



## Communicative competence and the facilitating and perturbing factors in the socialisation of immigrant students



Juan Manuel Moreno-Manso\*, M<sup>a</sup> José Godoy-Merino, Ángel Suárez-Muñoz, M<sup>a</sup> Elena García-Baamonde

Department of Psychology, University of Extremadura, Avenida de Elvas, s/n, 06006 Badajoz, Spain

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### ABSTRACT

This work analyses the communicative competence and the factors that facilitate and perturb the socialisation of immigrant students in primary education. It provides greater knowledge concerning the relationship between the immigrant student's social and linguistic competence. It also analyses the presence of difficulties in the different language components (morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics). The sample is made up of a total of 326 immigrant students between 6 and 12 years of age, attending 10 different schools. The study demonstrates that immigrant students possess a low level of linguistic dominion. All the linguistic components analysed are affected, although greater difficulties are evident in morphology and syntax than in semantics and pragmatics. The relationship between linguistic competence and the factors that facilitate and perturb socialisation is underlined. This work concludes that there is a significant relation between semantics and pragmatics and several socialisation factors (leadership, aggressiveness–stubbornness and anxiety–shyness). The educational centres should be aware of the complicated learning process that immigrant students have to go through.

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### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is a topic of both worry and debate, and the role it plays in education is vital to achieving a more just multicultural society in which social inequality has no place. The cultural diversity of Spanish schools is not a new problem, but there is an ever more frequent phenomenon of schools with many students who, coming from many different countries, need to learn a second language to allow them to achieve an adequate social and educational development. The many immigrant students entering schools is a challenge for the education system. The school is the first space outside the home where the first social relationships occur within the country of their destination, and it should encourage the students' integration and education.

The challenge is to design and set up educational programmes that facilitate the immigrant students' path to dominating a second language. However, the practical set up of such programmes should not be subject solely to actuations that imply the separation of these children from the rest of their companions, or from the routines and daily activities of the classroom, under the pretext of receiving intensive training. Quite the contrary, such programmes should offer contextualised support, both in the school and with the family, which helps the children to learn the second language in situations offering natural interaction.

In most countries of the western world, immigrant students have severe problems with school language and it takes them a considerable time to resolve such problems (Stanat, Becker, Baumert, Lüdtke, & Eckhardt, 2012; Vila, 2006). This could explain the high rates of school failure among this collective. Cummins (2000), Huguet and Navarro (2006), and Huguet (2008, 2009), demonstrate the disappointing results concerning their language level and the high rate of failure of the immigrant students.

The schooling of immigrant students requires an immediate educational response. Only the most homogeneous evolution in learning for all students can guarantee a positive, integrating and socialising school climate in accordance with the idea of inclusive schooling. However, to do so, it is necessary to redirect the tasks carried out by support teachers, careers advisers and specialised teachers. In most centres, immigrant students receive extra support classes precisely to reinforce their dominion of the adoptive country's native language and to encourage them to board, as soon as possible, the same "learning train" as the rest of the class.

Language is the regulating instrument of social exchanges, the latter being the result of integration, adaptation and socialisation (Carbonell, 2004). Extra and Yagmur (2004) reported on the linguistic diversity in Europe as a consequence of the migratory movements occurring on this level, working on it from different perspectives: phenomenological, demographical, sociolinguistic and educational. In such cases where the mother tongue is included at a curricular level, the students' integration in the educational context is facilitated. This gives them support, as they perceive that their knowledge is recognised and approved. Pedersen (2002), points out that when the mother tongue is promoted, not

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Extremadura, Avenida de Elvas, s/n, 06007 Badajoz, Spain. Tel.: +34 924289501.

E-mail address: [jmmanso@unex.es](mailto:jmmanso@unex.es) (J.M. Moreno-Manso).

only in the home, but also at school, the student achieves a higher competence in both languages. Siguan (1995) considers the language belonging to each culture to be the maximum expression of ethnicity; even that, in many cases, it becomes the cultural essence of the collective. It is through language that human beings forge links with each other and with their surroundings, establishing their first social ties.

Hamel (1993) states that all language is a social fact in permanent historical transformation and that the experience of a people and their world view is based on, and reproduced in, the lexemes, morphosyntactic structures, and above all the discursive formations. It is not only a support for thought or an instrument for transferring knowledge, but first and foremost a social act that is meaningful to the speakers. Discourse is a cultural act that produces and transforms the meanings of social structures, making them circular. To speak the same language is to open up communicative and collaborative possibilities that individuals who speak different languages do not have. The said common language can become a symbol of group identity and of solidarity among its speakers (Siguan, 2001).

The study by Serra (1997) with immigrant students of the fourth year of primary school (9 to 10 years of age) stresses that the levels of linguistic knowledge are very poor. This certainly means that their difficulties with the use of the language condition the inferior results in all areas of learning, resulting in failure at school. Several works carried out on the relationship between immigration and success at school are disappointing, given that the immigrant students obtain significantly lower results than native students (Huguet, Navarro, & Janés, 2007; Navarro & Huguet, 2005, 2006).

Siguan (1998) concludes that only 50% of immigrant students finish obligatory education, as opposed to two thirds of native students. Fullana, Besalú, and Vilà (2003) conclude that 61% of immigrant students finish primary school with important academic difficulties, as opposed to 30% of native students. They also conclude that 47% of immigrant students have important problems moving from the first to the second cycle of secondary education (aged 14). The percentage of students who do not make the jump from primary to secondary education is ten times higher in immigrants than in native students. Montes (2002) and Besalú (2002) point out that over 60% of immigrant school children go no further than the primary stage, and that this percentage increases at the end of the first cycle of secondary school (aged 13–14).

Research such as that of Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000), Huguet, Chireac, Navarro, and Sansó (2011), Maruny and Molina (2000), Navarro, Huguet, Sansó, and Chireac (2012), and Thomas and Collier (1997), stress the differences in the acquisition and the dominion of the language of the adoptive country with respect to the student's age of arrival and/or the time spent in our country.

We should not forget the importance of linguistic competence in the starting up of interaction and integration strategies for the immigrant students. The results of the study by Rodríguez, Romero, Luque, and Rocío (2002) in 8 state schools of Algeciras (Spain) indicate that immigrant students have lower levels of adaptation to school and academic performance than their native peers. They also point to the influence of socialisation in learning difficulties and failure at school among immigrants. Briones, Taberner, and Arenas (2005) point out that sharing a language influences the processes of finding an identity and the need for intergroup differentiation. The study carried out by Vila, Perera, and Serra (2006), concludes that *integration* and *adaptation* are decisive factors for the incorporation and development of language. Their study minimises the importance of other agents such as age, the time spent living in the adoptive country or the number of hours of attendance to the immigrant reception class.

With this background, our research analyses the communicative competence and the factors that facilitate and perturb the socialisation of immigrant students in primary education. Most studies do not provide data concerning how each of the different linguistic components (morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) is affected. Thus, the

research has two aims: to provide greater knowledge of the relationship between children's social and communicative competence; and to analyse the presence of difficulties in the different components of the language in immigrant students.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample is made up of a total of 326 immigrant students. Of these, 152 are male and 174 female, between 6 and 12 years of age. They attended 10 different state schools. According to data provided by the Secretary General of Education for the academic year 2010/2011, we worked on a representative sample of the different school collectives of immigrant origin in the Primary Education System of the Autonomous Region of Extremadura (Spain). The origin of the immigrant students is mainly Morocco and Romania, with a small representation in our study of students from South America, Central America and Asia. The predominant immigrant population in Extremadura is from Africa, Eastern Europe and South America.

### 2.2. Instruments

We used the Revised Screening version of the 'Objective Language Criteria Test' (BLOC-SR) (Puyuelo, Renom, Solana, & Wiig, 2007) to evaluate the children's linguistic competence. This test aims to detect whether difficulties exist in the language components (morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics). This test allows us to estimate the risk of there being a language problem in each of the four communicative skills evaluated. It has been designed to verify the level of dominion from 70% correct answers upwards. The test provides a gross score with respect to the items, a percentile score and a transformed score with respect to the development curves. A percentile score of 70–100 (upper level) indicates that the student dominates the psycholinguistic skill and can use it correctly; a percentile of 60–70 indicates transition level; that of 30–60 indicates emergency level; while a percentile below 25–30 indicates level of alarm. The test has proved to be effective for evaluating linguistic development in different target populations (Abad & Uriel, 2007; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2009; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2012; Moreno, García-Baamonde, Guerrero, & Blázquez, 2010).

The instrument used to evaluate the socialisation of school students is the version for teachers of the Socialisation Test of Silva and Martorell (2001). The Socialisation Test is a set of estimation scales to evaluate the socialisation of children and adolescents between 6 and 15 years of age. The Socialisation Test has allowed us to evaluate the socialisation of immigrant students through the seven scales that make up the test, in which several facilitating (leadership, joviality, social sensitivity and respect/self-control) and perturbing/inhibiting (aggressiveness–stubbornness, apathy–withdrawal and anxiety–shyness) aspects of socialisation are differentiated. It also allows us to obtain a global appreciation of socialisation with a scale of criteria.

### 2.3. Procedure

The first phase of the research was carried out on the basis of the data provided by the Secretary General of Education for the academic year 2010/2011. The schools with the greatest number of immigrant students were analysed, a representative sampling selection of the immigrant students was made, and the schools were contacted in order to establish a calendar for applying the instruments. The days for administering the tests were established, and an informative meeting was held with the management teams to ask for their collaboration.

We first of all did the BLOC-SR test with the children individually in the ten schools. The evaluation of the different linguistic components for each of the children lasted approximately 1 h, although in some cases, the attitude of the children themselves during the session

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