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Lifelong learning in higher education: the development of non-traditional adult students' plurilingual repertoires

Susana Ambrósio^a*, Maria Helena Araújo e Sá^a, Ana Raquel Simões^a

^a Research Centre "Didactics and Technology in Education of Trainers", Department of Education, University of Aveiro, Aveiro 3810-193, Portugal

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a study on the non-traditional adult students' representations concerning the contributions of Lifelong Learning in different domains in life, namely the contribute of Higher Education attendance in the development of their plurilingual repertoires. Our starting point is an online questionnaire filled in by non-traditional adult students. The results not only show a positive contribution of Lifelong Learning, but also suggest language learning as an important part of it. Non-traditional adult students seem committed to their Lifelong Learning process and recognize in the Higher Education attendance an opportunity to further develop plurilingual repertoires.

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1. Introduction

The study presented herein is part of a more comprehensive project which is being carried out at the University of Aveiro called "Plurilingual repertoires in a lifelong learning process: a case study with the non-traditional adult students in the University of Aveiro". Since attending Higher Education (HE) is another stage of the lifelong learning (LLL) process, namely the development of the plurilingual repertoire of non-traditional adult students' (NTAS), the present study aims to understand NTAS' representations regarding i. LLL contributions in different domains of life; ii. the importance of language learning and iii. how HE attendance contributes (or could contribute) to the development of NTAS' plurilingual repertoires.

In order to achieve these goals, the data obtained from an online questionnaire filled in by 195 NTAS (40.2%, N=485) were analysed. The data collected allowed us to characterize a sample of NTAS and access their representations of LLL, particularly language learning, as well as their perspective on how HE attendance contributes to their LLL process. Therefore, language learning is presented as a LLL process, considering that the development of a plurilingual repertoire is also a *continuum* process in the lives of individuals in a variety of contexts, such as HE (Section 2). Then, NTAS in the Portuguese context and the pivotal role HE plays in supporting LLL are presented (Section 3). In the last section of the paper, the results of the online questionnaire are presented and discussed (Section 4). In this sense, we intend to emphasise the importance of NTAS' representations of LLL, and how NTAS perceive HE attendance as an opportunity to develop their plurilingual repertoires.

* Corresponding Author: Susana Ambrósio. Tel.: +351-964-524-770
E-mail address: sambrosio@ua.pt

2. Language learning as a lifelong process

Lifelong learning (LLL) has become a structural necessity and a survival strategy for both professionals and organizations in the 21st century. It is perceived as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.” (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 163-162) promoting “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all routes, circumstances, and environments.” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 22). More than ever, individuals are expected to contribute actively to society and to live in a context of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Accordingly, language learning and, therefore, communicating in foreign languages are one of the key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2007), since they are perceived as an important lifelong process, complying with the idea that “it is impossible to predict the practical and personal communicative needs people may have after leaving education and training.” (Mackiewicz, 1998, p. 4). This plural language learning process is embodied in the plurilingual repertoire, a *continuum* process that occurs throughout life in a variety of contexts and through the contact with several people, continuously remodelled according to a variety of circumstances (Vigner, 2008).

2.1 - The plurilingual repertoire

As stated above, a plurilingual repertoire is developed throughout life and is influenced by the plurality and unpredictability of an individual’s pathway (Blommaert & Backus, 2012). This means that a plurilingual repertoire is not stable and it is remodelled according to life’s circumstances (Andrade et al., 2003; Beacco, 2008; Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009). The plurilingual repertoire gains new elements which transform or complete pre-existing ones obtained in various contexts, in view of the necessary adaptations to professional, geographical or family displacements, but also to the personal evolution of interests (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Lüdi, 2004).

In this sense, plurilingual repertoires, seen as “truncated repertoires” since “no one knows all of a language” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 103), are based on the principle whereby each one is able to learn languages according to the emerging needs throughout life, either due to personal/affective, professional or cultural reasons, or simply because it is the individual’s wish, resisting the hegemony of a single language (Beacco, 2008; Semal-Lebleu, 2006). Developing a plurilingual repertoire is very personal since “language learning is actually a process that each individual perceives and processes in different ways” (Franceschini, 2005, p. 121). Thus, plurilingual repertoire is the result of biographically organized complex resources which reflect the rhythms of the individuals’ lives (Blommaert & Backus, 2012). Accordingly, plurilingual repertoires are closely linked to life history and biographical trajectories (Thamin & Simon, 2010), being understood as “indexical biographies” (Blommaert & Backus, 2012) since they embody the plural linguistic and cultural experiences lived by individuals, which managing several languages on a personal or professional sphere or at school (Castellotti & Moore, 2006; Thamin & Simon, 2010).

Institutions play a major role in the development of plurilingual repertoires, namely HE institutions since "Les universités ont surtout la responsabilité de continuer de développer les compétences linguistiques de tous les étudiants" (Beacco, 2009, p. 9), emphasizing their role in promoting LLL, namely language learning.

3. The role of Higher Education in Lifelong Learning

We have witnessed many great changes in HE and increasing awareness regarding new challenges and demands since the signing of the Declaration of Bologna in 1999. In view of the Bologna reports, there is a clear intention for promoting Lifelong Learning, as a cornerstone of the HE European Area and one of the main vectors in HE reconfiguration (EUA, 2008; Prague Communiqué, 2001). It is understood, therefore, that “In the lifelong learning

scenario, a university would need to reassess completely its objectives and priorities, particularly its entry requirements, its method of working and its assessment and qualifications structures.” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15). Universities should respond to new lifelong educational and training needs, clearly appealing to its social responsibility. Thus, the mission of HE institutions should entail the promotion of LLL, namely language learning, since they are asked to contribute to “the European integration and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe” (ELC 2001: 3) by becoming multilingual spaces, promoting plurilingualism as a value and a competence (Beacco & Byram, 2007; Pinto, 2012).

In this sense, “the challenge of lifelong learning for universities is to view lifelong learning as an opportunity to expand their activities in all fields and to understand, and respond positively to, the very different needs of their new customers” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15). This means that HE institutions should be accessible to all (Bergen Communiqué, 2005), create more flexible learning pathways, and recognise previously acquired learning, either in formal or informal contexts (Leuven Communiqué, 2009; London Communiqué, 2007). Thus, HE institutions should be prepared for new demands and challenges, such as receiving new publics with different features from their traditional students, namely NTAS, and be able to contribute to the development of their plurilingual repertoire (Beacco, 2009).

3.1. Non-Traditional Adult Students

The presence of NTAS in HE is an ever-increasing reality in European universities. Adult students are considered non-traditional due to several factors influencing their participation in the educational process. Since they play multiple roles and have several responsibilities, their role as students is very often cast aside. According to various authors, the main features of adult students relate to: i) age – the majority of the students range from 18 to 21 years old, whereas adult students are over 23/25 years of age, ii) attending formal education – adult students were outside the formal education system for a while and have no university experience, and are usually the first family generation to go to university, iii) professional experience – adult students have greater work experience than traditional students (with little or none), and are usually working class, either working full or part-time and iv) their attitude as students – adult students are more concerned with the knowledge practical application, are more determined and committed, since the decision of attending HE is very often made with the view to pursue a career or update knowledge for professional progression (Correia & Mesquita, 2006; Johnson & Merrill, 2004; Lynch, Chickering, & Schlossberg, 1989).

In 2006, Portuguese special HE access and admission criteria were created for candidates over 23 that do not have qualifications traditionally required for accessing that level of education. However, NTAS possess the knowledge and the necessary competences acquired during their personal, professional and social pathway, allowing them to assess their eligibility to attend university (Law-Decree No. 64 of 2006). As a result of their LLL process, NTAS lived (with different degrees of exposure) plurilingual experiences, which are embodied in their plurilingual repertoires (Blommaert & Backus, 2012). Therefore, enrolling in a HE institution may be perceived as another plurilingual experience which contributes (or could contribute) to the development of their plurilingual repertoire.

4. The study: results presentation and discussion

As stated above, this study aims to understand NTAS’ representations regarding i. LLL contributions in different domains of life; ii. importance of language learning and iii. how HE attendance contributes (or could contribute) to the development of NTAS’ plurilingual repertoires.

In order to achieve these goals, an online questionnaire was designed by us, and subsequently filled in by 195 NTAS. This data collection instrument was divided into three parts: i. general characterization, ii. lifelong learning, with a focus on language learning and iii. HE and language learning.

We began by emailing the link with the questionnaire to all the NTAS attending the UA from 2006/2007 to 2010/2011 (a total of 485 NTAS); 195 (40.2%) filled it in. The data collected were analysed through use of the software SPSS - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 18.

The sample is comprised mostly of men (52.8%), with individuals aged between 23 and 66 years old, although most men were between 26 and 40 years (69.8%). The majority is Portuguese, except for two Brazilian students.

With regards to attendance, the three courses with more NTAS are Public Administration (n = 18), Languages and Business Relations (n = 16) and Technology of Information (n = 14). Most individuals were attending the first year (42.1%).

4.1. – Representations regarding Lifelong Learning contributions in different domains of life

One of the questions was about the NTAS' representations of LLL contributions in different domains of life (cf. Fujiwara, 2012), such as personal development, namely in promoting citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion, improving quality of life and developing self-esteem and empowerment. Another domain where LLL could contribute is in individuals' professional development, that is to say in the acquisition of new competences, developing pre-acquired competences, developing adaptation skills, career progression, increasing employment rates and encouraging retraining. NTAS were asked to give their opinions regarding LLL contributions, choosing from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lifelong Learning Contributions in different domains of life

As shown in Figure 1, the main contributions of LLL identified by NTAS were acquiring new skills (n = 192, 98.5%), improving pre-acquired skills (n = 190, 97.4 %) and developing adaptation skills (n = 188, 96.4%). The results suggest that NTAS associate more LLL to professional benefits and less to personal development, revealing a more instrumental perspective of LLL.

4.2. – Language learning importance

NTAS were also asked if they considered language learning to be important, with three possible answers: *yes*, *no* or *no opinion*. The great majority of NTAS answered *yes* (n = 184, 94.4%). Subsequently, they were asked to justify their answers, and five categories of analysis were created based on these answers. The categories focused on importance of language learning concerning i. professional needs; ii. personal development; iii. globalisation; iv. cultural enrichment, and v. opportunities for improving communication. 5.2% of NTAS have no opinion (n = 10), and one NTAS does not consider it important to learning languages throughout life (0.5%), although without stating why.

Below, we present the five categories, with the number of their occurrence in the justifications given by NTAS and some answers examples:

i. professional needs (61 occurrences): *"These days we have to be versatile and know a bit of everything so that we can easily adjust to any opportunity that arises."* NTAS25; *"(...), [speaking about foreign languages] it translates into added-value in terms of work skills."* NTAS142; *"In order to work in a multinational company, it is crucial to know how to communicate clearly."* NTAS145.

ii. personal development (59 occurrences): *"Because enriches us! And it makes me feel good!"* NTAS14; *"Because learning is good and because it is an added-value to ourselves"* NTAS108; *"Learning languages enables a major "openness" to life and to the world (...)." NTAS183.*

iii. globalization (35 occurrences): *"In a global world, speaking several languages can make the difference between winning and losing."* NTAS17; *"Mainly because it's our "business card" in the interaction as a global citizen"* NTAS25; *"It is essential to communicate in several languages due to globalization "* NTAS26.

iv. cultural enrichment (26 occurrences): *"It allow us to access new cultures, and the learning itself improves our ability to better understand the contact with people of other nationalities who speak foreign languages."* NTAS6; *"To better understand different cultures, thus making us more tolerant and less ignorant."* NTAS185; *"Knowing other languages enables us to get to know new cultures and opens new horizons, always "* NTAS194.

v. opportunities to improve communication (25 occurrences): *"Because it's very important to be able to communicate. Communication is essential in life, it is what allows us to be social as human beings, it is something that brings us together."* NTAS91; *"In an open borderless Europe, it becomes increasingly necessary to speak other languages in order to communicate effectively with people from other countries, other languages and other cultures."* NTAS136.

As stated above, the great majority of individuals believes that language learning is important [94.4% (n = 184)], mainly due to professional needs, personal development and globalization. It seems that language learning, as part of individuals' lifelong learning process, is faced, just like LLL in general, as an important feature in professional context. NTAS consider language learning also important to their cultural and communicational background, which which departs from a more instrumental view of LLL

Still from this perspective of language learning, 68.2% of NTAS (n = 133) stated that they want to learn languages and/or improve their language skills in the future due to professional issues, personal interest for learning new languages and cultures, globalisation and needs regarding HE attending. These results lead us to emphasise language learning as an unavoidable part of LLL.

4.3. – Representations regarding main contributions of HE attending in the plurilingual repertoire development

When asked if HE contributes to the development of plurilingual repertoires, 71.8% of NTAS (n = 140) answered affirmatively, regardless of their language skills. NTAS were asked, in an open question, to specify in which situations HE contributes to their repertoires. The following categories were created to analyse the answers: i. bibliographical research; ii. communicating with teachers and foreign students; iii. academic writing; iv. researching on the internet and using specific software. Next it is presented the four categories of analysis created from the answers given by NTAS and the categories' number of occurrences in the answers given by NTAS:

i. bibliographical research (80 occurrences): *"(...) Scientific communication... and most manuals are in English."* NTAS8; *"Reading textbooks and scientific papers in English (...)." NTAS23; "Because it makes me think (positively) about research, and search for good bibliography in the correct language (standard language)." NTAS29; "(...) Some assignments, technical books or other documents, and research methods may be in languages other than our mother tongue and we need translate in order to understand its content; this improves our language skills, it develops them."* NTAS81.

ii. communicating with teachers and foreign students (17 occurrences): *"(...) Contacting with teachers and students of other nationalities (...)." NTAS20; "(...) Teachers use it [English] (...) in most of the classes."* NTAS59; *"To meet Erasmus people if we want to communicate we need to understand each other."* NTAS91; *"Communicating with foreign students"* NTAS154.

iii. academic writing (8 occurrences): *"The fact that we are constantly writing assignments, it forces us to somehow develop our language skills, both written and spoken." NTAS4; "Because we go to several conferences with foreign teachers, and we have a lot of foreign bibliography." NTAS188; "In the research field we deal with, information is usually found in a variety of languages, which we need to understand." NTAS99.*

iv. researching on the Internet and using specific software (5 occurrences): *"(...) although the degree does not have languages courses in the curricula, [HE attendance] contributes due to work with English software, internet research as well in computer programming." NTAS114.*

The vast majority of NTAS mentioned the need research bibliography as one of the greatest contributions of HE to the development of their plurilingual repertoire, followed by the contact with teachers and foreign students, many of them participating in the Erasmus program. The results seems to point out that NTAS consider that HE attendance contribute to the development of their plurilingual repertoires, which highlight HE attendance as another stage in their LLL process.

4.4. – Results synthesis

LLL is viewed by the great majority of NTAS from a very positive perspective. They highlighted its contribution to the acquisition of new skills (n = 192), the improvement of pre-acquired skills already possessed (n = 190), the promotion of adaptation skills (n = 188), and the development of self-esteem and a greater sense of responsibility for their own life (n = 175). Also, the majority of NTAS (n = 184) believe it is important to learn languages, particularly due to business needs (n = 61), personal development (n = 59) and globalization (n = 35) assuming that language learning is a dynamic process throughout life, marked by their respective lives and experiences. According to 140 NTAS (71.8%) HE attendance contributes to the development of plurilingual repertoire, mainly due to the need for consulting the literature in foreign languages (n = 80), stressing English.

5 - Final Considerations

Given that the development of plurilingual repertoires is an activity for life, developed and remodelled in accordance with the circumstances of life and shaped by the plurality and unpredictability of the individuals' pathways (Andrade *et al.*, 2003; Beacco & Byram, 2007; Mackiewicz, 1998), it is important to understand how individuals, namely NTAS, perceive LLL, particularly language learning. Understanding language learning as a life project, echoed in the personal and social trajectories of individuals' (Coste *et al.*, 2009; Semal-Lebleu, 2006), highlights the importance of understanding how plurilingual repertoires develop.

According to our study, NTAS recognise the importance of LLL and the role of HE attendance in the development of their plurilingual repertoires. However, we should also question whether HE institutions themselves are creating multilingual spaces that truly contribute to the development of the plurilingual repertoires of NTAS or, instead, are promoting mostly one language, in this case English.

Since HE institutions are privileged spaces for constructing knowledge and think LLL as a cornerstone, it is urgent to encourage them to promote plurilingualism, as a value and as a competence. In view of this, it is also important to ascertain whether HE institutions are effectively considering this new reality as a challenge and if they are designing coherent and systematic strategies that support the diversity brought by new publics, such as NTAS, and language diversity.

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