

CIEA 2014

## The role of universities in the development of plurilingual repertoires: the voices of non-traditional adult students

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a study on the non-traditional adult students' (NTAS) perceptions concerning the role of university in the development of their plurilingual repertoires. Data were collected through biographical interviews with NTAS with fewer and more plurilingual experiences. The results show that NTAS with more plurilingual experiences are more aware of their plurilingual repertoire and acknowledge higher education as an opportunity to further develop it. It also appears that if university promotes a favourable environment for the development of plurilingual repertoires, there may be a change in NTAS' perception regarding lifelong language learning.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

**Keywords:** Non-traditional adult students; university; lifelong language learning; plurilingual repertoires; biographical interviews.

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### 1. Introduction

The role of the university should entail the promotion of Lifelong Learning (LLL) and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2012). University also ought to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of the communities and the region in which they are located: the 'Universities' third mission (Soeiro, 2009). In this sense, university should respond to new lifelong educational and training needs, clearly appealing to its social responsibility, by "reassess completely its objectives and priorities, particularly its entry requirements, its method of working and its assessment and qualifications structures" (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15). Universities are also asked to contribute to "the European integration and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in

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Europe” (European Language Council, 2001: 3) by becoming multilingual spaces, promoting plurilingualism as a value and a competence (Beacco & Byram, 2007).

Therefore, this article focuses on the important mission of the university in promoting plurilingual individuals and plurilingual contexts. The article is based on a study<sup>1</sup> which is being carried out at the University of Aveiro (UA), within a PhD project entitled “The plurilingual repertoires in a lifelong learning process: a case study with non-traditional adult students in the University of Aveiro”. The aim of the study presented herein is, on one hand, to understand how non-traditional adult students (NTAS) perceive the contribution of university to the development of their plurilingual repertoires (Beacco, 2009; Beacco & Byram, 2007). On the other hand, the study intends to clarify whether these perceptions (regarding the impact of higher education on the development of NTAS’ repertoires) are influenced by the more or fewer plurilingual experiences lived by NTAS throughout their life (Franceschini, 2005).

In order to achieve these goals, a biographical approach (West & Merrill, 2009) was used, namely biographical interviews (Demazière & Dubar, 2009).

This study intends to emphasise the importance of understand if attending university may be perceived as another plurilingual experience which contributes (or could contribute) to the development of individuals’ plurilingual repertoire, from a lifelong learning (LLL) perspective. It is also important to underline the significant role that university plays in NTAS’ perceptions regarding lifelong language learning.

In the first part of the paper, the theoretical framework of this study is presented, namely adult education at university, specifically NTAS (Section 2) and the plurilingual repertoires as indexical biographies (Blommaert & Backus, 2012) (Section 3). In the second part of this paper, the empirical study is presented and discussed (Section 4 and 5) and some final considerations are presented (Section 6).

## **2. Adult Education at university**

According to Powell, Smith and Reakes “adult education has deep historical roots, [but] the necessity for an individual to continue learning throughout life is a more recent concept.” (2003, parag. 14). Nevertheless, it has now become widely accepted that adult education (AE) is part of the LLL process. LLL is seen as “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all routes, circumstances, and environments.” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 22). Therefore, AE is linked to the necessity - or desire - to learn continuously during an individual’s lifetime due several reasons and in different contexts. One of these learning contexts is Higher Education Institutions, i.e. universities. The Declaration of Bologna signed in 1999 brought many great changes to university structures, and an increasing awareness of new challenges, demands and publics. In this sense, LLL is perceived both as a cornerstone of the Higher Education European Area, and as one of the main vectors in university reconfiguration (EUA, 2008). The reconfiguration of the university implied a complete review of its objectives and priorities (Longworth & Davies, 1996), since “In order to ensure that lifelong learning contributes to the European agenda on social inclusion and learning societies, universities need to develop educational offers that are attractive for different groups of European citizens to access and participate in throughout their lives.” (Smidt & Sursock, 2011, p. 18). This means that higher education should be accessible to all. Universities should create more flexible learning pathways, and recognise previously acquired learning, either in formal or informal contexts. Moreover, “the challenge of lifelong learning for universities is to view lifelong learning as an opportunity to expand their activities in all fields and to understand, and respond positively to, the very different needs of their new customers” (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 15), namely non-traditional adult students (NTAS).

### *2.1. Non-traditional adult students*

The presence of non-traditional adult students (NTAS) at universities becomes a reality in Europe. Various authors and studies have focused on these students, thus providing us with an international (Field, Merrill, & West, 2012; Johnson & Merrill, 2004; RANLHE, 2011), and a national perspective (Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá & Simões, 2014; Amorim, Azevedo, & Coimbra, 2010; Correia & Mesquita, 2006). Both emphasise the characteristics shared by these NTAS : i) age – NTAS are over 23/25 years of age, ii) attending formal education – adult students were

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