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Intercultural education and communication in second language interactions

Claudio Baraldi*

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali, Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Modena, Italy

This article analyses intercultural education outcomes produced in the setting of teaching Italian as a second language (ISL) in an Italian school. Intercultural education is produced in interactions which are based on specific cultural presuppositions, i.e. expectations regarding learning, role hierarchy and evaluation of student performances. Sixteen hours of interactions associated with ISL teaching in a multicultural classroom were audiotaped, transcribed and analysed. The analysis highlights three ways in which cultural diversity becomes meaningful. First, cultural diversity is constructed as one task of learning. Second, cultural diversity is constructed as conflictive interaction. Third, cultural diversity is constructed as a point of departure for positive school performance. These three ways of giving meaning to cultural diversity reveal a prevailing ethnocentric form of ISL teaching, as a consequence of educational presuppositions which do not take the difficulties of intercultural communication seriously. Recently, 'dialogue' has been invoked to address ethnocentrism; however, the conditions of effective intercultural dialogue are uncertain.

Questo articolo analizza l'educazione interculturale prodotta nell'insegnamento dell'italiano come seconda lingua (ISL) in una scuola italiana. L'educazione interculturale è realizzata in interazioni che sono basate su specifici presupposti culturali, che sono aspettative di apprendimento, di gerarchie di ruolo e di prestazioni degli studenti. L'educazione interculturale si occupa del problema della diversità culturale, basata su presupposti culturali diversi che emergono nella comunicazione. Sono state audioregistrate, trascritte e analizzate 16 ore di interazione durante l'insegnamento di ISL in una classe multiculturale: l'analisi ha evidenziato tre modi in cui la diversità culturale è resa significativa. La diversità culturale è costruita anzitutto come compito di apprendimento, in secondo luogo come interazione conflittuale, infine come punto di partenza per conseguire una prestazione scolastica positiva. Questi tre modi di costruire la diversità culturale rivelano una forma prevalente di tipo etnocentrico per l'insegnamento ISL, che è una conseguenza di presupposti educativi che non permettono di prendere seriamente le difficoltà della comunicazione interculturale. Recentemente, si è proposto di usare il 'dialogo' per superare l'etnocentrismo; tuttavia c'è incertezza sulle condizioni di un dialogo interculturale efficace.

Keywords: communication; interaction; second language; diversity; ethnocentrism

*Email: claudio.baraldi@unimore.it

Introduction

This article analyses the teaching of Italian as a second language (ISL) in classroom interactions. It aims to demonstrate that: (1) ISL teaching and intercultural education are produced together in interactions between teachers and migrant students and (2) in these interactions, teacher actions promote different ways of constructing migrant students' cultural diversity and identities.

For our analysis, we adopt a social constructivist approach, based on the connection of four conceptualisations. Firstly, communication is the primary social process and interactions are systems of communication (Luhmann 1984). In interactions, each action is followed by further actions, displaying interlocutors' understandings, and each action can refer to previous actions in terms of both content (information) and apparent intentions or motivations. Secondly, each participant's position in the interaction is 'a discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts' (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, 16), including stories relating to cultural identity (Carbaugh 1999). Thirdly, interactions can be analysed by looking at language use; the organisation of language use in interactions is based on participants' turn-taking and on the fact that each turn influences the following turn (Goodwin and Heritage 1990; Heritage and Clayman 2010). Finally, interactions are based on cultural presuppositions which allow participants 'to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended' (Gumperz 1992, 230); these cultural presuppositions may be observed as forms of expectations guiding interactions (Luhmann 1984).

Following this social constructivist approach, (1) individual actions can *condition* but not *determine* interlocutors' understanding and reactions. Therefore, the organisation of interaction is not determined by individual actions. (2) Individual positions, including displays of cultural identities, are discursive constructions in the interaction. Therefore, their psychological foundations are not objects of analysis.

Looking at the data within a social constructivist framework highlights the ways in which teacher–student interactions produce ethnocentric forms of intercultural communication, avoidance or suppression of intercultural conflicts and de-construction of diversity. This scrutiny may suggest ways of avoiding ethnocentrism, opening the way to the enhancement of the teaching of diversity. This allows for the production of new knowledge in ISL teaching and provides food for thought regarding the ways in which ethnocentrism can be overcome in such teaching.

Multicultural classrooms, intercultural education and ISL teaching

The inclusion of migrant students who do not know Italian has become a main concern in Italian schools. The continuous flow of migrant newcomers leads to a perception that classrooms have to confront a constant educational emergency due to the lack of linguistic competence among these newcomers. Due to such developments ISL teaching is becoming a priority. The lack of ISL competence among teachers points to the fact that Italian classrooms can hardly be considered multicultural spaces. But this lack of true multiculturalism goes further. Newcomers are not the only students with migrant parents. Second generation students and children of mixed couples find themselves in comparable circumstances. The two latter categories of students speak at least reasonable, and often very good, Italian. A classroom

can be termed multicultural if and when evidence of cultural diversity and plural cultural identities arise in educational interactions (Baraldi 2006; Herrlitz and Maier 2005). The Italian education system misses the complex interrelation between ISL competence and cultural diversity/identity: teachers are frequently not aware of the complex meanings of cultural diversity. They simply associate it with ISL incompetence. Nevertheless, this awareness emerges indirectly when we consider the fact that ISL teaching is often seen as a way of 'doing' intercultural education – since it relates to intercultural communication.

The debate on intercultural communication presents three controversial issues that are relevant to the present discussion. First, intercultural communication is frequently seen as a way to 'meet' existing cultures (e.g. Ting-Toomey 1999). However, cultural diversity may be observed only in the communication process; it is necessarily a communicative construction (e.g. Baraldi 2009; Verschueren 2008), which cannot be inferred from the observation of separate 'cultures' (e.g. the Italian culture vs. the Moroccan culture). Inevitably, this observation creates pre-communicative stereotypes. Cultural diversity is displayed through the emergence of different cultural identities, evoking different cultural presuppositions (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2009).

Second, intercultural communication is frequently described as a positive relationship. However, at least when it arises, intercultural communication causes problems since it introduces different cultural presuppositions, therefore threatening cultural sharing. This problem needs solutions, of course, but solutions can only be found after intercultural communication is initiated. Once different cultural presuppositions have emerged in communication, it is possible to attribute to them a positive or a negative meaning, i.e. the emergence of 'intercultural' issues encourages participants to promote a new form of communication.

Third, problems in intercultural communication are frequently conceived of as misunderstandings. However, intercultural communication may be achieved only if different perspectives are understood. External observers sometimes see misunderstandings, but participants in communication always see the difficulties in accepting different presuppositions, i.e. different expectations about values and beliefs, actions and results.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that a classroom includes intercultural communication if and when different cultural presuppositions (or expectations) are made evident in the interaction by participants' actions, thus creating problems of acceptance. Intercultural education has the function of dealing with the emergence of intercultural communication in the classroom.

The functions of intercultural education have been widely described and explained in the pedagogical debate (e.g. Alred, Byram, and Fleming 2003; Cushner 1998; Desinan 2000; Gundara 2000; Mantovani 2004; Portera 2003, 2008; Woodrow et al. 1997). This debate highlights four possible functions of intercultural education. Firstly, intercultural education can eliminate prejudice, inequalities and ethnocentrism, by creating awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. Secondly, it allows students to acquire the skills needed to interact with cultural diversity effectively. Thirdly, it can demonstrate that, despite the differences that seem to separate cultural groups, many similarities exist across them. Finally, it enhances positive exchanges among cultural groups, contributing 'to the development of co-operation and solidarity rather than to relations of domination, conflict, rejection, and exclusion' (Portera 2008, 483).

In sum, the function assigned to intercultural education is to teach students to accept cultural diversity, by integrating cultural minorities and promoting intercultural sensitivity among them, enhancing successful communication across cultures. Intercultural education should favour the acquisition of intercultural competence and lead to the construction of new mixed cultural identities, so that ‘individuals may keep their own cultural habits and beliefs while “integrating” aspects of the new culture into their lifestyle’ (Yamada and Singelis 1999, 707). Intercultural education tries to teach dialogue among cultures and intercultural learning, without denying specific cultural identities. In short, intercultural education means teaching and learning positive intercultural relations.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is observed as a social communicative process (Mercer 2000) and a social form of thinking (Mercer and Littleton 2007). This perspective provides clear evidence of the relevance of the interaction for learning and demonstrates that learning is enhanced by forms of communication in which teachers consider learners as active constructors of knowledge. It also demonstrates that teachers can promote students’ active participation, positioning themselves as ‘learners’ (Erickson 1996). The focus is mainly on (1) learners’ cognitive achievements as displayed in the interaction (Seedhouse 2004, 2007) and (2) the relationship between the interaction and the cognitive aspects of learning, such as modes of thinking (e.g. Johnson 2006), internalisation and imitation (Lantoff 1999, 2005, 2006). This article, however, is not focused on the ways in which ISL teaching, and intercultural education, promote students’ learning. Rather, it highlights how they create the meanings of students’ cultural identities.

A teacher’s degree of intercultural awareness is considered crucial in multicultural classrooms (Ciliberti and Anderson 2005; Ciliberti, Pugliese, and Anderson 2003; Grassi 2007), as teachers’ relations with migrant students seem to depend primarily on stereotypes and prejudices (Pugliese 2005; see also De Ruiter 2006; Gitz-Johansen 2006; Schell 2009). Frequently, teachers ask for students’ uncritical adaptation to the social and school context, and celebrate cultural diversity only as an abstract value, while neglecting it in daily classroom interactions. In particular, teachers tend to be dissatisfied with interactions with migrant students, and tend to blame these students for not making sufficient efforts. The problem here is the connection established between classroom interactions and teachers’ prejudices. In the next sections, I will try to demonstrate that problems in multicultural classrooms originate in the interaction between teacher and students, where teachers’ prejudices (or incompetence) can become evident and can be observed by students. On the one hand, utterances expressing stereotypes and prejudices affect the interlocutors’ positioning in the interaction (Tan and Mogaddham 1999). On the other hand, interlocutors’ (e.g. students’) understanding and reactions are not determined by (teachers’) utterances. Students’ cultural identities are discursive constructions in teacher–students interactions.

Teacher–student interactions frequently feature a triplet of turns, which includes a teacher’s question (or initiation), a student’s answer (or response) and a teacher’s comment or evaluation of the answer (Johnson 1995; Mehan 1979). The peculiarity of this triplet depends on its cultural presuppositions. The social organisation of education (Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006) is based on explicit expectations regarding learning (cognitive expectations), and, in some cases, regarding maintenance of correct behaviour (normative expectations), which

guide educational interactions. They lead teachers to systematic initiations and evaluations of student performance and behaviour. This means that teacher–student interactions are hierarchical: teacher actions aim to determine both the students’ experience (learning) and the student’s actions (answering to demonstrate learning is taking place).

Methodology and data analysis

The present article is based on a study of ISL teaching in a classroom with migrant pre-adolescents. This study focused on eight lessons (16h) held in a school in a town in the Centre-North of Italy with one of the highest rates of migrant students in the country. The lessons were sponsored by the local administration to support migrant students’ integration. The administration hired two retired teachers with long-standing experience in ISL teaching, but without any specialised ISL training. The sample consisted of 12 students who originated from different countries and all were aged 11–14. They were advanced learners of ISL. Therefore, the teachers were able to engage in relatively elaborate conversations regarding the meanings of cultures and cultural differences. The teachers were assigned the task to facilitate inter-personal relations and promote respect for cultural diversity. In Italy, this task is frequently associated with ISL teaching, which is interpreted as an opportunity to introduce intercultural education. Therefore, here ISL teaching is analysed in order to understand how intercultural education is initiated and managed in interactions.

The whole cycle of lessons was audio recorded, with the permission of the teachers as well as the students’ parents, and subsequently transcribed.¹ The sequences of teachers’ and students’ actions, and the ways in which these actions were performed by teachers and students, were analysed in order to explain their cultural presuppositions, i.e. the expectations guiding intercultural education. The extracts of transcribed interactions discussed in the following sections aim to identify the organised sequences of teachers’ and students’ actions, which are important for the production of meanings of cultural diversity in intercultural education.

In the next few sections, I will present some examples of sequences in order to show how cultural diversity is introduced and managed in intercultural education. These examples are representative of the main types of organisation in the analysed interactions, and provide an idea of the sequences of actions making the bulk of the teacher–students interactions observed in the whole cycle.² Transcriptions and analyses aim at explaining presuppositions and meanings of cultural diversity. They do not include details of lexical choices and turn design required by other kinds of analysis (e.g. Goodwin and Heritage 1990; Heritage and Clayman 2010). The analysis aims to highlight interactional episodes which raise important questions for both researchers in intercultural education and teachers.

The analysis highlights three ways in which cultural diversity becomes meaningful in interaction. First, cultural diversity is constructed as one task of intercultural learning, completely managed by the teacher’s actions (Extracts 1 and 2). Second, cultural diversity is constructed as a contradiction initiated by the students’ actions and managed by the teacher’s reaction (Extracts 3 and 4). Third, cultural diversity is initiated by the student’s actions, and positively evaluated by the teacher, as a point of departure for positive school performance (Extract 5).

Teaching cultural diversity

In Extract 1, the teacher (T1) introduces a student, with the explicit intention to enhance 'learning to know each other' (turn 3). This intention is visible in the following series of questions, which were intended to get the student to define his cultural identity. The questions related to his name (turn 3), his class and school (turns 5, 7) and his inclusion in the school (turn 11). In turn 13, T1 explains that the ongoing interaction is a ritual aimed at identifying cultural differences and relationships.

Extract 1

1. T1 Allora, andiamo avanti? Possiamo? Se avete delle cose da chiedere le chiedete. Lo conoscete voi C.?
So, shall we continue? Can we? If you wish to ask questions, do it. Do you know C.?
2. STS ((everybody)). No
3. T1. Allora dobbiamo anche imparare a conoscerci. Allora, lui si chiama C.S. C. è il nome, S. è il cognome, vero?
So, we must also learn to know each other. So, his name is C.S., C. is the name, S. is the surname, right?
4. ST1. Sì.
Yes
5. T1. Fa la seconda media. In che corso sei? Sei vicino a qualcuno di loro come classe?
He attends the seventh grade. ((addressing ST1)) In which classroom are you? Are you near anyone of them here in the classroom?
6. ST1. Sì.
Yes
7. T1. Li conoscevi già?
Did you know them already?
8. ST1 Conoscevo ((names of classmates))
I knew ...
9. T1. Lui già dall'anno scorso
You knew him from last year
10. ST1. Anche lui. Ma non conoscevo altri.
I knew him, but nobody else.
11. T1. Ho capito. Allora come ti trovi a scuola? Prova a raccontare tu
I see. So, how do you feel at school? Try to tell me
12. ST1. Benissimo!
Very well!
13. T1. Benissimo? Vuoi aggiungere qualcosa? Se no, si va avanti. Quando qualcuno ha finito passa la parola all'altro.
Very well? Do you wish to add something? If you don't, we can go on. ((addressing the whole class)) When somebody has finished, they can leave the floor to somebody else.

This kind of interaction ritual (Goffman 1967) makes it possible to introduce the meaning of diversity and the understanding of the extent to which this meaning is 'cultural'. In Extract 1, the teacher encourages the expression of the

student's cultural identity and tries to discover its meaning. This use of role hierarchy allows the inclusion of 'diversity' in the mainstream educational discourse, its identification and scrutiny (Foucault 1971). The student 'resists' this attempt, although avoiding direct conflict with the teacher. He replies in a concise way, not elaborating at all. Clearly, he tries to avoid the external construction of his cultural identity, resisting the pressure to respond (turn 12), although he diligently answers the teacher's questions, and finally the teacher gives up her attempt to go in depth into the social construction of the student's cultural identity (turn 13).

In Extract 2, the construction of cultural identities is more directly pursued in the interaction. T1 introduces a typical symbol of cultural diversity, 'ethnic' clothing. As clothing can be considered an explicit way of expressing cultural identity in public, T1 insistently asks the students to show their cultural identities through their knowledge of 'ethnic' clothing (turns 1, 3, 5 and 7). In doing so, she ignores the students' indifference (turn 2) and explicit refusal legitimised by the ignorance (turn 8) for this presumed dimension of cultural identity.

Extract 2

1. T1. Parlando di vestiti, D. e K., vi potrebbero raccontare che i vestiti che hanno in Gana sono famosi in tutto il mondo. D., glielo puoi raccontare? Prendi il quaderno.
 ((addressing the whole class)) *Talking of clothing, D. and K. can you tell something about Ghanaian clothing being famous all over the world.*
 ((addressing D., a Ghanaian female student)) *D. can you tell them? Take your exercise book.*
2. ST1. Io mi vesto in Italia come in mio paese.
I dress in Italy as I would in my country.
3. T1. Ma tu mi avevi portato l'anno scorso un vestito— e le stoffe del Gana?
But last year you brought me a dress— and fabrics from Ghana?
4. ST2 ((reading)). Sono di due tipi: il primo kente è di seta e un altro si chiama adinkra, di cotone, con disegni stampati.
They are two types: the former kente is silk and the latter is called adinkra, it is cotton with printed drawings.
5. T1. I colori hanno dei significati particolari, vero? Anche in Cina—
Colours have particular meanings, don't they? In China too—
6. ST2 ((reading)). Il colore rosso è della terra e del sangue, blu è dell'amore, giallo, come l'oro, è il colore della ricchezza.
Red is the colour of land and blood, blue is love, yellow, like gold, is the colour of wealth.
7. T1. Allora durante le feste i colori dei vestiti possono cambiare a seconda del tipo di festa. E in Cina i colori sono? Ho letto che anche in Cina hanno dei significati diversi. Ti ricordi?
So during festivals the clothing colours change depending on the type of festival. And in China, what colours are there? I read that in China they also have different meanings. ((addressing ST3, a Chinese male student)) *Do you remember?*
8. ST3. Mmm — No (..) Ho il quaderno a casa.
Mmm — No (..) My exercise book is at home.

In this interaction, the students are invited to learn the meaning of their own cultural identities through reading pre-structured texts. The non-existent direct experience of students is substituted by reading, which attaches a given meaning to the cultures to which the students are assigned by the teacher. In this case, the teacher's power in defining cultural identities is applied directly to a crucial symbol of 'culture'. While the teacher's action is more direct, the students' resistance increases, as shown by their indifference and ignorance. Rather than showing their cultural identities, the students show their detachment from the discussion. Nonetheless, the students avoid direct conflict, complying with the teacher's request to performance (reading).

In both Extracts 1 and 2, although in different ways and with different degrees of explicitness, the teacher's educational action promotes a form of intercultural communication which is predefined and not shared by the students, who try to escape it. The students let the teacher define their identities, but, by avoiding either the production of a narrative on personal experience as a migrant (Extract 1) or the identification of clothing as ethnic feature (Extract 2), they show their reluctance to accept the teacher's other-defining actions.

Managing intercultural conflicts

The construction of cultural diversity through teaching is scarcely effective in the examples given above because the students are reluctant to participate. On the other hand, the students' active display of cultural diversity creates problems, because it can initiate intercultural conflicts, introducing different cultural presuppositions as contradictions in the interaction. Conflicts are displayed as disagreements in communication – they can be seen as communicated contradictions (Luhmann 1984). Intercultural conflicts are communicated contradictions between different cultural perspectives. Education systems produce and establish strategies to avoid or suppress these conflicts in order to maintain internal order.

In the past few years, the importance of conflict management in classrooms has been frequently stressed in the literature (see, e.g. Jones 2004). In general, role hierarchies prevent the surfacing of conflicts in classroom interactions. In our data, role hierarchies are visible in questions which emphasise the importance of learning cultural differences (Extracts 1 and 2). Role hierarchies determine shared cognitive expectations (what has to be learned) and consequently prevent conflict from arising. When students' actions introduce contradictions in the interaction, role hierarchies become visible through normative expectations. In these cases, the teacher (1) establishes a norm, (2) produces a correction of its violation and (3) diverts the interaction towards other topics. In this way, the teacher tries to avoid or suppress conflicts in the interaction.

Before the sequence shown in Extract 3 takes place, the teacher asks the students to talk about Carnival celebrations in their home countries. In turn 1, T1 defers to a student from Rumania who starts talking about a festival in his country which is associated with the ancient struggle against the Turks (turn 2). This leads to laughing among the student's classmates because it does not appear to relate to commonly shared conceptions of Carnival (turn 3). The teachers see this as a provocation directed at the Turkish students in the class, and therefore as a violation of the norm of mutual respect and as a potential risk for interaction. T2 tries to repair the situation, through an implicit correction (turn 4: 'We are in February'), immedi-

ately followed by T1's explicit correction (turn 5: 'Excuse me A., this has nothing to do with the topic. We were talking about carnival in February'). T1 completes her turn with a diversionary tactic, talking about Carnival in Rumania ('So, is there Carnival in Rumania?'). In this way, the teacher attempts to avoid potential conflict among migrant students.

Extract 3

1. T1. Sentiamo A. che cosa deve dire.
Listen to A. ((ST1, a Rumanian male student)), what he has to say.
2. ST1 Ventotto novembre, giorno della liberazione dai turchi.
28th of November, the day of liberation from the Turks.
3. STS ((everybody laughs))
4. T2. Siamo a Febbraio.
We are now in February.
5. T1. Scusa A., non c'entra niente. Stavamo parlando del carnevale a febbraio. Allora, c'è il Carnevale in Romania?
Sorry A., this has nothing to do with the topic. We were talking about Carnival in February. So, is there Carnival in Rumania?

In Extract 4, T1 introduces another typical symbol of cultural diversity and food, with specific reference to the Chinese cuisine. Some students actively participate in the interaction, showing their curiosity about this cuisine. However, they ask questions that T1 perceives as embarrassing for the Chinese student (turns 3, 4). In turn 5, T1 corrects the students ('you are a bit confused') and then diverts student attention towards a different topic, avoiding a potential conflict. The students do not challenge this diversion.

Extract 4

1. T1. In Cina tutti i cibi vengono messi già pronti. Al posto del pane-
((addressing ST1, a Chinese male student))
In China food is presented ready to be eaten. Instead of bread-
2. ST1 Usiamo il riso.
We use rice.
3. ST2. E' vero che mangiano le rane?
Is it true that they eat frogs?
4. ST3. Anche i pesci vivi!
Live fish too!
5. T1. Avete fatto un po' di confusione. C., ti ricordi come si chiamano le posate che abbiamo studiato al corso del mattino?
You are a bit confused. ((addressing a Moroccan male student)) C., do you remember what the eating utensils we studied in the morning class are called?

In Extracts 3 and 4, intercultural conflict is avoided through normative assertions, followed by corrections and diversions. Student actions that introduce potential contradictions in the interaction are treated as risky. Teacher actions are based on normative expectations regarding 'positive' intercultural communication.

However, these actions discourage students' opportunities to participate in the interaction actively, and prevent a healthy and appropriate discussion of cultural diversity, which is promoted by students rather than guided by teachers.

De-constructing cultural diversity

A third way of constructing cultural diversity is suggesting that it can be 'overcome' through successful integration by means of academic achievement in the classroom. The idea, which is popular among teachers, is that academic achievement eliminates the need for diversity management.

Extract 5 features an interaction ritual which is similar to the one described in Extract 1. In turn 1, the migrant student starts presenting herself to the class. Her hesitation in concluding this self-presentation projects T1's question in turn 2, which aims to explore the student's interests. However, the student explicitly signals that she has not concluded her presentation (turn 3), and immediately T1 leaves the floor to her, apologising for the interruption (turn 4). After another student contributes to the discussion, supported by T1 (turn 6), the student stresses her positive integration (turns 7, 9). This turning point in her self-presentation is strongly supported by T1's appreciation in turns 8 and 10. This appreciation coincides with a positive evaluation, as is evident in turn 10, where T1 stresses the student's school achievement. The importance of this positive evaluation is highlighted by the both teachers reinforcement in turns 11 and 12.

Extract 5

1. ST1: Vengo dal Ghana, sono alta e magra, ho i capelli neri e gli occhi neri. Sono nata a Accra, in Ghana. Sono arrivata in Italia il 14 novembre 2002, mmm—
I am from Ghana, I am tall and slim. My hair and my eyes are black. I was born in Accra, in Ghana. I arrived in Italy on the 14th of November 2002, mmm—
2. T1: Che cosa ti piace fare?
What do you like to do?
3. ST1: Aspetta!
Wait!
4. T1: Ah, scusa!
Ah, sorry!
5. ST1: Frequento la terza media.
I am attending the third year ((eighth grade))
6. T1: La terza media del corso E, ha detto L. Ci tiene perché è la sua stessa classe.
The third year in class E, L. said. It's important to her because that's her own class.
7. ST1: Io sono tranquilla, intelligente e paziente.
I am quiet, clever and patient.
8. T1: Brava!
Good!
9. ST1: Ho tanti amici e a me piace ballare, cantare e studiare.
I have many friends and I like to dance, sing and study.

10. T1: Bene, è molto importante perché io vedo che tu, a studiare, sei diventata molto brava. Io non ti vedevo da tanti mesi e adesso parli veramente bene!
Fine, it is very important because I can see that you've become very good at studying. I hadn't seen you in months and now you speak ((Italian)) very well.
11. T2: Sì!
Yes!
12. T1. Brava! Sei stata proprio brava!
Good! You have been really good!

The teachers participate in the social construction of the student's cultural diversity as a deficit. Cultural diversity is implicitly de-constructed as a deficit that must be overcome, indicating that only the student's adaptation to the existing educational culture can improve her social life.

Cultural identity is frequently associated with school difficulties. In this case, the reference to school performance is used to move from cultural identity (turn 1) towards cultural assimilation (turns 10–12). The student not only concurs with this position, but also initiates the de-construction of her own cultural identity (turns 3, 7, and 9) and participates in the co-construction of her own assimilation. The teachers are actively involved in the student's assimilation, following a script in which active listening and appreciation are their main tasks. The interaction indirectly underscores the presupposition that 'cultural' deficits can explain migrant student failure. This presupposition, with the help of teachers' supportive actions, may lead to stigmatise migrant students if they do not acknowledge the necessity of cultural adaptation.

Conclusions: ethnocentrism and dialogue

The manifold difficulties in applying the concept of intercultural education are well known (Portera 2008). This article has underlined some of these difficulties, which emerged during an experience of ISL teaching, in particular looking at teacher–student interactions. This kind of analysis provides insight into various mechanisms that produce ethnocentrism through educational interactions, in particular highlighting teacher actions that are ineffective in introducing intercultural education through ISL teaching.

The analysis of this experience shows that intercultural education is based on hierarchical interactions: teachers assess the meanings of cultural diversity, as either correct or problematic, depending on students' responses to their initiations. Their actions project norms that should be shared (e.g. solidarity and cooperation), which prevent or avoid intercultural conflict when students actively introduce contradictions. These interactions highlight teacher prejudices and stereotypes regarding cultural identity and cultural cooperation, and produce ethnocentrism (Pearce 1989), i.e. a distinction between positive values and behaviours, on the one hand, and negative values and behaviours on the other. The open display of prejudices and ethnocentrism are at odds with educational objectives. Consequently, they are expressed indirectly, by imposing predetermined knowledge regarding cultural differences (Extracts 1 and 2), avoiding contradictions introduced by student actions (Extracts 3 and 4) and positively evaluating student actions that de-construct cultural identities (Extract 5). In all of these forms, ethnocentric interactions strongly bind students' positioning, building or reinforcing their identities through external attributions, and negatively impacting their participation in classroom interactions.

The rise of ethnocentrism in intercultural education is a consequence of the failure in acknowledging the difficulties in managing cultural diversity in educational interactions. By being blind to these difficulties, intercultural education practitioners seem to try to avoid the cultural diversity coming from student actions, and to substitute it with teaching and evaluating, following both cognitive and normative forms of expectations. Therefore, the interactional production of ethnocentrism is rooted in educational presuppositions, i.e. role hierarchies and cognitive and normative expectations, which lead to systematic initiations and evaluations of student actions.

Only a radical change of these presuppositions can avoid ethnocentrism in intercultural education and lead to students' active display of their cultural diversity and identities. The importance of student active participation in education has been observed in recent childhood studies (e.g. Baraldi and Iervese 2012; James and James 2004; Wyness 1999) and in theories of person-centred education (Gordon 1974; Rogers 1969). These approaches invoke practising 'dialogue' (Bohm 1996) in classrooms, in order to support and confirm student actions, and formulate meanings that respect and enhance their personal expressions (e.g. Baraldi 2008). In intercultural education, however, this perspective needs to be associated with particular attention to the meaning and ambivalences associated with intercultural communication. On the one hand, open displays of cultural identities can be at odds with personal expression, e.g. when students initiate intercultural conflicts or embrace cultural assimilation. On the other hand, personal expressions seem to be the only way to display cultural identities, and promotion of student personal expression seems to be the only starting point for an effective management of intercultural communication.

Effective management of intercultural communication in classroom interactions needs to be much better explored and requires extensive research. To what extent can student active participation be promoted in intercultural education? To what extent and under what conditions can it be important for intercultural dialogue? To what extent and under what conditions can intercultural dialogue enhance intercultural conflict management? Last but not least, with what consequences for teaching?

Further research is needed to answer these questions. Nevertheless, this study clearly shows that training in ISL teaching can benefit by including an analysis and evaluation of naturally occurring teacher-students interactions. By devoting particular attention to the ways in which ethnocentrism is produced, intercultural issues can be interpreted and dialogue can be enhanced in interactions. Training of this type can serve to address the shortcomings of ISL teaching that emerged in this research.

Notes

1. It was not possible to interview the teachers and the students to understand their intentions and understanding. In the theoretical framework which is presented in this contribution, this lack of interviews does not affect the analysis of the interaction.
2. The lack of permission for video-recording did not make it possible to analyse non-verbal aspects of the interaction; however, the examples presented enable an accurate analysis of the communicative episodes.

Notes on contributor

Claudio Baraldi is a professor of sociology of cultural and communicative processes at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. His research includes work on cultural

presuppositions and interaction in educational systems, promotion of children's social participation, intercultural communication and mediation, conflict management in schools and other organisations, the development of methodologies and techniques for dialogue. He has published a number of papers in Italian and international journals, and several books on the topics above.

Transcript symbols

T	teacher
ST	student
Initial (e.g. C.)	name of student
text-	interrupted turn
(.) (..)	short pauses (less than one second)
!?,	rough indication of turn intonation
((comment))	researcher's comments

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