

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TODAY'S MULTICULTURAL AND MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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**ABSTRACT.** *Foreign Language Learning in Today's Multicultural and Multilingual Classrooms.* This paper intended to emphasize the fact that foreign learning language implies being able to communicate effectively in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, in an increasingly multicultural society, the development of a competence that facilitates appropriate cultural and linguistic transfers needs to be considered. The paper provides details about the challenges and positive aspects of learning a foreign language in a multicultural and multilingual context. The educational landscape has undergone considerable changes in order to accommodate the learning process to the requirements imposed by a globalized society.

**Keywords:** *foreign language teaching, multiculturalism, multilingualism, cultural context, formal education.*

**REZUMAT.** *Învățarea limbilor străine în clasele multiculturale și multilingvistice ale societății actuale.* Acest studiu a încercat să evidențieze faptul că învățarea unei limbi străine implică abilitatea unui individ de a comunica eficient în diverse context culturale și lingvistice. De aceea, într-o societate în care se intensifică latura multiculturală este necesară dezvoltarea unei competențe care să faciliteze transferurile culturale și lingvistice. Lucrarea de față oferă detalii despre obstacole și aspecte pozitive în contextul învățării unei limbi străine într-un cadru multicultural și multilingv.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *învățarea limbilor străine, multiculturalitate, multilingvism, context cultural, educația formală.*

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## Theoretical underpinnings

Nowadays, societies are characterized by an increasing amount of cultural and linguistic diversity. In view of globalization and technological advances, interlocutors have to surmount linguistic and cultural constraints when communicating to different people, in various contexts, using diverse channels of communication. Because communication is context-sensitive, it is advisable that interlocutors pay attention to the way in which the message sent is interpreted by the sender as well as the receiver.

In the last two decades, the educational arena has undergone considerable changes in order to accommodate learning to the requirements imposed by a globalized society. Within the European Union, decisional factors (European Commission, the Council of the European Union) have tried to translate these changes into operational objectives. Thus, the *Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ET2020* (European Commission 2015, 9) indicates some educational priorities for 2020:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship;
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

These strategic objectives reinforce the role of education in the European society and indicate guidelines of development for all those involved in teaching and training programmes. Moreover, education is expected to play a more active role in providing learners with the appropriate tools and resources in order to help them build a sense of community and strengthen the social cohesion in Europe. In addition, learners need to be able to engage in intercultural dialogue with people who have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They need to develop their “social, civic and intercultural competences” (European Commission 2015, 5) and act as active citizens in order to achieve community-led social development. A change in mindset is expected from teachers too. They also have to develop skills, attitudes and knowledge that favour and support an understanding of the implications of multiculturalism in the formal classroom setting.

To develop an educational system that guides its policies and pedagogical practice by multicultural and multilingual perspectives constitutes today one of the greatest challenges of schools (Lillejord 2008, 207 in Westrheim K. & Tolo A. 2014, 48). Still, it as an endeavour that has to be undertaken if the purpose of education is to provide meaningful schooling that is appropriate to students who have diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A

considerable amount of research has been conducted having in mind the areas of multicultural education and multilingual learning in formal educational settings (Coelho 2012; Banks and Banks 2010, Coelho and Rivers 2004; Cenoz and Gorter 2015; Conteh and Meier 2014).

Multilingual and multicultural classrooms are today a growing reality in many countries all over the world. Therefore, any type of research and projects that bring added value to this topic are demanded and encouraged by different institutions. This is the case of the following award. The directorate-general for education and culture within the European Commission offers yearly the *European label award* to different innovative projects in language teaching and learning. The European priorities for 2016-2017 target two key priorities:

- Multilingual Schools and Classrooms: Embracing Diversity in Schools
- Language-friendly society – informal language learning (European Commission 2016, 1)

The first key priority aims to gather and investigate good practices of efficient multilingual pedagogy in diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Emphasis is laid on integrating learners that belong to different cultural and linguistic groups and providing them with equal opportunities to learn. Various aspects of education, such as school policies, organization, teachers, students and the curriculum need to undergo changes in order to embrace diversity in schools. The second key priority aims to acknowledge the importance of a “social environment where language learning and intercultural understanding are encouraged, and multilingualism is promoted and seen positively” (European Commission 2016, 2). In addition, this priority focuses on the importance of developing foreign language competency in informal contexts where language is learned unintentionally and spontaneously, by taking part in the daily routine.

In this paper, the term *multilingualism* makes reference to the ability of an individual to express himself in different languages. A *multilingual classroom* is a formal learning environment where students are able to speak different languages besides the official instruction language. The term *multiculturalism* refers to the existence and acceptance of multiple cultural identities within a unified nation. A *multicultural classroom* is a learning context in which learners, even when they speak the same language of instruction, can pertain to several different mother-tongue cultures. Multicultural pedagogy targets the development of mutual respect among learners, aims to reduce stereotype thinking and intends to maintain and develop all the languages and cultures that are to be found in a particular classroom context.

### **A multilingual and multicultural learning context**

This paper intended to focus both on the challenges and positive aspects of learning a foreign language in a multicultural and multilingual

context. For the sake of brevity, in terms of challenges, the discussion made reference to the following three elements: the teacher, the student and the curriculum. Positive aspects regard the teacher, the students and the professional relationship between them.

Cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom should be perceived as a valuable resource and not as a problem. A good example of approach is provided by the Norwegian educational system which values linguistic and cultural diversity and constantly tries to identify suitable pedagogical approaches. In Norway, Report No. 14 to the Storting (2008-2009, 18) entitled *Internationalisation of Education in Norway* states that multilingualism in the classroom represents a valuable contribution to develop linguistic competence in several languages, to raise interest towards learning foreign languages in general and to build understanding and tolerance for different languages. Therefore, immigrant and foreign students who speak several languages are regarded as resources because with their knowledge and abilities to learn different foreign languages and experience diverse cultures they add value to the foreign language learning classroom.

Even if in the formal classroom students are multilingual and multicultural, each and one of them needs to feel secure, equal and not feel discriminated in the learning environments they are part of. Therefore, multilingual and multicultural approaches to learning are not only celebrating diversity of languages and culture, but also urge everyone involved in the educational system to promote respect and tolerance for diversity. Culture “is profoundly involved in the processes and contents of education” (Erikson 2010, 36) and “shapes and is shaped by the learning and teaching that happens” (Erikson 2010, 36). In consequence, culture and cultural elements cannot be neglected within the educational system.

In addition, in multicultural pedagogy, students’ beliefs, life experiences and cultural values constitute the foundation on which teaching and learning takes place. This stresses the fact that learning is not just an individual activity but also a social one.

## Teachers

In the field of education and particularly in the area of foreign language learning, educators “should be trained to deal with the growing diversity of learners” (European Commission 2015, 5). The challenge resides in identifying appropriate training courses, in finding opportunities (available time, available money etc.) for teachers to attend these courses but also willingness to adopt such diverse changes requested by a multicultural pedagogy.

A teacher has to demonstrate genuine interest in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes that are conducive to multilingual and multicultural understanding. Still, one has to keep in mind the fact that "being an effective multicultural educator is a lifelong process" (Clauss-Ehlers 2006, 207).

This multi-layered diversity constitutes nowadays the norm in almost all societies. Still, this diversity can become according to Landenperä and Sandström "a challenge for the entire educational system" or "a didactic challenge" (2011, 91-93). Therefore, every element that is part of the educational system needs to undergo considerable changes in order to align itself to the requirements imposed by a multilingual or multicultural pedagogy.

In a multilingual setting, the teacher should:

- make use of all the languages available in the classroom;
- develop the multilingual repertoire of his students;
- promote an inclusive learning environment for students who have different mother-tongues and belong to diverse cultures;
- show respect for all languages;
- admit that linguistic diversity is a reality in daily life.

Teachers strengthen the professional relationship with their students when they make room in the classroom for learners' own languages, culture and traditions. Because "the multilingual classroom presents ample and creative openings for effective language learning and intercultural understanding" (Helot and Laoire 2011, XI) the teacher could design activities that engage learners' full language repertoire.

## Students

Because language is a "cultural tool" (Johnson, 2009, 3) learning a foreign language implies for learners a close contact with the target language culture. Gardner (2012, 78) puts an emphasis on the fact that "the study of language needs to be inclusive of the linguistic diversity in the social, local community and society at large". Learning a foreign language entails more than just learning grammar and vocabulary. In fact, it constitutes an opportunity to question one's identity in relation to mother-tongue culture and the target culture.

In the multilingual classroom, students should be encouraged to make use of all the language skills they have acquired and to operate their language competence so that they make use of the transfer of knowledge and skills between languages. Students should be encouraged to analyse their language repertoire in different contexts of communication, in formal and informal learning settings. The following activities could be appropriate for developing language skills and cultural awareness about other cultures available in the classroom:

- *find my match* - activity that involves work with idioms or sayings in different languages available in the classroom; this activity aims to develop students' language skills and their knowledge of culture general and culture specific representations;
- *foods around the world* - activity that develops students' language skills and knowledge about different types of traditional recipes;
- *movie night* - activity that requires students to write subtitles for a movie in which several foreign languages are used; this activity aims to develop students' language skills;
- *sister class project* with other multicultural schools from other towns or from abroad; this activity aims to develop students' language skills and intercultural attitudes, skills and knowledge.

Still, language learners have different relationships both to the target language they learn and to the target language culture. Therefore, despite exposure to diverse cultures, some learners tend to continue to use the framework of their own culture when interpreting different social and cultural events. Therefore, this view might be biased.

### **The curriculum**

The educational landscape has undergone various changes in order to adapt the learning process to a multicultural and a multilingual context. In foreign language pedagogy these changes should also be made visible in the curriculum. The curriculum is defined in the field of education as the amount of students' learning experiences in various educational settings.

In a multicultural school the curriculum should consider and address the impact differences in race, ethnicity, gender or religion have on the students' learning experiences, choice of instructional content and educational objectives. Such a multicultural curriculum should incorporate according to Gollnick and Chinn "the histories, experiences, traditions, and cultures of students in the classroom and supports and celebrates diversity in the broadest sense" (2009 in Vang 2010, 11). Thus, the students' identity would be taken into consideration in the teaching process. Moreover, set in a comprehensive and humanistic perspective, the learning process targets the development of the individual as a whole.

As regards multicultural and multilingual societies, Parker, Wade and Atkinson (2004, 76) suggest that for higher education the curriculum should consider the following aspects:

- develop skills, competencies and understanding in order to become actors in a complex world at local, national and global levels (teachers and students alike)

- take account of the complex multiple identities of people today
- produce curricula that develop an understanding of complex local and global issues
- develop transdisciplinary ways of working (language is not just a subject)

These current imperatives emphasize the need for developing mutual understanding and respect for diversity in formal educational settings. Learners need to understand that language learning is not just a subject matter in the timetable but a window to another culture; it expresses cultural and social identity. Moreover, language constitutes both a means for communication and for establishing relationships. A multicultural and a multilingual approach to teaching provide an understanding of cultural and linguistic differences on two levels: general and specific. In addition, this curriculum aims to explicitly address the need for understanding one's role in the educational process. It empowers both teachers and students. Still, the challenges in carrying out such a curriculum reside in lack of trained personnel, inconsistencies in education policies, critiques towards multicultural education or financial resources in order to implement this curriculum and to inform stakeholders about the benefits of such curriculum transformation.

## Conclusions

This paper intended to stress the fact that learning a foreign language entails much more than just learning grammar and vocabulary. In fact, it constitutes an opportunity to question one's identity in relation to mother-tongue culture and the target culture. In today's multicultural and multilingual societies, cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom should be perceived as a valuable resource and not as a problem. The discussion of this topic made reference to the following three elements: the teacher, the student and the curriculum.

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