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Implementation of plurilingual approach into the foreign language teaching

Zuzana StrakováUniversity of Prešov, Slovakia
zuzana.strakova@unipo.sk

Abstract

Teaching foreign languages has adopted various approaches over the history. The last decades of dominance of the Communicative language teaching brought the tendency to insist on the target language use in the classroom in order to allow the immersion into the language. The European Union, however, started to support linguistic diversity more than two decades ago and it has left an imprint on the way foreign language teaching is approached today. Inclusion of plurilingualism in traditional school context requires the readiness of language teachers to use other languages as well as encourage learners to use their prior language experience. The present study presents the results of a questionnaire survey among student teachers measuring their attitudes and readiness to implement more than one additional language in their practice. The participants of the study ($n = 118$) are all future teachers of English language at both undergraduate and graduate level. The results of the survey indicate a generally positive attitude towards plurilingualism and at the same time ability of the students to rely on more than one language while teaching. The results, however, raise quite a few questions and imperatives for the content of teacher training programmes as well as for the organisation of language education in general.

Keywords: plurilingual approach, foreign language teaching, language diversity, teacher training, attitude towards plurilingualism

Introduction

Interaction in more than one language in various situations seems to be a reality of everyday life. The rapid technological development has enabled people to communicate different people in different parts of the world at the same time using a variety of languages. Globalisation as well as migration tendencies (whether a short-term, long-term or permanent) within or outside the European space influenced all aspects of living in a modern world. Therefore, the questions of promoting linguistic diversity seem to carry existential importance.

All these aspects have inevitably generated activity of the institutions which hold the language education policy of the European Union as their agenda.

Linguistic diversity has been clearly stated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in the Article 22 Cultural, religious and linguistic diversity: „The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity“ (EUR-Lex, 2012). The same principles have been declared by the Treaty on European Union in the Article 3: “It shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced”(Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012).

One of the main pillars of the existence of the European Union is the protection of individual languages and at the same time the support of mutual understanding between nations through implementation of principles of plurilingualism. The advantages of being able to communicate in more than one language, as stated by the European Commission addressed several areas:

- better language skills enable more people to study and/or work abroad, and improve their job prospects
- speaking other languages helps people from different cultures understand one another - essential in a multilingual, multicultural Europe
- to trade effectively across Europe, businesses need multilingual staff
- the language industry – translation and interpretation, language teaching, language technologies, etc. – is among the fastest growing areas of the economy (European Union, online).

The support of the linguistic diversity has been declared by a large amount of the official documents of the European Union. For instance, the White Paper on Education (1995) defines the necessity for everyone within the EU “*to be able to acquire and to keep up their ability to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue*” (p. 47). This was later confirmed by the European Council meeting in Barcelona in 2002. The main arguments were promoting employability and using all the advantages that the European citizenship offered on one hand but at the same time highlighting the fact that by being able to speak more languages one can learn about the culture and diversity and thus develop understanding among European citizens. It was even suggested that foreign languages should be introduced into education at pre-primary level since the results of research documented the positive influence of foreign language development on the cognitive development (ibid.). That would further influence the success in the education in general.

The above mentioned can be seen as the prime stimulus for formulation of M+2 rule where M stands for the mother tongue and 2 means two language other than the mother tongue. At that time the term mother tongue was used as a synonym of the official language of a country, even though these did not have to be the same. The term mother tongue typically describes the first language which the child

acquires, however, as Sokolová (Jursová Zacharová & Sokolová, 2013) highlights, in situations in which a child is exposed to more languages, the term first language usually addresses the language that is considered the most relevant for the user as to the frequency of the use, the proficiency achieved, or an internal or external identification with the language.

Communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the Council (2008) entitled *Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment* states as the main aim „to raise awareness of the value and opportunities of the EU's linguistic diversity and encourage the removal of barriers to intercultural dialogue“ (Communication of the EU 566, 2008, p. 5). The importance of learning languages was repeatedly highlighted by the Council conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences (2014) where the Council recommends not only to promote multilingualism but also to focus on “the quality and efficiency of language learning and teaching, including by teaching at least two languages in addition to the main language(s) of instruction from an early age and by exploring the potential of innovative approaches to the development of language competences“ (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 27). It also declares the support to the cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Centre for Modern Languages.

Literature review

The Council of Europe defines multilingualism as a situation where more languages are being used within one geographic area not taking specific notice of the users themselves and not even expecting they would use all the languages present in that area. On the other hand, plurilingualism is viewed as the focus on the user and the ability to use more than one language (Beacco, et al. 2015). However, there is not absolute consistency in the use of these terms which varies according to the context and the specific conditions (e.g. Janíková, 2014).

Using more than one language should not be understood as the mastery of all languages at the same proficiency level but rather as the ability to use different languages in relation to what is expected or required by a specific communicative situation (Krumm, 2004). Coste, Moore and Zarate (2009) argue that the level of complexity within various languages used by individuals may vary; however, this does not necessarily have to influence the process of communication in general. They claim that the competence of one language of a plurilingual individual cannot be separated from other languages since the “possession of skills in more than one linguistic code means that one can switch from one language to another according to the situation” (ibid., p. 18). As they further explain plurilingual individuals can switch from one language to another during one communication act. Thus they view this use of the languages not as the result of

satisfaction with a limited competence in one language use; rather this is understood as “partial competence” in a particular language and as a part of a plurilingual competence (*ibid.*). In this sense some researchers (e.g. Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Gunesh, 2003; Wilton, 2009) underline the difference between competence-based understanding of plurilingualism or the focus on using the language independently on the proficiency achieved in individual languages (e.g. Wei 2008; Lüdi, 2006). As can be seen plurilingualism is understood as an umbrella term and in this way it covers also bilingualism, which is by many viewed as a specific form of multilingualism (Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2008; Herdina & Jessner, 2002).

Research in the area of multilingualism has attracted attention especially in the last decades (Moore & Gajo, 2009) and has faced long-standing prejudice of bringing hazardous approach towards acquisition and learning of languages which should remain separate, balanced and inclining towards native-like competence (Dabène, 1993). Code-switching was considered problematic and inclusion of first language in the second language context as a flaw. Only later this monolingual understanding of bilingualism as well as multilingualism started to be perceived holistically: “The bilingual is not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather, he or she has a unique and specific linguistic configuration. The co-existence and constant interaction of the two languages in the bilingual has produced a different but complete language system” (Grosjean, 1985, p. 471).

This understanding urged the research to focus on the user of more languages and approaches they apply while using these languages (Cook, 1992; Gajo, 2007; Lüdi & Py, 2009; Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009). This development, especially in the last two decades, has been reflected also in education where the focus is placed upon social, cultural and political dimensions of the language use in specific contexts with the aim to create principles for plurilingual education (e.g. Kramsch, 1993; Candelier, 2012; Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009; etc.). Plurilingualism thus becomes a key principle of language policies in Europe in line with the Council of Europe (Beacco, et al., 2010, Candelier, 2003; CEFR 2001, 2006;) and with clear distinction between plurilingual education and education for plurilingualism (Moore & Gajo, 2009, p. 145). In this sense the former builds upon the development of “plurilingual competence through a coherent, transversal and integrated approach that takes into account all the languages in learners’ plurilingual repertoire and their respective functions” (Council of Europe 2006, p. 5). The latter, on the other hand, supports awareness and mutual respect towards other languages and cultures in their variability and complexity as well as “a global integrated approach to language education in curriculum” (*ibid.*, p. 5). Language awareness can play an important role in language education also through raising awareness of similarities of various languages and activation of higher order

thinking skills of the learners. Deducing, comparing, and contrasting can lead towards more memorable conclusions and wider openness for hypothesising about other languages, which the learners would be otherwise unaware of.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to identify the attitudes of trainees – future language teachers – towards plurilingualism and to find whether they are able to identify any benefits of plurilingual approach for language learning in general. The survey also intended to identify the level of readiness of future teachers to apply plurilingual approach in teaching and at the same time to identify the level of their language proficiency in multiple languages as one of the key factors for plurilingual approach.

The study involved a group of university students ($n = 118$) at both undergraduate and graduate levels in the study programme English language and literature for future language teachers in Slovakia. Research sample consisted of randomly selected students. The method used in the study was a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The questionnaire included questions which were inspired by the Special Eurobarometer (EB) 386 questionnaire conducted by EU in 2012 (European Commission, 2012). The reason for choosing this survey and developing the study based on the previous results was to compare the development in language awareness and language proficiency in multiple languages over the period of time since the language policy in Slovakia has changed since 2012 and the orientation of the language education was directed to one language (English) support only. That means, that while before 2012 the learners at primary level could choose which foreign language they wanted to start with as the foreign language, after 2012 the English language became compulsory. Thus, the intention of the survey was to identify any differences in the language competence development in Slovakia and at the same time to compare it with other European countries. The questionnaire consists of eight questions focusing on respondents' views on learning languages, their own ability to use multiple languages and their learning experience. The last question presents twelve statements asking the respondents to express their agreeing or disagreeing opinions. These statements were evaluated according to the Likert rating scale coded as follows: "totally agree/ tend to agree/ tend to disagree/ totally disagree". The response "don't know" was also included to provide students with a wider variety of options.

Findings and the discussion

The findings of the present study were compared to the results of EB survey conducted in 2012 (ibid.) with the aim to see whether there is any change in

language awareness of Slovak respondents. Even though the respondents in the present study were a rather specific and limited group the results could cast the light on the development in language awareness and the attitudes towards learning and using foreign languages.

When looking at the number of languages other than their mother tongue (graph 1) that respondents speak well enough to carry out a conversation, the results are clearly influenced by the fact that the respondents are students of foreign languages in a teaching programme. Thus, the response to option 1 (at least 1 language) was 100%. However, what might be surprising in comparison with European results is the number of respondents who are able to use two languages other than their mother tongue. This is clear even from the EB where Slovak respondents scored higher than Europeans. The suggested answer might be that the Czech language (the choice for 95% of respondents in the present study) is very close to the Slovak language although that refers mainly to the receptive skills. The respondents in the present study scored high also in the ability to use at least three languages other than their mother tongue which can indicate that especially students of foreign languages are aware of the importance of ability to use various languages.

Graph 1: Languages (other than their mother tongue) that students speak well enough to have a conversation

This could be supported also by the fact which languages the respondents considered the most useful for personal development. The results show that the English and German languages as a preference were selected by the Slovak respondents similarly in both EB and the present study. However, the preferences for other languages such as Russian, Spanish, French, Italian or Chinese differ significantly. Chinese as an optional foreign language did not even appear as an outcome in the EB questionnaire in the Slovak responses. This also indicates that the situation in the global tendencies in the world is changing and this is reflected

in language awareness of their potential users. The same can be said about the Russian language which was an option for only 8% of respondents seven years ago; however, in the present study more than 20% respondents indicated usefulness of this language.

Graph 2: Two languages (other than the mother tongue) that are the most useful for personal development of respondents

Graph 3: Languages which respondents would like to learn in the future

Respondents were also asked if they consider learning new languages besides the ones, they are able to use now. Majority of participants (92%) responded positively with multiple language options, however, the selection of the languages represents a typical choice corresponding with their vision of useful languages (see graph 2).

As can be seen from the following graph 4 most respondents identified the beginning of their second language experience quite early – at pre-primary or primary level. That corresponds with the educational policy of the country although there are some respondents who started to learn their second language much later, e.g. at secondary level (9%) or in higher education (7%). That seems rather surprising due to the fact that the research sample consisted exclusively of students studying language programmes with the intention to become teachers of foreign languages which presupposes at least B2 level of at least one language at entering the higher education.

Graph 4: Beginning of learning (1st language other than their mother tongue)

EB questionnaire also gathered opinions of the respondents on advantages that learning foreign languages brings as well as the factors which may discourage some people from learning foreign languages (graph 5). The results indicate higher awareness of possible advantages among the Slovak respondents in the present study in comparison with the general inquiry in EB. This might be given by the attitude of students focusing on foreign languages in their study and thus a higher

awareness of benefits of using foreign languages in general. Nearly all reasons were considered with higher relevance in comparison to outcomes of EB, some significantly (e.g. items 1, 2, 6, 8, 9 and 11). However, it is interesting to note that two items were marked as less important namely item 5 (getting a better job in Slovakia) and 10 (to feel more European). While the former could be quite easily explained by the fact that not every position in Slovakia necessarily requires a foreign language, the latter might be connected to the general attitude towards EU among citizens of Slovakia since while in 2012 this marked as relevant 13% of respondents, in year 2020 it was only 8% of respondents. This, however, is not much different from the results of EB results for all EU participants where the score of relevance was 10%.

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Graph 5: Main advantages of learning a new language
Legend:

1. To use on holidays abroad
2. To use at work
3. To be able to study in another country
4. To be able to work in another country
5. To get a better job in Slovakia
6. For personal satisfaction
7. To keep up knowledge of a language spoken by your family
8. To meet people from other countries
9. To be able to understand people from other cultures

10.To feel more European

11.To be able to use the Internet

A quite distinct perspective can be spotted in the present study in comparison to EB survey in identifying the reasons for discouraging a person from learning languages. While the lack of motivation and time were among top three choices also for EB respondents, in the present study the respondents opted for these options in much higher number. The lack of motivation was selected as a factor discouraging people from learning language in nearly 70% and the lack of time in more than 65% in the present study while in the EB study the lack of motivation was indicated by 30% and the lack of time only by 34% of respondents. The biggest difference though, can be noticed in item 11 (graph 6) which might be connected to the fact that respondents are students of teaching programmes.

Graph 6: Reasons which may discourage people from learning another language
Legend to graph 6

1. It's hard to find information about what's available
2. The nearest place where you could learn the language is too far
3. It is too expensive
4. There is no course available in the language you want to learn

5. There is no course available for your level of knowledge
6. You haven't time to study properly
7. You are not good at languages
8. You are not motivated enough
9. You don't get enough exposure to the language in TV, radio, newspaper, etc.
10. You don't have enough opportunities to use the language with people who speak it
11. Poor teaching / boring methods / inadequate learning materials
12. You have had negative experience in the past

Interesting data has been gathered in the area of learning experience of respondents and their consideration of its effectiveness. While 100 % of respondents acknowledged they have attended language lessons at school only 28% considered this experience as useful. This is rather discouraging; however, on the other hand if we take into consideration that the research sample consisted of future teachers of English there could be the hope for better since they already know what does not work. The best experience was - not surprisingly - identified as the moments of close connection with the authentic language users such as conversation lessons with a native speaker or talking informally to a native speaker and at the same time visits to the country where the language is spoken or taking language courses in that country. That can hardly be applied in a typical educational context; however, nowadays teachers can easily connect learners with authentic language through technological devices and they can even involve them in genuine communication with native speakers. That requires the change in the teaching methods as reflected in the previous graph 6 in item 11.

The last question of the questionnaire, the opinion poll, aimed at finding out the opinions of future teachers on plurilingualism and its applicability in the Slovak educational context. In general, it can be said (as seen in Graph 8) that the respondents as future teachers expressed quite positive attitude towards plurilingualism and they believe that if a person already possesses a second language proficiency all subsequent languages will be mastered with more ease (item 8, 80%). The participants also believe that learning strategies are transversal and can be used irrespective of the language being studied (item 10, 90%) and thus consider them helpful in learning subsequent languages. What is more is that the respondents agreed (item 11, 71%) that already their teacher training experience should incorporate this approach and prepare them for techniques including other languages in the main language learning. At the same time they would agree if language teachers were themselves equipped with the ability to use at least two languages other than their mother tongue (item 12, 73%). On the other hand what stands as a contrast to this positive attitude is quite a large group of

respondents (item 6, 31%) disagreeing with one of the key European principles in education and that is that the Europeans should speak more than one language other than their mother tongue. That may be explained by their response to item 2 (87%) stating that people in the EU should be able to speak a common language and they may understand the English language as the one additional language everyone should learn. That could have been supported also by the national policy adopted in the recent years where the focus was on English as the first compulsory language. The respondents also felt that the national language policy should support the development of language skills of the citizens (item 7, 78%).

Graph 7: Ways of learning languages the respondents have used and ways they consider most effective

Legend to graph 7

1. Language lessons at school
2. Group language lessons with a teacher outside school
3. One to one lessons with a teacher
4. Conversation lessons with a native speaker
5. Talking informally to a native speaker

6. Long or frequent visits to a country where the language is spoken
7. Language course in a country where the language is spoken
8. Teaching yourself by reading books
9. Teaching yourself by using audio-visual material (CDs, DVDs)
10. Teaching yourself by watching TV, films, listening to radio
11. Teaching yourself online

Graph 8: Opinion poll

Legend to graph 8

1	The European institutions should adopt one single language to communicate with European citizens
2	Everyone in the EU should be able to speak a common language
3	Everyone in the EU should be able to speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue
4	Everyone in the EU should be able to speak more than one language in addition to their mother tongue
5	You prefer to watch foreign films and programmes with subtitles, rather than dubbed
6	All languages spoken within EU should be treated equally
7	Improving language skills should be a policy priority

8	The more languages you know, the easier it is to learn additional languages
9	Teachers should make comparisons between a new language and the languages students already speak
10	It helps to apply learning strategies from previously learnt languages into learning new languages
11	Initial teacher training should prepare future teachers for using other languages the students have learnt before
12	Language teachers should be encouraged to be proficient in at least two languages other than their mother tongue

An interesting finding can be seen in item 5 (legend to graph 8). Similar item appeared also in EB survey in 2012. The preference to watch foreign films and programmes with subtitles has changed significantly in Slovakia over past years. This could be the result of a tendency of young generation to watch movies and series on Internet TV rather than on regular TV broadcasting as well as the raise of awareness how much watching movies in the target language helps in language learning. This is further supported by the statement 10 in the question considering respondents' prior learning experience (graph 7) where 97% of participants expressed that they have used this approach in their own language learning and 70% of them consider it as an effective strategy.

Graph 10: Opinion poll – item 5

Conclusions

The present study was aimed at mapping attitudes and readiness of future teachers of foreign languages to apply principles of plurilingual education in their future carriers. It seems as a key aspect that teachers who are expected to apply such principles are themselves multilingual (whether the ability is based on

multilingual background or is gained by language studies) and at the same time believe in the importance of raising language awareness of their students. The results of the study demonstrate the shift in the attitude towards multiple languages to be used in education especially on the level of awareness of usefulness of multilingual approach. Experience with the exposure to multiple languages and experience with the linguistic diversity around the globe seems to equip future teachers with more open approach towards supporting language learners with other languages they are able to use. This, however, requires the changes in EFL methodology and the selection of approach since the past experience of insisting on using English only in the classroom may still hinder the willingness of teachers to involve other languages in the classroom, including learner's mother tongue.

Limitations present in the current study, such as small group of respondents, very specific group, or limited teaching experience, can be the cause that the results may have rather limited validity. The respondents may have the tendency to overestimate their skills and potential and it would be useful to measure the outcomes with the ones of teachers in practice. Yet, the results cast some light on how their pregradual training needs to be changed and may suggest the higher level of inclusion of prior language learning experience of the trainees.

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Contact

prof. Zuzana Straková, PhD.

University of Prešov
Faculty of Arts
Ul. 17. novembra č. 1
080 01 Prešov
Slovakia
zuzana.strakova@unipo.sk