

Young learners' functional use of the L2 in a low-immersion EFL context

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The present study focuses on young EFL learners' use of the L2 to convey various linguistic functions (ask for information, talk about personal things, etc.). Based on the functional categories identified by Halliday (1975) and Painter (1999) in the development of the L1, and after having observed the use of these functions in a full-immersion EFL context, the aim of the study is to analyse the ways in which teachers can promote the use of the L2 to express different functions in low-immersion contexts. The results of the experiment presented here show that, with the use of specific and well-planned activities, teachers can encourage very young learners to use the L2 to convey different functions and to initiate interactions as they usually do in their L1.

Introduction

The importance of learner corpora in the study of interlanguage development is now widely accepted. However, most of the studies on learner corpora have been based on adult learners (Granger *et al.* 2002). The present paper shows a part of a wider study which consists in analysing the functional use of the L2 in different types of bilingual classroom contexts at the pre-school level. For this purpose, an EFL spoken corpus was collected from schools with different types of immersion in the L2 (full-immersion, mid-immersion, and low-immersion).¹ Informed consent forms were distributed to the parents by the school to sign prior to beginning the study.

After studying the classroom interactions in the corpus, a taxonomy of pragmatic functions was developed (Llinares García 2004a; Llinares García 2004b). This taxonomy was based on the functional analysis of the first language of the child carried out by Halliday (1975) and Painter (1999), who found that children learn a language because they need to do things with it (give orders, ask questions, talk about their world, etc.). It is precisely the functionality of language, according to these authors, that motivates the child to use it and improve it.

Halliday (op. cit.) and Painter (op. cit.) distinguished six main functions in the language of the child:

- Heuristic function: the use of language to ask for information about things.
- Informative function: the use of language to inform about external things.

- Personal function: the use of language to inform about oneself.
- Regulatory function: the use of language to demand actions.
- Instrumental function: the use of language to demand actions for a personal benefit.
- Interactional function: the use of language to interact socially with others.

These categories were applied to the language used by the children in the different EFL contexts, and a data-driven taxonomy was developed for each of the aforementioned functions (Llinares García 2004a; Llinares García 2004b). In an initial stage of the study, the analysis focused on the functions used by children in a first language context as well as in a full-immersion EFL context (in both cases, with five-year-old children). The results driven from these first analyses concluded that the most common function was the personal function, that is, the children were especially interested in talking about themselves, their family, toys, abilities, etc.

Aim of the present study

Following Ovando and Collier (1998), the general aim of the whole study was to analyse the natural use of classroom language from a functional perspective and to see to what extent the communicative functions proposed by Halliday and Painter were performed in first and EFL classroom contexts. In this particular paper, I observe the way in which these functions, which the child uses in the L1, could be promoted in the L2, particularly in low-immersion EFL contexts.

Having observed the children's functional use of the L2 in the full-immersion context, the next step was to find out whether the role of the teacher in the low-immersion context would be an important factor in the children's functional production in the L2. The hypothesis behind this was that the children would use the language to initiate interactions, and not just to respond to the teacher's display questions,² if they were encouraged to do so. As noted above, I wanted to see which of the functions identified by Halliday and Painter (and later developed by Llinares García) five-year-old pre-school children were able to perform in the L2. For this purpose, an experiment was carried out in a low-immersion context with two classes of five-year-old children and two different teachers.

Methodology

The subjects

The subjects were five-year-old children who had been distributed by the school into two groups with a different teacher each. In this school, pre-school children (between the ages of three and five) had one hour of English every day. In group A there were 18 children (14 boys and 4 girls) and in group B there were 17 children (6 boys and 11 girls). All the children participated in the verbal interactions to a greater or lesser extent.

The experiment

According to Tabors and Snow (1994), in order to encourage young learners' production in the L2, it is necessary to respond to the children's intentions to communicate in this language and to promote interesting activities. Following these ideas, I decided to carry out an experiment based on creating activities that encouraged children's initiations in the L2.

The control and the experimental groups were chosen at random (Group A became the experimental group and group B the control group). The experiment consisted of asking the teacher in the experimental group to

perform some activities and role-plays that promoted the pupils' discourse initiations³ in the L2 and the use of this language to perform the same communicative functions as in the L1.

In order to carry out the experiment, data from four sessions in each group were collected and coded. Four one-hour sessions were video-recorded in each group. The first session was recorded before the experiment. In the other three sessions, the teacher in the experimental group used activities aimed at encouraging the children's use of the functions and discourse initiations in the L2, whereas the teacher in the control group went on with her normal classroom activity. All the sessions in both groups were based on oral tasks.

The data were then transcribed and each utterance was coded according to the function that was conveyed. In the case of the children, the coding included information on whether the utterance was used to initiate an interaction. (The child asked a question, explained something, etc. . . .) Finally, the data was retrieved with the help of *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott 1998).

The activities suggested to the teacher in the experimental group for the realization of each function were the following.⁴

- Instrumental: there are balls with different colours and sizes. The children have to ask for a specific ball.
- Regulatory: the teacher pretends not to know how to put on a jumper and the children give him/her simple instructions on how to do it.
- Personal: the teacher asks the children to bring something personal to the class and to talk about it. The teacher asks questions and helps them to talk about their object using techniques such as scaffolding.⁵
- Heuristic: the children have to ask questions to find out the toy animals that the teacher has inside a box. This activity promotes the use of questions by the pupil in the L2, which rarely happens in the EFL class, especially at the beginner level.
- Informative: one of the pupils has to inform about the way different things are organized in a picture. With his/her information, the other children have to manage to draw the same picture.
- Interactional: no specific activity was suggested to promote this function as social interaction (greetings, farewell) took part automatically in both groups.

The hypotheses were the following:

- a The learners' functional linguistic production (in terms of frequency of discourse initiations) in the experimental group will improve after practising activities aimed at the production of initiation functions by the children.
- b The learners' functional linguistic production (in terms of frequency of discourse initiations) will be higher than that of the control group after practising activities aimed at the production of initiation functions by the children.

The dependent variable in this study was the quality of the functional discourse of the pupils in the L2 before and after the treatment, defined in terms of the frequency of functions used that represented discourse

initiations. The independent variable was the treatment carried out on one of the groups, through the activities that the teacher used to encourage the realization of functions by the pupils in the L2 that represented discourse initiations.

Analysis of the data and interpretation of the results

The data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative analysis was based on the observation of what kind of activities promoted the children's initiations in the L2 in the experimental group.

Example 1 below shows a coded section of the corpus, which belongs to the experimental group. In this activity, the teacher (TCH) asks a pupil (VIC) to describe a flashcard without showing it and the other children (CH, ADR) have to guess what this card represents. The children are also encouraged to ask questions. With this activity, the teacher is promoting the children's use of the informative and heuristic functions:

Group A (S3/124–136)

- 124 VIC: Is it big. (Informative)
125 TCH: It's big.
126 VIC: Purple. (Informative)
127 TCH: It's purple.
128 VIC: Fat. (Informative)
129 TCH: Very fat. And, where does it live? In the-?
130 CH: Water.
131 TCH: In the water.
132 CH: [Me].
133 CH: [Me].
134 TCH: Adrián.
135 ADR: Is is a fish . . . ? (Heuristic)
136 TCH: No. It's not a fish.

The children that learn a second language at an early age do not usually show intrinsic motivation to use the L2. Therefore, it is very important to motivate the learner to use it. According to Abbot (1980), one way is to create activities that encourage them to use referential questions. In the example above, the learners have the need to ask questions in order to obtain information that they do not possess.

Example 2 below shows how the teacher in the experimental group promotes the children's use of the regulatory function:

Group A (S2/334–345)⁶

- 334 TCH: Very good. OK. Now, Raquel. You are the teacher now, OK?
335 FER: <LI Jo LI> ((SHE STANDS OPPOSITE HER CLASSMATES))
336 TCH: Now she is going to say, for example 'Touch your eyes', and everybody touch your eyes. OK? And you say . . .
337 RAQ: Touch your . . . (Regulatory)
338 TCH: Touch your . . .
339 RAQ: knees.
340 TCH: Knees, everybody your knees. OK. Another one.
341 RAQ: Touch your . . . shoulders. (Regulatory)
342 TCH: Shoulders. OK. Another one.
343 RAQ: Touch your . . . hair. (Regulatory)

344 TCH: Hair or head?

345 RAQ: head

The quantitative analysis was based on the comparison of the functional production of the pupils in the experimental and control groups, before and after the treatment, in terms of the functions that were used to initiate conversations. In Figure 1 below, we show the frequency of functions used in the first session of both the control and the experimental groups:

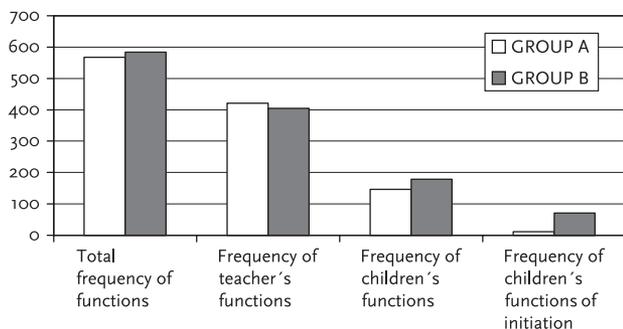


FIGURE 1
Distribution of functions in the first session of the experimental group (A) and control group (B)

Figure 1 above shows that in both groups the teachers used more functions than the pupils, as can be expected in a classroom context, and the frequency is very similar (420 in group A and 405 in group B). As far as children are concerned, although the number of functions are not very different (146 in group A and 179 in group B), the children in the experimental group (A) only used 11 utterances to initiate interactions. This represented 7.53% of all the utterances realized by the children in this session and 4.66% of the total number of functions of initiation used in the four sessions—the first session and the three sessions after the treatment. We can see, then, that the majority of the functions of initiation in this group were realized after the treatment. On the other hand, in the control group (B), in the first session, the children performed 71 functions to initiate an interaction in the L2 (39.65% of all the utterances performed by the children in this session and 26.1% of the total number of functions of initiation in the four sessions). Therefore, in the first class, the children in the control group used more functions of initiation than in the experimental group (26.1% in the control group against 4.66% in the experimental group).

However, the experimental group improved significantly after the treatment. Table 1 below shows the results of a statistical t-test where we can see that the number of functions of initiation in the experimental group after the treatment is significantly higher than in the control group:

TABLE 1
Differences in the use of functions of initiation in the L2 by the children in the control and experimental groups after the treatment

	Group A (Experimental)	Group B (Control)
Frequency of functions of initiation in the L2	227 (95.31%)	192 (70.54%)
Significance level	p = 0.01 significant	

Another interesting result was that, after the treatment, the children in the experimental group used the L1 less frequently than in the control group (54 functions in the experimental group against 142 functions in the control group, in the last three sessions). A possible reason is that, in the experimental group, the use of these controlled activities, adapted to the level of the learners, encouraged their use of the L2.

Finally, Table 2 below shows the type of functions used by the children in the two groups, both in the L1 and the L2, in the three sessions after the treatment:

	Group A		Group B	
	L2	L1	L2	L1
Personal function	31	25	13	66
Informative function	100	4	35	12
Heuristic function	15	7	16	17
Instrumental function	1	9	4	12
Interactional function	3	0	9	0
Regulatory function	77	9	115	35

TABLE 2
Functions used by the children in the experimental and control groups after the treatment

The data in this table indicates that the most common function in the L1, in both groups, is the personal function. This coincides with the results driven from the native and full-immersion contexts in the study carried out by Llinares García (2004a). Therefore, we can argue that the use of activities to encourage the use of the personal function in the L2 in group A results in a higher number of instances of the personal function in the L2 and a lower number of functions in the L1, in comparison with the control group.

Conclusion

Children learn a language because they can do things with it (inform, ask for information, talk about their things, etc.). In my opinion, children also need this kind of motivation in order to learn a second or foreign language from a very early age. The present study shows that, in low-immersion EFL contexts, very young children can communicate in the L2 if the teacher motivates them with activities that lead them to use the L2 for some purpose, in a similar way to their use of the L1. These activities should encourage the children to initiate interactions in the L2, and not simply respond to the teacher's queries.

This study also shows the importance of addressing the children's communicative needs. We have seen that children at the age of five have a special interest in talking about their personal world. The comparison between the use of the personal function by the children in the L1 in the experimental and control groups shows that, when children are not encouraged to use this function in the L2, they still use it in the L1.

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Notes

- 1 I have used the term 'full-immersion' to refer to schools where English is the language used for the whole school day; 'mid-immersion' contexts are those where the L2 is used for half of the day; and 'low-immersion' contexts are those where English is taught for a maximum of an hour a day.
- 2 These questions, for which the answer is already known by the speaker, are very common in the language of the teacher in second/foreign language contexts. An example of such questions is the following: 'Are you a boy?'. With such a question, it is obvious for the pupil that the teacher knows the answer, and consequently, they do not really provide new information. The teacher is merely testing their knowledge of the L2.
- 3 With 'discourse initiations' I refer to the use of language to initiate an interaction. This would contrast with the use of 'discourse responses'.
- 4 The teacher was encouraged to use other activities in the same line as the ones presented. These only represented 'examples' of activities that promoted the use of the different functions by the children.
- 5 The type of questions asked by the teacher in this kind of activity motivates the children because they see that the teacher is really interested in their answer. This contrasts with the so-called 'display questions', which are typical of the classroom and are not so motivating for the learners, as we have already pointed out.
- 6 The information in brackets corresponds to the number of the session (S3) and the entries (I24 to I36).

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