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Cultivating communicative repertoire awareness via participatory engagement with middle school teachers

Abstract

This paper is a brief methodological reflection on the process and product(s) of one year of engaged participatory linguistic research in urban Italian middle schools which, literally and figuratively, turned the lens toward teachers. By adopting an exploratory framework of communicative repertoire awareness (Rymes 2010; García 2016), teachers and researchers together reflected on textual and audiovisual data collected in their own classrooms as a means of raising awareness about the salience of language and non-linguistic communication in the teaching and learning of all subjects, for all students, and for all teachers.

Il presente articolo è una breve riflessione metodologica sul processo e sui prodotti di un anno di ricerca linguistica partecipativa in due scuole medie italiane in centri urbani che, letteralmente e figurativamente, ha rivolto la lente verso gli insegnanti. In questo contesto insegnanti e ricercatori si sono uniti per riflettere insieme sui dati audiovisivi raccolti nelle loro aule adottando un quadro esplorativo di consapevolezza del repertorio linguistico (Rymes 2010; García 2016). Tali dati costituiscono un mezzo per aumentare la consapevolezza di studenti e insegnanti sull'importanza della comunicazione verbale e non verbale nell'insegnamento e nell'apprendimento di tutte le materie.

Keyword

middle school, participatory research, repertoire awareness, teacher reflection

1. *Introduction*

Middle school teachers are actively involved every day in the instruction, education, and mediation of their adolescent students. This sensitive work, especially in urban schools with diverse student populations, merits careful self-reflection and regular didactic fine-tuning. However, this is often impossible due to the solitary work of teachers in a high-intensity environment. The participatory project STEMCo ("Stances Toward Education in Multilingual Contexts")[1] described in this paper uses language as a lens for examining *with teachers* the interactional processes of teaching and learning which have long since become routine aspects of their daily work. This project uses participatory educational linguistics research with teachers, in schools, to help teachers

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better *see*, *reflect on*, and therefore potentially *modify* their daily teaching practice. To do this, the researcher documents classroom interactions via fieldnotes, audio recordings, and videorecordings and then reflects on them with teachers. This modified participatory action research (Stringer 2004) involved ethnographic observation and periodic reflection sessions in two urban middle schools in Northeastern Italy over the course of one school year (2022-2023). This paper reports specifically on the affordances and challenges of a participatory approach for cultivating communicative repertoire awareness (Rymes 2010; García 2016). Specifically, it considers how this approach can raise awareness about the sensitivity and multiplicity of communicative practices in educational contexts, especially in those with a multilingual student body.

2. *Framework*

The composite framework of *communicative repertoire awareness* draws on the concept of the *communicative repertoire* and on the concept of *critical multilingual awareness*. The communicative repertoire (CR) involves all linguistic and nonlinguistic communicative resources at one's disposal, as well as knowledge about how to use them (Rymes 2010). The CR allows us to consider students' and teachers' language practices (e.g., word choice, accent, register), other forms of self-presentation (e.g., hairstyle, posture, clothing), and knowledge of how, why, and when to use them. The CR thus provides a framework for moving beyond the focus on language proficiency which often dominates multilingual educational contexts (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). Relatedly, critical multilingual awareness (CMLA) involves cultivating a critical understanding of language(s) in society, of language(s) and power, and of the fact that everyone has multiple ways of speaking and communicating (García 2016; see also Hélot et al 2018). CMLA moves beyond the focus on developing awareness and appreciation for plurilingualism and its sociocultural roots—a focus of many language awareness projects in Europe—and also seeks to "develop in all teachers a critical understanding of how language use in society has been naturalized" (García 2016: 6).

  While proficiency in named languages accounts for one aspect of communication, discourse analysts have argued that it is also crucial to consider students' familiarity with and competence in the interactional norms, evaluation rituals, and social expectations of school (Mehan 1996; Wortham 2005). However, these aspects of communication are not typically explicitly taught to or discussed with students, and they often remain obvious to the "insiders" and opaque to the "outsiders." Indeed, to use a metaphor from Van Lier (1995: iv), "[It] often seems that we go through life as unaware of language as we suppose the average fish is of the water it swims in." However, the framework of communicative repertoire awareness affords at least two investigative points of entry for a more aware and more inclusive education for all students, regardless of their background:

  1. a broadened definition of "language" and "communication" which includes named languages, regional accents, and domain-specific registers, but which

also includes awareness of sociopolitical factors (e.g., race, class) and non-linguistic elements (e.g., hairstyles, clothing styles, body language);

2. a deepened understanding of how language, interactional structure, and other forms of semiosis mediate and are mediated by power, hierarchy, tradition, and rituals in educational contexts.

Cultivating communicative repertoire awareness is especially important in Italian schools where there is an inclusive approach to integrating newly arrived students. The socially and linguistically diverse classes which result from this inclusive approach often lack sufficient funding and sufficient resources for providing much-needed academic and sociolinguistic support (Migliarini, D'Alessio, & Bocci, 2020). Thus, teachers and students must delve into their CRs in search of a means of communicating effectively across a number of interactional events each day, especially when new arrivals are included in these interactions.

3. *Methods*

During the 2022-2023 academic year, the research team did weekly or bi-weekly observations (approximately 6 hours each) at two middle schools in Northeastern Italy: one in an urban center of the historically and officially multilingual province of South Tyrol and another in an urban center in the historically monolingual region of Veneto (Leone-Pizzighella 2021). Five second-year classes and their teachers were involved in these observations to varying degrees over the course of the school year (+/- 30 weeks). Qualitative data were collected during each school visit in the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2011), which were then coded qualitatively and analyzed in the software NVivo, as well as in the form of audio and video recordings, which were analyzed via classroom discourse analysis (Rymes 2010, 2016)[2]. Teachers explored their own and students' CRs via a series of four reflection sessions throughout the school year, focusing on the salience of language and other non-linguistic forms of communication in the teaching and learning of *all* subjects, for *all* students and for *all* teachers.

Figure 1 – *The participatory action research cycle*

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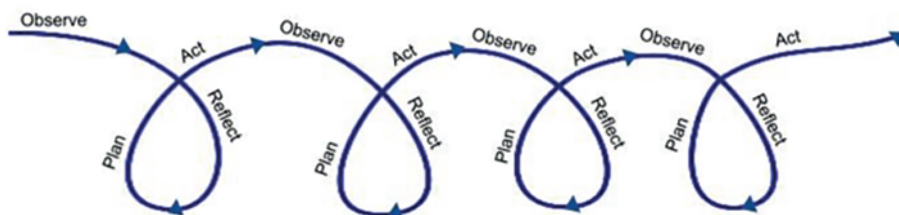
[2] See the Data Management Plan in Leone-Pizzighella (2023) for detailed methodological information.

This project roughly followed the participatory action research paradigm (Stringer 2004). However, in this case, the researcher identified a guiding research question independently of the participants and then sought out two schools who shared this interest and were willing to participate in the collection of ethnographic data for teachers' professional development. The project followed the four phases of participatory action research: observation, reflection, planning, and action (see Fig. 1). After six to eight weeks of observation in a given school, the participating teachers were invited to attend a reflection session with the research team in which field-notes and/or recordings from the previous weeks[3] were discussed and reflected on as a group. At the conclusion of each of session, teachers were invited to make a minor modification in their daily teaching practice which aimed at solving a problem that the data helped to highlight, which sometimes included implementing a practice or technique used successfully by their colleagues. The "action" phase, which followed the planning phase, was then observed by the researcher and taken into consideration as data for the subsequent reflection session two months later.

4. *Teacher Reflection Sessions*

The concept of CR was introduced to teachers at the first reflection session (Fig. 2). Topics in the subsequent reflection sessions would diverge over the course of the year according to the interests, needs, and preferences of the teachers at each school, as well as different data emerging from the schools' specific local realities. Figure 3 shows the dates and topics of the eight reflection sessions (four in each school) done throughout the school year.

Figure 2 – *List of reflection session topics by location and date*

Location	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
South Tyrol	16 Nov 2022	1 Feb 2023	29 Mar 2023	17 May 2023
	Textual data: focus on CR	Textual data: procedural display (Vignettes from German class)	Video data: simple vs. academic language (Analysis of math lesson)	Brainstorming: post-project planning session
Veneto	16 Dec 2022	10 Feb 2023	14 Apr 2023	27/29 Jun 2023
	Brainstorming: what is CR?	Video data: procedural display (analysis of group work in literature class)	Video data: analysis of group work in science class	Brainstorming: end-of-year take-away points

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[3] The data shared in reflection sessions were selected/prepared in such a way that they could not be (easily) reused for evaluative or disciplinary purposes.

4.1 Teacher reflections on recorded group work (Veneto, Session #2)

At the first reflection session with the teachers in Veneto, they demonstrated a heightened awareness of their own CRs (e.g., when and how they use local dialects, how they speak to adults as opposed to children, how they modify their speech for different purposes) and showed great interest in taking a critical view of their own teaching practice and of the ways that students participated in class. The term CR was new to them, but their anecdotes demonstrated that the concept was familiar (Fieldnotes 16.12.2022). Thus, their second reflection session focused on a video clip of a highly linguistically complex group work session among four students who have a contentious relationship with one another (Section 4.1). The teacher whose class this clip was recorded in – who had given permission for it to be used during the reflection session – explained the activity to their colleagues at the beignning of the session: the students' assignment was to read a section of Dante's *Inferno* in the original Vulgar Latin and then to paraphrase it into modern Italian (Fig. 3). Students seated near each other were grouped together, and one slip of paper was passed out to each group to facilitate collaboration.

The first task for teachers in the reflection session was to predict, on the basis of the student participants and the activity's requirements (i.e., deciphering Vulgar Latin, translating it into modern Italian, writing the paraphrased language clearly), how the group dynamics would have ensued. That is, they were asked to predict which of the four students would have designated themselves or been designated "the writer" and, on the other hand, which of the four students would have been ostracized from the activity. The teachers individually wrote down their predictions and then shared them out loud, unanimously predicting exactly what would have happened in the clip: the high achieving L1 Italian speaker became the writer in the group activity and the seasoned L2 Italian speaker with a certified learning disability would have never laid their hand on the pen.

Next, the teachers and the researcher watched a 10-minute excerpt of the recorded group work, stopping at specific sections and rewatching particular moments which highlighted students' CRs, their communicative competence, and their awareness of interactional norms and expectations. The video also exemplified issues that the teachers were interested in better understanding, including bullying. An exhaustive description and analysis of this group work session is not available here, but see Leone-Pizzighella (forthcoming).

Figure 3 – *Paraphrase worksheet from Dante's Inferno with student responses (from a different group).*

After watching the video, teachers expressed surprise about three elements in particular. One was that students draw on sometimes radically different CR elements from one class to another. For instance, one student, who is typically a trouble-maker in one teacher's class, was an important contributor to the activity in the recorded group work and took on a quasi-leadership role in the accomplishment of the recorded group activity. The second aspect which surprised them was the frequency of *all* students' ethnic, racial, or provenance-based commentary to one another, which the teachers suggested—aside from being a common topic for jokes in their peer group, regardless of students' ethnic or linguistic origins—might be a means of "*mettere le mani avanti*" [playing it safe; seeking to avoid blame] during an academic activity which required significant knowledge of Italian. That is, three students in the group referred to themselves as "not Italian" (video, January 24 2023) in their attempts to withdraw any responsibility from the completion of the paraphrase activity. And third, this video allowed teachers to see with extreme clarity the interactional processes which led to one student's constant exclusion from peer interaction (the same student who they correctly predicted would be least likely to take on a writer role in the group). Teachers explained that they often saw this student entirely disengaged from his work, staring into space, sitting separately from his peers. However, as one teacher noted, "We always notice the end result, but we don't see how it comes about" (10 February 2023). Watching this video brought to their attention the role that peers can play in constructing each other as competent or incompetent, e.g. via bullying, silencing, and ostracism.

4.2 Teacher reflections on recorded group work (South Tyrol, Session #2)

In South Tyrol, the first reflection session about CR and communicative competence proved to require significant conceptual scaffolding. The many teach-

ers involved in the session had a wide array of professional and disciplinary experiences and expertise, which rendered it challenging to arrive at a shared understanding of the CR concept and whether and how it could be applied to teaching practice. The second session therefore used an ethnographic vignette from the day of the placement test in German class as a means of highlighting how CR can be applied to one specific type of classroom interaction. This vignette depicted an instance of procedural display (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou 1989: 272), i.e. the normative ways of "doing a lesson" by "enacting" certain roles and behaviors. This allowed the research team to focus on a concrete and specific instance from class which highlighted a wide CR of skills by a single student in a multilingual context (Section 4.2). The part of the vignette which provoked the most discussion among teachers was the following (translated from the original Italian):

> It's the day of the German test to see who "moves up", who "moves down", and who "remains". This is the language that is used both by the teachers and by the students when they refer to the scope of the test. Eric[4], for the past ten minutes, has had the test on his desk without even touching it. I don't think he has even written his name on it. The teacher comes over to check in with him. Eric makes a comment that I can't hear, but which seems to suggest that he knows he has no possibility of "moving up", despite the teacher's friendly approach with him. Then, however, the teacher turns to another student and tells them that they have a good chance of "moving up". Eric hears this comment (he looks over at them) and, referring to the higher level class, says "they have too much homework in that class anyway." Nobody answers him. He says it again, a little louder, but still nobody answers him. (Fieldnotes, 22.09.2022)

About half of the teachers who were present at the second reflection session did not teach subjects that had "levels" (e.g., art, music, geography) while the other half did (e.g., math and languages). As the teachers finished reading the vignette and began to discuss it with each other, the teachers who taught subjects with levels immediately picked up on Eric's comment that "they have too much homework in that class anyway" and suggested that Eric was pretending not to know any German so that he could avoid moving up to a more difficult level. As one teacher said, "They [the students] mess up the test on purpose so they can stay with the people [classmates, teacher] they want." The other teachers in the session, shocked by this practice and by their colleagues knowledge of it, then commented incredulously, "So it's *them* [the students] who decide the levels in the end!" A math teacher stepped in, in a serious voice, to say, "No, it's actually *us teachers* who decide; the test is just a reference point for us." To this, a German teacher added, "We teachers meet together to decide who will move up, move down...but the principal has their say, too" (Fieldnotes, 01.02.2023).

Thus, via a collective examination of the practice of placement exams, we discover that both students and teachers are aware of ways to manipulate the

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[4] All names are pseudonyms.

outcome of placement tests, and sometimes do so. Students intentionally feign lower skills than they actually have in order to avoid, e.g., a strict teacher, too much homework, or a class where they don't have any friends. Likewise, over the course of the year, teachers—upon consulting with their colleagues and with the principal—can shift students into different levels on the basis of their skills, but also for organizational purposes (e.g., too many or too few students in a single level, a high concentration of high-need students in one class, etc). By examining this practice, teachers were able to revisit the shortcomings of language proficiency measures (e.g., that they can be easily manipulated), and to consider how students' CR includes their intricate social knowledge of an examination ritual and of their specific school context. This knowledge then grants them some degree of control over their education.

5. *Implications and results of participatory research in schools*

As can be seen in Section 4, the overlap between CR and CMLA is a fruitful space for investigating classroom realities in diverse classroom environments, where students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez 1992) vary widely across their many socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. The focus on communicative repertoire awareness with teachers involved in STEMCo intersected in surprising ways with several pervasive issues and questions at each of the schools involved in the research. In Veneto, for instance, where teachers were continually challenged by verbally aggressive behavior among students (e.g., bullying, racist comments) as well as the ongoing arrival of new students from outside of Italy, this small group of teachers developed a heightened critical awareness of student dynamics. Via an analysis of classroom discourse data, they also gained a deepened understanding of the ways in which students accessed—or were prevented from accessing—academic content, as well as how students learned to participate (or not) in academic activities. Importantly, the CR encouraged them to look beyond students' institutional labels (e.g., regarding language proficiency or disability) and to more deeply consider the significance of microinteractional factors (such as student's jokes and body language) in group activities. In South Tyrol, the school's collective interests were primarily in classroom management, student academic performance, and the academic language development of newly arrived students. In this context, an analysis of classroom data allowed teachers to reflect their school's ability-level tracking and the institutional rituals for maintaining it. For instance, while ability-level tracking and frequent diagnostic tests are intended to provide targeted instruction and recognize student merit, they may not be serving their intended purposes because students have devised ways to manipulate the system.

6. *Reflections on participatory research in schools*

Perhaps due to the method of recruitment, teachers had varying degrees of interest and enthusiasm in both the initial data collection in their classrooms and in the reflection sessions. About one third of the participating teachers were highly engaged in the project[5], and the desire of these teachers to be involved in the project also meant that data collection shifted toward their classrooms over time. After reviewing data especially from their own classrooms during reflection sessions, these highly engaged teachers implemented small but powerful changes over the course of the year, such as increasing wait time after questions to ensure that all students have time to raise their hands, enforcing hand-raising policies to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak, assigning roles in group work to ensure no one is excluded, and providing more explicit instructions about how to participate in even the most taken-for-granted school activities.

The different realities of the middle school in Veneto and of the middle school in South Tyrol led to different types of needs for each of these populations. In addition, due to preexisting and sometimes longstanding relationships among teachers, the research team needed to take different approaches to presenting and discussing data in each of the two schools. For instance, since video- and audio-recording a teacher's lessons is a sensitive task from an ethical and logistical perspective, it proved to be very sensitive to share these recordings among their colleagues. Teachers who are accustomed to working in relative isolation were sometimes wary of sharing a video of their teaching even with trusted colleagues. While all teachers seemed to appreciate the data that was presented during reflection sessions insofar as it captured moments of their daily professional lives, fine-grained analyses of these data were less appreciated by some of the teachers, since they were (sometimes rightly) skeptical about how much of the classroom reality could be encapsulated in a written transcript or excerpt of fieldnotes.

In sum, one year of participatory engagement in these two schools was not sufficient for long-term or widespread change-making, since building working relationships takes time and each school year has its own set of particularities. At the final reflection session at each school, the research team and the teachers explored the possibility of revisiting the data collected in light of a specific set of issues defined by the teachers themselves (such as premature abandonment of school by at-risk students), and/or additional data collection and reflection sessions around this specific set of issues. Participatory research with teachers is necessarily iterative, since the objectives of the school and of the teaching staff fluctuate over time in response to the continuously changing student body, as well as to changes in education policies.

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[5] Engagement did not coincide in any noticeable way with a teacher's age, seniority, subject expertise, or gender, although the vast majority of participating teachers were female, and therefore also the most highly engaged.

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