A plea for lingua francas in language learning and teaching

LINGUA FRANCA: “A ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture” - Alan Firth, 1996.

The use of lingua francas is not new. Throughout history, people have always had to use languages other than their first language with non-native speakers in order to do business, agree, disagree, love each other, hate each other, etc. A lot of research is currently being done on the main global lingua franca, English, on many different aspects (humour, classroom discourse, electronic conversation, silence, miscommunication…), while very little is known of other lingua francas. Many languages have served the purpose of vehicularising in history: Latin, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, French and artificial languages such as Esperanto. And today any language (yes ANY) can act as a lingua franca. A few examples from my research and own observations can illustrate:

- A French lady married to a Japanese man speak Chinese to each other, while living in Hong Kong (they met in Beijing);
- One Iraqi and a Turk speak Swedish to each other on a ferry from Turku to Stockholm;
- A Finnish family has Esperanto as their language;
- A Hong Kong family has English as their language – though none of the parents are so-called native speakers of English;
- An Indian student of French works online in the language he studies with a Finnish student…

Elder et Davies (2006 : 282) have identified three different contexts of lingua franca use:

1. One of the speakers is « non-native » or doesn’t speak the language as her first language;
2. All the speakers are non-native speakers of a language they use to interact with each other, and do not share the same first language;
3. All the speakers are non-native speakers of a language they use to interact with each other, but they have the same first language.

It is easy to recognize situations that we cross on a daily basis in this, especially in language lessons. As such case number 2 is probably the most common in Finnish institutions, being for “big” languages (English, Swedish) but also “small” languages (French, Spanish, Russian…): the teacher is a non-native of the language she teaches, so do the learners, yet they often use the language orally or in written form to interact.

I shall always remember of the first French lesson I taught in Britain. I entered the class, swearing to myself that I would only use French during the first lesson to both help me with discipline (the groups consisted of 35 “difficult” teenage boys, I had been warned) and to establish a routine. Just before the lesson started, one student was in the classroom waiting for the lesson to start. I asked him in French “vous pouvez ouvrir la fenêtre s’il-vous-plait?” Puzzled, he looked at me and said “what are you saying?” I repeated and tried to help him by gesturing open the window please – which he didn’t understand. After some extra attempts, I surrendered: “May I ask you to open the window please?” I said. Relieved, he exclaimed: “Sir, if you speak English, why do you speak French to me?” This interesting – and “natural” reaction – tells us a lot about one misunderstanding that circulates on lingua francas: if people share a first language, why should they use another language to talk to each other? I am tempted to ask: why not?

To all the Erasmus exchange students who come to Finland and complain about the fact that they are often surrounded by people who speak the same language and thus cannot
practice English, I always say: “speak a foreign language with them, if you want to practise” The answer to this usually meets such reactions as “it’s not natural”, “we are not good at speaking it, it will be a disaster”, “it’s not the same”... As if there was a subconscious rule that forbade this sort of practice...

This is typical in our “monolingual” European countries, where one country often equals one language (or two/three maximum for the very happy few). In some contexts such as African countries, India or Malaysia, people are used to speaking different languages with their fellow country people as they do not always share the same first language. In Europe (amongst other places), we are still very obsessed with the ideas of nativeness vs. non-nativeness and language boundaries. Jennifer Jenkins (2007) has examined for example the perceptions that English language teachers have of English as a Lingua France and found that it is perceived very negatively (it is dirty, incorrect, not good...). People will tend to prefer to communicate with native speakers as they feel that only them can help them to improve their language skills, can correct them, know how to speak the language perfectly... But these are imaginaries. First of all, and this has been questioned for a long time now, who qualifies for “nativeness” in the 21st century? Do people who share the same first language speak it the same way? Perfectly? Just think about your own first language, listen to people around you, don’t they all speak diverse forms of it? Haven’t you ever heard non-natives speaking so well that they are comparable to/ see better than natives?

Why should we work on lingua francas?

Lingua francas (not just English) are spoken all around the world. They are often invisible and “unofficial”. As such we don’t know how many people use lingua francas, which ones, where, for what purpose and with whom.

Language learners of today will undoubtedly find themselves in situations where they will have to use a lingua franca with other “non-native” speakers in their lives and careers. If that is the case, maybe they should get more accustomed to such situations and get “trained”... in our classrooms. In a way they do get such opportunities, probably daily, when they are asked to work with a partner during lessons or when they interact with their teacher in the foreign language (how much this is practiced in Finland would need to be looked at actually). As I see it, preparation should tackle the issue of representations on languages and especially on lingua francas: What do learners think of such languages? Why do they think that they are good, bad, unnatural, interesting, etc.? What impact(s) does the use of lingua francas have on relationships, on how learners see other people? Also do they notice differences between interaction with natives and non-native speakers? Do they feel more at ease with either of them? Do they think that native speakers speak the language perfectly (many people believe that!)? etc. All these need to be deconstructed, not really to “force” the students to accept their value (because you can never be sure), but to guide them in their future interaction in lingua francas and maybe influence the way they will deal with such situations – and thus people...

Another argument that many people put forward in favour of native speakers is that they are better suited to deal with cultural issues, i.e. they know their culture better than anyone else. In postmodern times, this argument is far from being valid. What is a culture? Are we talking about national cultures? Daily lives? Laws? Culture with a big C (literature, painting...)? Aren’t these in a way too generic, solid, imaginary? No one can claim that they know all the different habits, manners, ways of thinking of a people as we live in hyperdiverse, mixed
and plural societies – I don’t mean because we have immigrants and foreigners around us but I refer to every single person from the same country. My neighbour might share the same passport but her life and ideas may be extremely different. As such I might find that some people I met in Japan are closer to what I represent as an individual then her. Evidence? If people who share the same national space are the same, why do some of them hate each other, can’t stand each other and sometimes feel like “killing” each other? Isn’t that a sign that we are different? Now coming back to the use of lingua francas, the interesting point in using them is that none of the interlocutors can claim that they are “representatives of such or such culture” or that the specialize in Finnish, German, Mexican, Filipino cultures. This is important because it means that people may want to go beyond cultural differences (which are often “imagined”, “put into scene”...) and start seeing each other as equals and just... people - not cultures. This is one of the main goals of intercultural education as I see it.

Other advantages of working on/with lingua francas include: less stress for learners and teachers alike (the “native” may be too scary); less inhibition (the fear of writing and speaking in front of native speakers); identification with people from other environments (non-natives might notice that they encounter similar problems with the language) – which means more motivation; it is easier to organize exchanges with non-native classes than native ones (stays abroad; virtual exchanges) and maybe less stressful; interlocutors are always available (within the same classroom, within the same school); lingua francas can help to boost plurilingualism and respect for languages through e.g. code-switching/mixing (use of words or sentences from different languages at the same time).

Working with lingua francas can thus have many advantages; it needs to be negotiated between teaching staff and learners, but also explained. Learners do not always see the point of communicating with e.g. somebody from India in French via a computer. That’s why it is important to involve them in projects that allow them to forget quickly about the language issue, so that it becomes “natural” to them. Why waste energy on e.g. trying to find a group of native students abroad for exchange purposes while one can simply identify a language class in neighbouring countries? Also why not send two groups of learners from two different countries to a target country and make them work together in the local language(s)? It is easy to see how the notion of lingua francas open up new and creative doors. So why not jump on the bandwagon and revolutionize language learning and teaching?

A few basic references to continue explore this fascinating topic:

Check also the Online Computer corpus of English as a Lingua Franca (University of Vienna, Austria), http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/what_is_voice