STUDYING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ENGLISH: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED THE STUDENTS' DECISION

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar los factores que influenciaron la decisión de los estudiantes, futuros maestros, de elegir el nuevo grado en Educación Primaria en inglés de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (España). El estudio se basa en teorías postructuralistas de la identidad, el lenguaje y el aprendizaje. El análisis de los cuestionarios y de las entrevistas individuales y grupales muestra que la "identidad imaginada" (la persona que quieren ser en un futuro) es el factor principal que condicionó su elección. Este factor engloba otros factores mencionados por los participantes: el rol del inglés a nivel global y el interés para seguir aprendiendo la lengua dentro del grado.

Palabras clave: identidad imaginada, inversión, Comunidades de Práctica (CoP) , globalización.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the factors that led student-teachers to choose a new English-Medium Pre-Service Primary Teacher Education Bachelor's Degree offered by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). It draws on postructuralist theories of identity, language and learning. The analysis of questionnaires and individual and focus group interviews shows how the imagined identity (the person they want to become in future) is the main factor that influenced their choice of degree. This factor embodies other aspects mentioned by the participants: the role of English in the world and the students' interest to keep learning English within the degree.

Keywords: imagined identity, investment, Communities of Practice (CoP), globalization.

1.INTRODUCTION

Individuals' lives are affected by intercultural experiences, exchanges of information and values, increased mobility and a worldwide global consciousness. Such realities seem to be important factors when it comes to understanding possible interests to learn English (Norton & Gao, 2008). Globalisation is increasingly contributing to important changes, by shaping countries' cultures, practices, behaviours and, last but not least, individuals' identities. Within the Catalan context, in 2013 the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) offered for the first time the possibility to study an English-Medium Pre-Service Primary Teacher Education Bachelor's Degree (EM-PTED). Being part of a longitudinal research project (Guideway-2014-ARMIF00009), this paper aims to examine the factors that might have influenced the participants' decision to choose the English-medium branch.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

More than three decades ago, Bourdieu (1977) suggested that language learning and learner's identities are related to each other, using notions such as "legitimate speaker" or "cultural capital". From a sociocultural perspective, the Community of Practice approach (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) affords researchers the notions of "situated learning" and "legitimate peripheral participation" for the analysis of the conditions under which individuals learn.

From a postructuralist approach to identity and language learning, identity is something changing, shifting and non-static (Weedon, 1987; Cummins, 1966). As Norton argues, learners decide to acquire a second language because of a "wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (Norton & Gao, 2008:110). There is therefore a need to develop a theory that embodies language learners and their language learning context (Norton, 2000).

Norton proposes to leave behind the idea that "learners can be defined unproblematically as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited" (Norton, 2000:5). The term

"investment", suggested to replace "motivation", can capture better the social factors behind a learner's interest towards a language. This notion differs from instrumental motivation, as it includes much more complex variables, such as learners' history or their possible multiple desires. Norton expands Lave & Wenger's view of learning by developing the notion of "imagined communities", which guide a learner's current learning and provide individuals with an "imagined identity" (Norton, 2000), i.e. the person they want to become in future.

The impact of globalization on identity and the spread of English worldwide have also been addressed by many scholars (e.g., Giddens, 2000), as English has become "an international language, a lingua franca, a global language, and a world language" (Caine, 2008:4).

3. METHODS

This study takes a qualitative and interpretive approach. Data were collected through two initial questionnaires (Q0 and Q1) and individual and focus group interviews (IndIs and FGIs, correspondingly). All participants were student-teachers at the UAB, who had enrolled in the EM-PTED. 14 participants were selected through an initial questionnaire (Q0) on the criterion of being good informants. Q1 served to elicit information about their relationship with English and their possible interest towards the language. The issues raised in Q1 served as a basis for the follow-up IndIs (4 participants) and a FGI (10 participants), which took place at the end of their first academic year.

Data were analysed within the grounded theory approach (McQueen & Knussen, 2002), adopting Miles & Huberman's (1994) approach to the data analysis: reducing data, displaying data and drawing and verifying conclusions. The search for patterns and conclusions in the data consisted of three phases (Punch, 2005): "coding", "memoing" and "developing propositions". This inductive method also required a continuous triangulation of different types of collected data.

The reliability and validity were increased through piloting and rapport building (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, participants'

anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms.

4.FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following conceptualizations have shown to be useful lens through which to analyse the data. Two main issues, which are highly interlinked, arise from the participants' answers: (1) the significance of English, and (2) their willingness to invest in the practices of the community they seek to belong to.

4.1.Significance of English

In Q1 most participants gave short and straightforward answers to refer to their reasons for choosing the EM-PTED, such as, e.g. *"I've always liked learning languages, and especially English"*[1] (Roser, Q1). However, all participants provided more and richer information in the interviews. The reasons for "liking" English go beyond the language. All participants addressed identity issues and the status of English in the world as the factors that led them to be interested in this language. Its significance seems to sit on two levels: the role of English nowadays, i.e. its significance worldwide, and the student-teachers' imagined identity (Norton, 2000) (the significance of the language for oneself).

4.1.1.The role of English nowadays

Most participants stated that they liked learning English, but not all of them responded the same when referring to foreign languages in general. Moreover, 13 of them agreed with the assertion that it is an international language. Students commented on the importance of English nowadays at many levels, both personally and professionally, while they also emphasized its role in getting access to information.

This role of English seems to be one of the reasons for choosing the EM-PTED. However, data insinuate that actually it was the meanings behind this language what mattered to the participants. Even though all participants pointed to the future career possibilities that

pursuing the EM-PTED could offer them, when further discussing the role of English in their lives, everyone stated that they would not have chosen this degree only because of its professional bonus.

4.1.2.Imagined Identity

The participants' interest towards English constantly overlaps with what seems to be another key factor for their choice of degree: their "imagined identity". When asked whether personal motivations had affected their decision to study the EM-PTED, all participants answered affirmatively. They gave a wide range of ideas, experiences and opinions that shed light into the role that identity and the investments in the learning of English had played in such decision.

English is considered to be important in these student-teachers' society and the understanding of its role and status entails numerous other factors that cannot be neatly understood in a compartmentalised way. English places them on the worldwide map, in that its role as a global language might allow them to allocate themselves as international English speakers. English seems to be important in their lives due to numerous and multifactorial reasons and sociocultural realities.

The notion of "investment" helps to further understand the participants' interest towards English. Investing in its learning implies an investment in who they want to become, since mastering this international language carries a series of implied meanings, and it is these meanings what the student-teachers are strongly pursuing by choosing this degree.

Two recurrently mentioned factors when referring to future desires were clearly identified: the possibility to live experiences abroad and the cultural capital that the EM-PTED will provide them with.

4.1.3.Experiences abroad

The participants' imagined identity embraces possibilities for future investments and everyone seemed to value the possibility of acquiring an international background. Furthermore, as future teachers, they

wanted to be positioned as “good teachers”, searching for social recognition as educators by planning to move to countries where they could gain a more positive teacher identity. Some of their aspirations imply additional training, working or learning abroad. Thus, international practices associated with their profession also enhanced their investments. In case of one participant, her imagined teacher identity not only required her to master English and teach it properly to her students, but also to contribute to their future knowledge in terms of cultural capital.

4.1.4.Gaining Cultural Capital

While social prestige might not be a direct goal, the participants seem to be aware of the fact that English increases it. They saw their cultural capital and social power gradually increasing as they positioned themselves and were positioned by others as English users. To place oneself in a social hierarchy, mastering English seems to be a form of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1977). By saying “*in a few years, without English, you will be nothing”*, a participant was imagining how she would be positioned without this language.

4.2.Willingness to invest in English practices

The participants’ interest to invest in the practices of a community they wanted to belong was found to be a factor that was explicitly mentioned by all student-teachers. They both imagine their future community and take actions to step into the shoes of its members: they decide to study the EM-PTED because they want to keep learning English. They consider that engaging in practices such as studying in English, taking notes or reading in English will help them to become better English users.

5. DISCUSSION

Globalisation has resulted in “a new society, in which English is shared among many groups of non-native speakers rather than dominated by the British or Americans” (Warschauer, 2000:512). This

reality surrounds the daily life of these participants and it contributes to both their aspirations and identity possibilities and their nearest future. According to Block (2007:113), "an engagement with English as an international language […] can have a significant impact on an FL learner's sense of self".

Mastering English seems to afford these student-teachers opportunities to gain cultural capital regarding the rest of their society, other recently graduate teachers and an international community of English speakers, whose "oldtimers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) might then allow them access to full participation in the CoP. They are "newcomers" (ibid) who are learning through practice, seeking for opportunities to play a role in the worlds that English comprises.

These findings suggest that there is a strong connection between a language learner's investment and their identity. Therefore, on the one hand, instrumental reasons (Gardner, 1985) cannot be considered one of the factors for choosing the EM-PTED. On the other hand, Blommaert (2003:619) argues that "the process of mobility creates difference in value", and that is what the participants seem to pursue by wanting to live experiences abroad. Similarly, they seem to be aware of "the knowledge, credentials, and modes of thought" that characterize the CoP they envision (Norton & Toohey, 2011:420).

The student-teachers' comments about keeping learning English through the EM-PTED are in accordance with Kanno & Norton's (2003:246) idea that the imagined community and identity they envision "may compel learners to seek certain kinds of educational opportunities they might otherwise not seek". Their need to engage in English practices is guided through imagination, as it is possible to connect to imagined communities "through the power of the imagination" (ibid:241), driving future actions and investments in a language.

6.CONCLUSION

The student-teachers' *imagined identity* was found to be the key factor that influenced their choice of degree. Such imagined identity and its connection to their interest in learning English cannot be understood without considering the role of English in globalization

processes. All participants were aware of its significance in the world and its uses as a "lingua franca". Such reality encompasses practicalities that were also mentioned, although this issue does not seem to be decisive.

The role of English worldwide can contribute to the formation and expansion of the students-teachers' identity, by allowing them to envision future life-changing experiences and by affording its speakers social power, turning this language into a highly valuable tool which allows them to be positioned as more valuable citizens.

The participants' willingness to invest in the practices of the community they seek to belong to was found to be another relevant factor. Our study confirms that "imagination plays both an educational and an identitary function" (Pavlenko, 2003:253).

NOTES

[1] Direct quotes from the participants' accounts have been marked in italics.

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