Measuring Student Language Use in the School Context

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After the experience of many years of teaching in two or three languages, the Basque speech community needs to know not merely how much students achieve in each language and what level of proficiency they attain but also which language they use, how often they use each language, and the relationship between language use and other variables. This paper reports on a study, the ‘Arrue Programme’ conducted during the 2005–2006 academic year on student language use in the school context and the factors affecting it. Participants were students between the ages of 10 and 11 who were in the sixth grade of primary education in 50 schools in different areas of the Basque Autonomous Community. The data include the observation of language use by 1325 students both in the playground and inside the classroom. In addition, data on other student variables were collected through questionnaires and written work. The two sets of data are used to suggest a model of the principal background and situational variables that determine the varieties of language use that we observed.

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Predicting Language Use: A Theoretical Model

In order to analyse the links between student language use and the characteristics of the students, we assumed that the survival of a language depends on its use, specifically on the use that is made of it in order to fulfill a community’s social functions (Martínez de Luna, 2001). On an operational level, the survival of a language and its use amount to the same thing. Taking this a step further, it follows that a number of conditions need to exist on three levels to ensure survival (or use), one individual level (the student level in this case) and two social levels, the micro- and macrosocial levels (Figure 1).

Individual level

In a language contact situation, certain favourable conditions, like competence and motivation, are needed on an individual level to ensure that a specific language is chosen by the speaker. Nowadays, there is broad acceptance of the interaction or relationship between three language elements; competence, motivation and use (see Sánchez Carrión, 1991: 35–64). Minimum competence in the
Language in question is necessary, but not sufficient. The level of competence that speakers need in the threatened language cannot be given in absolute terms. It needs to be as good if not better than the competence they have in the other language in the contact situation. If not, the chances are that when people communicate, they will spontaneously – consciously or otherwise – select the language in which they can express themselves more easily.

Furthermore, speakers need to have a positive attitude to language and motivation to use it. The value they place on the language may be pragmatic, symbolic, integrative or other. If motivation in favour of the language is of more than one type, then the impulse the person will feel towards the language will be greater, with respect to either using or learning the language. Undoubtedly there are minimum conditions that must be met to ensure that the threatened language is used, but for the overview that this model is going to offer us, the most relevant ones are relative competence and motivation.

**Micro level: Situations and social networks**

This is the ‘social situation’, as specified by Fishman (1972), and has three ingredients:

- the implementation of the rights and duties of a particular role relationship;
- in the place (locale) most appropriate or most typical for that relationship;
- at the time societally defined as appropriate for that relationship (Fishman, 1972: 39).

The social situation is realised in everyday life, through those networks of relationships we gradually build up, so that we can fulfill the social functions we regard as usual: at home or in the family, in our sphere of work, among friends, when we are interacting with our partners in leisure activities, and so on. For example: when the members of a family perform their usual roles (children, parents and so forth) during mealtimes; when classmates and teachers...
in a classroom perform their roles; when they engage in their everyday relationships as buyers of bread at the baker’s, and so on.

On a sociolinguistic level, we are talking about our close network of relationships, or about our community relationships perhaps, and the fact that we share one, or more, languages with the people we are interacting with.

In addition to motivation with respect to the language itself, in order to use it one would also need: (1) the presence in the networks of other people who share the same language; (2) the speakers to identify the other speakers as speakers of that language, that is, they need to know that their interlocutors are able to speak in that language; (3) in the case of any single group, it would also be necessary for the members capable of speaking in that language to be in a majority (Amonarriz, 1991: 40–41).

Only when these conditions exist will it be possible to maintain a network of relations to operate in a certain language in a specific social situation. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that it is not enough that there is a large number of speakers that fulfill the aforementioned conditions. It is more a question of consolidating these networks. To put it another way, these speakers need to constitute a network of relationships that is sufficiently interwoven and solid to enable their own speech community to exist.

**Macro level: Social domains and social representations**

When referring to the macro level in society, we will be using the term ‘social domain’, as defined by Fishman (1972).

The large-scale aggregative regularities that obtain between varieties and societally recognized functions are examined via the construct termed domain . . . The domains are particularly useful constructs for the macro-level (i.e. community-wide) functional description of societally patterned variation in ‘talk’ within large and complex diglossic speech communities . . . in education, in the family, in employment, in religion . . . domains are as real as the very social institutions of a speech community and indeed they show a marked paralleling with such major social institutions. (Barker, 1947 in Fishman, 1972: 43–45)

So when we speak of a social domain, we are referring to something that is more abstract, general and objective and goes beyond the immediate environment of the individual. For example, daily work relationships corresponds to the sphere of work domain; a class to the educational system domain; the showing of a film to the culture and leisure domain; a radio programme to the mass media domain; and so on. The same happens with any other daily situation as well: each one of these is simply one of the main components of a broader domain.

Furthermore, we are putting an additional element into this macro level: that of the ‘social representation’ of a language. This image largely coincides with the concept of ‘subjective ethnolinguistic vitality’ developed by Landry and Allard (1994), Harwood et al. (1994) among others. It is of interest here because it raises the question how a society rates and perceives a language. It is evident that the attitude that each member of that society has towards the language is associated both with its image and its social prestige, and that these ideas belong at different levels of analysis.
When there is a lower legal or social status at the domain level for any language (less importance or legal prohibition, or absence of the language in the landscape, and so on) or, on the other hand, when the social representations with respect to it are adverse (lack of social prestige, social norms opposed to it, and so on), bilingual people may opt for the other language in contact, in favour of the language that is valued in the immediate environment. And that can happen very easily, even though people may have a positive attitude towards the weaker language:

As the environment (in general) does not encourage integrative-pragmatic motivation (…), the Basque language revival process is only linked to symbolic motivation; and that support alone amounts to very little for the language that one is trying to revive. (Martínez de Luna & Jausoro, 1998: 132)

So, while a language lacks legitimacy or favourable conditions in the various social domains, and while the social representations are unsuitable, its acceptable use – if such a thing exists at all – will be restricted to three situations, which are in no way reassuring:

(1) diglossic situations, with few social functions for the language
(2) forms of use based on voluntarism, that is, requiring a constant special effort on the part of its supporters, because it is working against the inertia of a social norm that tends towards the majority language;
(3) insecure forms of use by various social and public groups that can be cut off or restricted at any moment because of the excessive difficulties they pose and that additional costs associated with them.

A language that finds itself in these circumstances is left with very few options.

Interaction between the three levels

It has to be pointed out that close, lively interaction exists between the micro- and macrosocial levels, and likewise between these two and the individual level; in other words the three levels are linked and influence each other:

… domains and social situations reveal the links that exist between the microlevel and macrolevel sociology of language. The members of diglossic speech communities can come to have certain views concerning their varieties or languages, because these varieties are associated (in behavior and attitude) with particular domains. (Fishman, 1972: 46)

Nevertheless, even though interaction takes place among the three levels, it has to be admitted that the interaction is not unrestricted nor does it always operate in a deterministic way. In spite of unfavourable conditions historically in many domains, lesser-used language communities have sometimes maintained a good level of linguistic competence, positive attitudes and networks of use, as Erize indicated in his research on the history of the Basque language in Navarre:

Basque has survived because it has been built upon a structured society or community: in it, being a Basque speaker was regarded as a value, it had
prestige and Basque language behavior tended to be developed and transmitted. (Erize, 1997: 24)

The Basque speech community of Navarre did not have... any political or social framework built upon it or upon its language. (Erize, 1997: 36)

Conditions Linked to Basque Use

Measuring Basque use in the playground and processing the data

Basque use by students in the playground is the dependent variable that we took as the main object of study. Information on the use of Basque was gathered by direct observation, and the data analysed using the quantitative methods described below.

In order to build a model of student language in the playground, several earlier studies were taken into account. Firstly, the EIFE research (Sierra & Olaziregi, 1989) conducted by the Basque Government Department of Education constituted an important reference when specifying what kind of explanation we were aiming to produce. Secondly, with respect to the method for measuring use, we based ourselves on the experience gained at the SEI Association (Altuna, 2003) and the Sociolinguistics Cluster (Soziolinguistika Klusterra, 2007). Furthermore, we took into account research conducted to measure and quantify playground use in the Catalan case (Vila & Galindo, 2006), and work published by Professor J.A. Fishman and his associates in the early 1970s (Fishman et al., 1971; Fishman, 1972).

Data on language use were gathered by having teachers observe the students in the playground. The observation was direct and the data were collected in such a way that they could be analysed on an individual level. The students knew that the teacher was present but did not know, at least not in theory, that he or she was collecting data on their language use.

In the course of these observations we recorded whether the students were using Basque or Spanish amongst themselves while they were speaking. If it was not clear in which language they were speaking (either because they could not be heard properly or because they were mixing the two languages) no data were recorded. Neither were data recorded when students were speaking a language other than Basque or Spanish. We did not analyse ‘the type of language’ students were using, only who was speaking, to whom, and in what language.

The number of conversations in Basque observed for a particular student was expressed as a percentage of all of their observed conversations. As we based ourselves on the data collected through observation, subjects with zero observation were left out of the study. Among the students studied (1325) 88.7% had three or more observations and 75.2% had five or more observations.

In addition to data on their use of Basque in the playground, student data on 151 other variables was also recorded (variables on linguistic competence and the sociolinguistic context: school, family, friends, neighbours, leisure activities). These were reduced to 25 indicators, recording aspects of the students’ background that might be considered relevant to their language behaviour.
Individual level

Following the theoretical approach seven indicators were used at the individual level and six entered the multiple regression analysis at a significant level (Stepwise Type). The indicator that did not reach significance and was excluded from the multiple regression analysis was school achievement.

These six individual indicators explained 46.9% of the variance use of Basque in the playground (Table 1). The simple (bivariate) correlations of these variables with the dependent variable were relative ease with Basque ($r = 0.574$), competence in writing in Basque ($r = 0.489$), first language ($r = 0.487$), habit of speaking Basque in the classroom ($r = 0.439$), being an active Basque or Spanish speaker ($r = 0.389$), and motivation with respect to Basque ($r = 0.374$).

Table 1 Individual indicators and use of Basque

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Change statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2$-change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Relative ease with Basque</td>
<td>0.574</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>0.330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Competence in writing in Basque</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>0.402</td>
<td>0.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Habit of speaking in Basque in the classroom</td>
<td>0.656</td>
<td>0.430</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) First language</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>0.453</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Motivation with respect to Basque</td>
<td>0.680</td>
<td>0.462</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Being an active Basque/ Spanish speaker</td>
<td>0.685</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Micro level: Situations and social networks

Eleven indicators were used for the microsocial level and seven entered the multiple regression analysis at a significant level (Stepwise). These seven microsocial indicators explained 73% of the variance in use of Basque (Table 2).

The simple (bivariate) correlations of these seven microsocial indicators or variables with the dependent variable were group Basque use in the playground ($r = 0.830$), Basque use with siblings ($r = 0.620$), language in the home ($r = 0.578$), student use of audio-visual resources in Basque ($r = 0.510$), Basque atmosphere of school ($r = 0.501$), group Basque use inside the classroom ($r = 0.425$), school planning and activities in favor of Basque ($r = 0.345$). The four indicators that did not enter the equation were the following: speaking in Basque with local friends, leisure time in Basque, parents’ competence in Basque and local friends being able to speak Basque.
Macro level: Social domains and social representation

At the macro social level seven indicators were analysed and six of them entered the multiple regression analysis at a significant level. These six macrosocial indicators accounted for 51.7% of the variance in use of Basque (Table 3).

Table 2 Microsocial indicators and use of Basque

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Change statistics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R² change</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Group Basque use in the playground</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td>0.689</td>
<td>0.689</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Basque use with siblings</td>
<td>0.846</td>
<td>0.716</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Student use of audio-visual resources in Basque</td>
<td>0.849</td>
<td>0.721</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Basque atmosphere of school</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td>0.004</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Language in the home</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>0.728</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) School planning and activities in favour of Basque</td>
<td>0.854</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Group Basque use inside the classroom</td>
<td>0.855</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Macrosocial indicators and use of Basque

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Change statistics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R² change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Basqueness of the student’s hometown</td>
<td>0.582</td>
<td>0.339</td>
<td>0.339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) School’s bilingual teaching model and teaching staff</td>
<td>0.683</td>
<td>0.467</td>
<td>0.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Subjective ethnolinguistic vitality I: family</td>
<td>0.707</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>0.033</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) People admired by students</td>
<td>0.716</td>
<td>0.512</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Subjective ethnolinguistic vitality II: society</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Student’s gender (understood as habits of use according to gender)</td>
<td>0.719</td>
<td>0.517</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The simple (bivariate) correlations of these six variables with the dependent variable were Basqueness of the student’s hometown ($r = 0.582$), school’s bilingual teaching model and teaching staff ($r = 0.552$), subjective ethnolinguistic vitality I: family ($r = 0.522$), subjective ethnolinguistic vitality II: society ($r = 0.332$), people admired by the students ($r = 0.329$), student’s gender (understood as habits of use according to gender) ($r = 0.079$). The two indicators that did not enter the multiple regression were student’s and parents’ birthplace.

**A combined view of the individual, microsocial and macrosocial levels**

The analysis of indicators and variables is divided into three levels, in accordance with the theoretical model. Taken together, the three levels explain 76.1% of the use of Basque in the playground (Figure 2).

Among the three levels, the variables of the student’s network of close relations, those of the microsocial one, are the ones that mostly account for student Basque use in the playground (73.0%). The macrosocial level – social domain and social representations – account for 51.7% and the students’ language characteristics, the individual level, account for 46.9%. These three levels of analysis have in fact many links between them, and also what they explain regarding use is to a great extent shared. That is why when analysing the 25 indicators and variables used in the theoretical model together, only 76.1% of student use in the playground is explained, and no more.

**Conclusions**

The influence of the sociolinguistic situations and conditions linked to the close social networks (micro level in our model) in the use of Basque by students in the playground reported in this research study confirms previous research. It is consistent with theoretical proposals made by scholars like Fishman (Fishman, 1972: 39) and it also confirms empirical research conducted
in the Basque Country by Erize (1997). Erize proved the influence of the microsocial level in the vitality and survival of Basque in a specific town of Navarre. These scholars do not refer to specific age groups as it is the case in the current study but our results are consistent with their conclusions because they confirm that the ‘social situation’, that is, the close social networks and other sociolinguistic conditions of the immediate context are also decisive in the students’ linguistic behaviour.

The sociolinguistic development of the Basque Autonomous Community in the last decades is also a very good example to confirm the influence of the microsocial level. Twenty-five years after a new legal framework allowed the Basque language to be co-official along with Spanish in the BAC (Law for the Normalisation of the Use of the Basque Language 10/1982) the Basque language is a minority language as compared to Spanish. The distribution of social functions among the two languages in contact clearly favours Spanish in most cases. An example of the limitation in use is that ‘in 1991 13.8% of the inhabitants of the BAC used Spanish at home and in 2001 the percentage was 13.64%’ (Eustat, 2006: 233). This situation persists in spite of the measures taken to promote the use of the Basque language as a result of the passing of the Law. The use of Basque has spread to social dimensions (macrosocial level in the model), particularly to the domains of education and public administration but to a lesser extent to the media, the ICTs, the labour market and other economic activities.

The changes at the macrosocial level have allowed for the generalised transmission of Basque to new generations though the educational system. In 1981, only 17.99% of the population between two and 19 were competent in Basque and in 2001 the percentage reached 57.79% of the population (Eustat, 2006: 223). That is, there has been an important increase in competence in Basque although most speakers of Basque as a second language are more competent in Spanish. There is an improvement in competence in Basque but the relative competence (the individual level) of Basque vis-à-vis Spanish is much lower.

In general, it seems that the linguistic policy developed in the BAC for the recovery of Basque has resulted in an improvement of the social and demolinguistic conditions of the Basque language:

On the whole, the language planning policies implemented by the BAC have had a beneficial impact on the recovery of the Basque language in that region of the Basque Country. This experience and ‘know-how’ can be further adapted to the special circumstances prevailing in Navarre and the Northern Basque Country... (Bourhis, 2003: 4)

It is clear that the improvement of the conditions of the Basque language at the macrosocial and individual level are necessary conditions for its recovery but the progress made is not useful unless progress is also made at the same time in the situations and social networks in which the languages are used in everyday life. The findings of this research study also confirm the need to do so because the microsocial level can explain to a larger extent than the other levels the use of Basque by students in the playground.

It is not a question of ignoring or minimising the influence that the conditions associated with the other two levels of our model – the individual and
macrosocial levels – have as predictors of language use. At the same time, it is necessary to highlight the most crucial level and to work at this microsocial level in order to recover the minority language. Of course, this level interacts with the individual and social levels as it can be seen in the model proposed in this article.

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**References**


