

Janine Knight

Creating plurilingual, pictorial and 'talking' dictionaries to support the development of plurilingual and intercultural competences in a Catalan primary school



Dr Janine Knight, a teacher trainer at the International University of Catalunya, working together with primary school teacher, Joana Puig, set out to investigate how a plurilingual dictionary resource could be used to encourage pupils and trainee teachers to explore the multitude of languages spoken within a superdiverse primary school class in Barcelona, Spain.

Who? The study involved two groups of participants: a class of 23 11-12-year-old primary school pupils who between them spoke a total of 19 different languages and a group of 21 pre-service trainee English teachers.

Why? With an increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse population in some Catalan cities, teachers are required to try and integrate newly arrived pupils into the classroom and to develop all pupils' plurilingual and intercultural competences. This study set out to explore ways of achieving this both from the perspective of the pupils themselves, but also among trainee teachers. It also wanted to look at the concept of mediation, an often poorly understood part of the CEFR* which forms part of language curricula across many countries.

"We wanted to have a practical example of how mediation activities could be carried out in planned plurilingual school-based projects to produce something that met a real school need."

The dictionary project: For the study, groups of pupils, working with the researchers and trainee teachers, created plurilingual, pictorial, 'talking' dictionaries. To do this they took photos of different areas around the school, in the playground, the library, the canteen, etc. which were added to photo albums equipped with audio. They then recorded the vocabulary items illustrated in Catalan and Spanish (the school's two languages), plus English (taught as a foreign language), and the audio was added to the albums enabling users to click and hear the words.

Importantly, the project also involved a range of other activities and games that allowed the pupils, and trainees, to explore the children's linguistic knowledge beyond Catalan, Spanish, and English to include their heritage languages, and to work on mediation activities that involved plurilingual communication.

Trainee reflections: Throughout the 6-week project, the trainee teachers wrote reflections on their experiences which Janine analysed thematically. Key themes to emerge included an increased awareness and appreciation of the pupils' diverse linguistic backgrounds and the dynamics of a plurilingual context, the opportunities that the activities afforded for mutual learning (between trainees and children) and co-operation (among the children), and greater linguistic awareness generally from working with the different languages.

Conclusions: The dictionary creation project acted as a vehicle for exploring the plurilingual nature of the class and raising the trainee teachers' awareness and appreciation of what plurilingualism is and how they can work with it productively, especially through practical mediation activities. And from a wider lexicographic perspective, Janine concludes:

"The study underscored a potential shift in both the nature and role of dictionary-related work, compared to more 'traditional' dictionary forms and uses, and highlighted the lexical work of naming as dispersed, co-created, contextualised, and plurilingual."
