABSTRACT: At the core of linguistic autobiography lays one of our main educational purposes: leading students to appreciate and to take advantage of their own plurilingualism. The knowledge of different languages becomes a tool of useful compensation strategies in the process of learning a second language. This research aims to show the results obtained by the Unaccompanied Minors with an extremely low level of schooling attending literacy courses at the School of Italian Language for Foreigners of the University of Palermo. Thanks to the narrative devices used in linguistic autobiography it is possible to acquire a great amount of data about learners' plural identities and, by analyzing different variables of the users, to reflect upon the specific results in L2 proficiency. Students are involved in emotional activities that give them the opportunity to share complex stories, starting from the analysis and the appreciation of languages.

KEYWORDS: Plurilingualism, literacy, Unaccompanied Minors, narration, identities, L2 proficiency.

1. This paper is the result of the joint research conducted by Laura Di Benedetto, Valentina Salvato, Chiara Tiranno. Valentina Salvato is the responsible for the first section, Chiara Tiranno for the second, the third and the fourth sections, and Laura Di Benedetto for the fifth section.

1. INTRODUCTION

Autobiography is a writing tool that aims at reflecting upon life experiences and sharing them. This literary genre could become a useful didactic tool in L2 classroom, by focusing on the use of languages by multicompetent language users. Through the practice of linguistic autobiography, students are encouraged to reason for the first time about languages as systems and about meeting points existing between languages and cultures (Groppaldi, 2010: 90).

The value of languages and cultures is the basis of recent political European action plan. The latest measures and documents issued by the Council of Europe aim to protect cultural and linguistic identities. One of the most important and powerful tools for integration is linguistic education. Indeed, a true social inclusion in a new reality is possible only after learning basic skills of the new language.

Following two of the main documents on language issues in education drafted by the Council of Europe, *A European reference document for languages of education* (Council of Europe, 2007) and *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* (henceforth, FREPA; Council of Europe, 2010), it is possible to notice a remarkable change of perspective in order to give dignity to every language through moments of reflection upon plurilingualism in the classroom. Moreover, this could offer the opportunity to transfer competences and skills from a language to another one. Thus, linguistic autobiography becomes a useful tool in the conceptual scenario outlined in FREPA, where it is possible to find four pluralistic approaches: intercultural approach, awakening to languages, the intercomprehension of related languages, and integrated didactic approaches to different languages studied.

The didactic path of linguistic autobiography follows, in particular, one of these plural approaches: awakening to languages. As underlined in this passage from FREPA:

The approach concerns the language of education and any other language which is in the process of being learnt. But it is not limited to these "learnt" languages, and integrates all sorts of other linguistic varieties – from the environment, from their families... and from all over the world, without exclusion of any kind... Because of the number of languages on which learners work – very often, several dozen – the awakening to languages may seem to be the most extreme form of pluralistic approach. It was designed principally as a way of welcoming schoolchildren into the idea of linguistic diversity (and the diversity of their own languages) at the beginning of school education, as a vector of fuller recognition of the languages "brought" by children with more than one language available to them and, in this way, as a kind of preparatory course developed for primary schools, but it can also be promoted as a support to language learning throughout the learners' school career. (Council of Europe, 2010: 9)

The didactic model adopted by the School of Italian Language for Foreigners (henceforth, ItaStra) of the University of Palermo aims to include all of these plural approaches. During the Italian language courses, many didactic activities take place to reach these goals. This research focuses on the value of different languages in LESLLA² learners by

2. LESLLA is the acronym for Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition for Adults. By using it we refer also to adolescent learners.

using autobiographical narrative devices. A complex linguistic identity emerges through the writing of personal stories and experiences which focused on the use of languages.

The adoption of autobiographical technique in the classroom follows the whole tradition of linguistic autobiography in didactic programmes. In Italy it was introduced by Tullio Telmon and Sabina Canobbio with the original purpose to evaluate the use of dialect in the Piedmont region. The data collection was carried on in other Italian regions too, in particular in Veneto and Sicily (Arcuri et al., 2014: 143). This method is performed in L2 teaching to know learners' linguistic background in a systematic way. By considering plurilingual competence not only as a requirement but also as a goal in the process of teaching-learning, didactic planning has changed: it regularly includes activities such as linguistic autobiography (Arcuri, 2014: 69). It is adopted with students who have a vast cultural background and children of primary school. Recently this technique has been experimented also in didactic paths concerning the learning of a second language³. The use of this practice reveals positive outputs, especially for those people who experienced a complex story of migration. Indeed, thanks to the writing of linguistic autobiography and the expression of their feelings, they can link and explore the past and the present, home country and host country (Groppaldi, 2010: 91).

By considering these insights and previous experiences (Strazzari, 2016), the path of linguistic autobiography was planned and tested with LESLLA learners during the last two years in ItaStra literacy courses. In this paper, we focus on the practice adopted with newly arrived Unaccompanied Minors (henceforth UAM) and on the comparison of the results with other kinds of LESLLA users.

2. PURPOSES

Linguistic autobiography serves various purposes both for students and teachers. On the one hand, the most relevant aim consists in making students aware of their own plurilingualism. This awareness can stimulate the learning process. On the other hand, this technique offers teachers new diagnostic instruments which are suitable to discover and analyse the linguistic background of the students. Teachers can better understand linguistic education of learners' mother tongue, evaluate similarities and differences between their languages, and perceive the difficulties that students can find in learning a second language (Groppaldi, 2010: 90). The inclusion of linguistic autobiography in teaching programmes represents a functional device to improve students' proficiency in L2. It is truly important especially for those migrants that can have the opportunity to narrate the long and hard journey by sea and land. All the students, even those who apparently cannot communicate, are able to share their own stories through different expressive means, such as drawing and acting.

By performing some activities included in the autobiographical path, students can understand how the lack of linguistic competence in target language can be solved by

3. Previous experiences with foreign learners of Italian language are described in Groppaldi (2010).

means of compensation strategies. Meanwhile, other activities make students use their native languages and L2 in order to transfer linguistic competences, which were already acquired in L2, to their first languages. Thus, the use of this kind of strategies occurs not only in a unidirectional way but also in a mutual one, promoting the learning process and making the students aware of the relevance of plurilingualism (Arcuri, 2014: 70). These activities are part of literacy programmes, since they have important communicative and linguistic aims. Teachers can choose to adopt linguistic autobiography only after one hundred literacy hours, in order to reinforce and test the competences acquired by students during the whole learning process.

3. USERS

The proposed autobiographical model has been previously tested on different types of learners characterized by different features⁴: children of primary school in L2 and FL context; low-educated migrant women participating at FEI project⁵; adult and UAM participating in a university project with CPIA⁶.

This paper focuses on a recent project involving UAM who attended experimental literacy courses⁷. These were aimed at training students before compulsory education provided in CPIA, in order to fill the lack of linguistic competences in writing and reading. This lack is a serious obstacle to UAM integration in the host country and the Italian educational system does not offer appropriate solutions, such as literacy courses for adult and adolescents.

Most of the UAM comes from areas of the world characterized by a low level of schooling, specifically from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. In our classes the UAM coming from Gambia and Senegal are the majority. Other students' origin countries are Benin, Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Egypt and Bangladesh. Students were aged 16-18 years old and almost all of them are newly arrived males, who usually attend Italian courses one month after their arrival. Data concerning years of schooling, which were acquired by means of entrance tests and confirmed with didactic activities, show the low level, or even the absence, of literacy. UAM generally attended school for a maximum period of three years, while some of them attended Koranic school. They face a dramatic journey to come to Italy, where they live in hosting centres sharing habits and state of soul. It is worth to stress that difficulties concern not only cohabitation, but also the process of inclusion in the new reality (D'Agostino et al., 2016: 11).

4. Among these features, in our research we consider: age, sex, origin countries, languages, different cultural background and life expectancies.

5. "I saperi per l'inclusione" was realized by the University of Palermo with European fund for the integration of third-country nationals (2007 -2013).

6. CPIA is the Center of Adult Education.

7. Such courses were held in the frame of the project "Italiano lingua seconda in soggetti a bassa scolarizzazione. Ricerca, formazione, didattica" of the University of Palermo (2016).

4. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

In order to respond to the above-mentioned purposes, didactic planning is customized to fulfil the requirements of different users. It is the case of our experience in adopting linguistic autobiography with adult migrant women and UAM. Teaching practices are structured in different phases answering linguistic and communicative aims: some of them were already introduced during the classes, while others are brand new ones. The whole plan requires a minimum of twenty hours and it is entirely based on workshop activities. Students can use different narrative devices in order to talk about their personal stories and rethink their troubled experiences (Di Nuzzo, 2013). According to the main educational purpose, and due to the students' lack of linguistic competence in L2, some activities are performed by using students' own mother tongues.

At the core of the first activity lays the relevance of learners' mother languages, by emphasizing their sounds. Sharing mother tongue's sounds represents a useful opening moment in which students choose and pronounce a selected word in the native language. This activity aims to stress the variety of languages, and consequently students' heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, with equal dignity in the classroom (Strazzari, 2016).

In the second step, students fill out a form with personal data, including: name and its meaning, age, country of origin, country of residence, people they live with, mother tongue and other languages, years of schooling. This form is used to practice single words and review communicative acts introduced in the first one hundred hours of lessons, such as sentences useful to talk about themselves and their housing contexts.

The third step recalls the previous one since here many daily contexts are introduced. Teacher selects two contexts (i.e. at home and at the market) and students pretend to be actors reproducing a daily conversation. This role-play is performed and later written down in a comic strip in students' first and second language. The aim is to investigate the amount of linguistic inputs and the languages in use.

Then, portraying student's own body in life-size is considered as a necessary tool to explore and reflect upon body parts and their functions, introducing this lexicon. Only after this step, students can understand how to associate their languages with one or more body parts. The success of this fourth step depends on many factors and, probably, one of them is students' desire to share their feelings. This phase introduces the fifth step in which students can deeply reflect upon their journey experience.

Here teacher shows how the world map works and then, together with students, reproduces the map on the floor. Later, students are free to move in the space and to tag the crossed countries to show their journey. Then all the students retrace on a personal map their course to recollect the languages heard and used to communicate. In this fifth step they are able to express journey's memories and experiences. Retracing on a map the course of the journey is one of the most interesting activities realized in literacy classes of UAM. It is exactly this map that shows the multilingual background which takes shape during the journey to Europe. This is a fundamental step to value students' plurilingualism and also to decode a complex text such as a geographical map. Autobiography starts and ends with an impressive moment: sounds' appearance of all the native languages of the participants.

5. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Linguistic autobiography offers diagnostic instruments able to value students' linguistic background, to test linguistic competence in the target language and to plan specific didactic activities. The data collected in this paper are drawn from a large corpus of UAM's classwork. Our analysis highlights the vast linguistic knowledge of LESLLA learners. We observe that students are initially unwilling to use L1 in class activities, but this reluctance decreases gradually up to the point in which they eventually start using all the known languages, and discover the important role they play in the process of learning L2. Most of UAM coming from Sub-Saharan Africa are plurilingual, but in different ways: some of them speak more than two languages and can understand languages typologically close to their mother tongues, while other know more than three languages. There are also few cases of monolingual speakers, usually coming from Bangladesh.

Linguistic autobiography also contributes to improve L1 linguistic skills. Many activities, which require the use of written code in mother tongues, enact the reflection upon some linguistic aspects. LESLLA learners were able to transfer competences from L2 to their own first language. This metacognitive process is one of the most relevant aims of the plural approaches (Curci, 2016: 143). It represents another crucial point in the development of personal identities: mother tongue, which was not learnt at school, becomes a concrete purpose of the study, especially by focusing on the sounds and signs which were introduced in our literacy courses.

UAM reconsidered the power of their plurilingualism also in the host country, since they live in a complex linguistic context together with people coming from different parts of the world. The large amount of exposure to many linguistic inputs let students practice and switch various codes in the new daily life. In the frame of this wide range of languages the knowledge of L2 emerges.

Focusing on our analysis, one of the most distinctive features of the autobiographical techniques experimented with UAM, is the description of their journey across many different countries in order to escape from wars and poverty to find better life conditions. The journey usually counted from a minimum of three months up to four years. The main objective of working with geographical maps is to associate languages used in each country. As a result, the creation of linguistic maps gives students the chance to rethink languages as tools of communication and survival. Finally, students came to reevaluate their personal skills and troubled experiences thanks to the appreciation of the linguistic knowledge used and improved during the journey.

The abovementioned results reveal interesting features when compared to another specific kind of users, i.e. adult migrant women attending literacy courses. By comparing UAM linguistic autobiographies with those written by FEI and CPIA women, it is possible to notice that the latter come from a monolingual context and live in Italy for a long time in a monolingual reality; while most of the newly arrived UAM comes from a plurilingual context and lives in plurilingual hosting centres, characterized by a larger amount of exposure to L2 outside the classroom. The analysis of data acquired from linguistic autobiographies shows different levels of proficiency in L2 between monolingual and plurilingual students. The latter can easily use compensation strategies to fill the lack of knowledge in the target language and their acquisition process seems faster. After the first part of the literacy course (around 100 hours), UAM have

stronger abilities to read and write than women. We should take into consideration that UAM attended an Italian literacy course at ItaStra following an experimental didactic model in the frame of a research project related to the acquisition of second language in low educated students.

In order to better understand these results we show two illustrative cases as a sample of two of the largest groups of learners: Karimou (UAM) and Kadija (FEI project women).

Karimou (UAM)	Kadija (FEI project)
Origin country: Gambia	Origin country: Morocco
Age: 17 years old	Age: 45 years old
Years of schooling: 0	Years of schooling: 0
Linguistic background: plurilingual (Mandinka, Wolof and English)	Linguistic background: monolingual (a variety of Arabic spoken in Morocco)
Daily context: plurilingual	Daily context: monolingual
About the journey: many countries crossed by bus and boat to find better conditions of life	About the journey: by plane to join a family member
Time of permanence in Italy: 3 months	Time of permanence in Italy: 8 years
Results after 100 literacy hours: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reading and writing simple sentences dictated to him; - oral communication skills: sufficient 	Results after 100 literacy hours: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reading and writing simple disyllabic words (CVCV) with teacher's assistance; - oral communication skills: lacking

Table 1: UAM and FEI Learners' Backgrounds and Results: a Sample

We can compare, in the table above, the different features which characterized Karimou's and Kadija's backgrounds before attending the literacy courses and their progress after one hundred hours of teaching. Data were acquired from specific tests and activities used in linguistic autobiography. Karimou's results are the following: he can read and write, without teacher's assistance, words containing simple syllable structure which consists of alternating consonants and vowels (CV); moreover, his reading and writing process of short sentences dictated to him has already begun. In oral communicative competence he shows a good ability to remember and reuse many expressions useful in daily life contexts. Different results emerge from Kadija's data. Her reading and writing process appears slower than Karimou's one, since she can read and write, with teacher's assistance, only single and disyllabic words (CVCV) and she is not able to use complex communicative sentences accurately.

This complex frame encourages the rise of new approaches devoted to the study of the relations between literacy and plurilingualism. Actually, following the results of our recent teaching experience, we are dealing with challenging research questions: is it possible to find a clear link between proficiency in L2 and plurilingualism? Do

plurilingualism and L2 exposure affect the process of literacy? We do believe that the faster literacy process in plurilingual individuals probably depends on their metalinguistic awareness, as underlined by the scholar Măra Dirba. Following the research of Ulrike Jessner, Dirba concludes that this specific awareness allows these individuals to develop different features:

- a) divergent and creative thinking (e.g., a wider variety of associations, original ideas);
- b) interactional and/or pragmatic competence (cultural theorems of greeting, thanking, etc.);
- c) communicative sensitivity and flexibility (language mode); and
- d) translation skills, which are considered a natural trait in the majority of multilinguals. (Dirba, 2016: 18)

Moreover, some researches, conducted on bilingual children, show that they can read earlier than the monolingual ones, thanks to metalinguistic awareness. The latter has positive effects on both linguistic and non-linguistic areas (Sorace, 2007: 194-195). In our teaching experience data acquired after two hundred literacy hours strengthen our hypothesis: the learning gap between the two groups is, indeed, persistent. Other examples confirm this. Monolingual students, similar to Karimou in terms of the characteristics listed in the table (with the exception of the specific linguistic background), show a lower proficiency in the literacy process.

Finally, we noticed that the first language takes advantage of the newly acquired competences: the ability to transfer knowledge and strategy permits the development of linguistic skills in mother tongue. This consolidates the sense of identity and self-confidence, by promoting positive attitudes towards language learning among all the students. Nevertheless, it is still an early stage of the research to draw clear-cut conclusions, but we do believe that probably the different proficiency in L2 between the above-mentioned case studies could depend also on their different linguistic exposure to target language. New research is expected to be undertaken to deepen our hypothesis.

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