Effects on the Linguistic Awareness of Foreign Language Learners

Zsuzsanna DÉGI

ELTEAL Department/ Department of Humanities
University of Szeged / University of Sapientia
zsiged@yahoo.com

Abstract. The last decade has witnessed a rapid increase in interest in multilingualism and the benefits of multilingual education have been advocated by many scholars during this last period. The aim of the study is to reflect upon how multilingualism is incorporated in the educational setting under investigation. In other words, the study focuses on multicompetent foreign language users and their language behavior during EFL classes. Several studies on multilingualism have shown that there are qualitative differences between second and third or additional language learning and that these can be ascribed to an increased level of metalinguistic awareness in the learner. The question is: Do the teachers' language behavior have an effect on the language awareness of the students? In order to answer this question the following qualitative research methods were used: classroom observation and interviews with learners. Results show that teachers' language behavior has a major effect on students' language use.

Keywords: multilingualism, language awareness, multicompetence, language use, EFL

1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a rapid increase in interest in multilingualism on the part of researchers, educators and policy makers. In Europe, this development is certainly linked to the commitment of the European Union to maintain and support a multilingual Europe. In 1995 it was proposed that EU citizens should be proficient in three European languages, their L1 and two other

community languages, to ensure multilingualism as an essential characteristic feature of the European identity.

Although, on a socio-political level, it is considered to be important to learn other European languages, multilingualism may possibly be seen as an exception by the European population because it is misunderstood in many important respects. Multilinguals are still expected to be as multiple monolinguals in one person, which most of the time necessarily leads to the treatment of multilinguals as incompetent speakers in each of their languages.

The benefits of multilingualism and multilingual education have been advocated by a number of scholars (Cook 2002, Laufer 2003, Pavlenko 2003, Jessner 2008) during the last decade. In particular, findings that emerged from new research fields like Third Language Acquisition (TLA) and inquiries that have been made around the notion of multicompetence, have contributed to a better understanding of multilingual processes and language use.

Until very recently (and this is still true for some of the schools and teachers), the only guarantee for successful instructed language learning seemed to be a strict separation of the languages in the multilingual learner and in the classroom. As has been just mentioned, in the traditional classroom the language subjects are often kept totally apart, and contact between the languages in the curriculum is rejected (sometimes even forbidden) since it is considered a hindrance to successful language learning. Consequently, teachers keep knowledge about other languages, including the L1, out of the classroom in order not to confuse students.

Yet, as recent research on TLA and multilingualism clearly shows, during multilingual production links are established between the languages in the multilingual mind and made use of. Additionally, metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive skills are developed as part of multilingual development and should also be fostered in an instructed context (Jessner 1999, 2006).

2. Multicompetence

Using multicompetence as a framework, this study intends to explore the behavior and language use of Transylvanian Hungarian minority students in an EFL classroom setting.

Over the last decade or so, the concept of multicompetence has attracted significant research attention in the field of applied linguistics and, in particular, in the study of multiple language use and learning. The idea of linguistic multicompetence was first proposed in the early 1990s as "the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind" (Cook 1991) and I believe it is the best notion that describes the linguistic competence of multilinguals. With the emergence of the notion of multicompetence, the term "language user" has also become preferred to that of "language learner" as the former regards the speaker not as an

unsuccessful native speaker but a different kind of person in their own right. Thus, the multicompetence perspective allows us to view language learners not as incompetent speakers of a language but as language users who have at their disposal an "extended and integrated linguistic repertoire" (Edwards and Dewaele 2007: 35) that is grounded in the actual linguistic practices they engage in.

This interpretation of the term multicompetence was further developed first by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2003), then by Edwards and Dewaele (2007), who defended the idea that multicompetence should not be perceived as a fixed, ideal end-state but rather as a dynamic, ever-evolving system. To explain the dynamic nature of the languages in contact in one mind Dewaele and Pavlenko (2003: 137) use the metaphor of liquid colors,

> [t]hat blend unevenly, that is, some areas will take on the new color resulting from the mixing, but other areas will retain the original color, while yet others may look like the new color, but a closer look may reveal a slightly different hue depending on the viewer's angle.

According to Dewaele and Pavlenko's view (2003: 137), multicompetence is a never-ending, complex, nonlinear dynamic process in the speaker's mind. This does not mean that parts of the system cannot be in equilibrium for a while; but a change in the environment, i.e., a change in the linguistic input, may cause widespread restructuring with some "islands" remaining in their original state (Edwards and Dewaele 2007: 225). Using the metaphor of a juggler, Edwards and Dewaele conclude that multilingual language use relies on "basically the same technique" linked to that individual's unique multicompetence (Edwards and Dewaele 2007: 235). Moreover, this ability to use several languages that speakers' have at their disposal becomes more complex as the input is more complex (Hall et. al 2006: 230).

The quote suggests that the term multicompetence has been introduced, not only to avoid making differences between the never-ending lines of bilingual, trilingual, quadrilingual, etc. competencies, but to stress the importance of the techniques and strategies that underlie the linguistic behavior of multilingual individuals. Concentrating on the behavior of multilingual individuals, I can state that they have a special ability of how to deal with languages in certain situations and what language to use in what circumstances. I understand this ability to handle effectively several languages as a technique possessed by multicompetent language users. Among the several factors that contribute to individual multilingualism one major ingredient is education, more specifically, foreign language education.

2.1. Application of the concept to foreign language teaching

This subsection first discusses Cook's (2002, 2006) proposals for language teaching based on the concepts of multicompetence and the L2 user, then I will present my own views on the application of this concept to FL teaching. Cook proposes that the external goals of language teaching should be related to the L2 user and not to the native speaker. While traditional methods of language teaching set the native speaker's use of language as their goal, the goal of language teaching from the L2 user perspective should be achieving proficient L2 users who have the ability to use languages in a variety of contexts. Teaching should help the students with L2 uses of language, most obviously translation and code-switching, and the standards against which L2 users are measured should also be L2 user standards, not L1 native speaker standards. The success of these students should be measured by the ability to use the second language effectively (Cook 2002: 335-6).

The role models should be successful L2 users and not native L1 users. If the proper goal is the L2 user, native speaker teachers have no intrinsic advantages. On the one hand, they are not using an L2 form of the language; on the other hand, their inability to speak the students' first language may be a less efficient role model for success in L2 learning. A non-native teacher may set the students a more feasible goal since, as Kramsch (1998: 19) puts it, "non-native teachers and students alike are intimidated by the native-speaker norm" and students may prefer the more achievable model of the fallible non-native speaker (Cook 2002: 337).

A further proposal is that the value of the L1 in the classroom should be emphasized. As I have mentioned in the introduction as well, earlier language teaching methods tried to avoid the L1 in the classroom. At one level, national syllabuses insisted that the L1 should be used as little as possible. In the classroom, then, students are never encouraged to see the first language as something that is part of themselves, whatever they do, and they are prevented from using their L1 as a tool in learning the second language (Cook 2002: 339-40).

As we could see from Cook's proposals, foreign language education faces rapid changes and challenges. We must also bear in mind that the so-called 'traditional' foreign language education was provided for elites and not for all learners where language learning was seen as a gateway to "high" culture and elite international communication. Today's society is experiencing a shift, which is gaining more emphasis together with the European Union's proposals to achieve a multilingual Europe. These changes mean that the expansion of the language repertoire is seen as important for all, not just for the elite (two languages in addition to one's mother tongue proposed by the European Council) and language learning goals are reconceptualized in functional/instrumental terms. Thus education, as one of the key factors in achieving multilingualism, is facing not just new views on linguistic norms but also new linguistic needs. The plurilingual

approach in the European educational discourse emphasizes the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other people, he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact (CoE 2001: 4).

Thus returning to Cook's proposal on the use of the L1 in the foreign language classroom, I would also add that additional language knowledge should also be taken into account when learning a foreign language. In our case, Transylvanian high school learners are already considered to be multilingual individuals, who, besides their L1, also have knowledge in at least two or three languages. In this way, English language teaching could also draw on this multilingual repertoire of the students, taking into account that both the L2 (Romanian) and the possible German or Italian languages are typologically closer to English than their Hungarian mother tongue.

3. Research Questions

Since the concept of multicompetence has been treated theoretically so far, the aim of the research was to show and describe its ways of manifestation in foreign language (FL) classrooms, thus reflecting upon how multilingualism is incorporated in the educational context under investigation.

Several studies on multilingualism have shown that there are qualitative differences between second and third or additional language learning and that these can be ascribed to an increased level of metalinguistic awareness in the learner as learners tend to rely on prior knowledge and they "try to connect the new elements to whatever linguistic and other knowledge" that they have (Ringbom 2007: 1). Thus, the following research questions focus on the learners' language awareness:

- Do students consider the use of other languages during EFL classroom as an asset in learning English?
- What are the languages that are viewed to help students in learning English?
- Do the teachers' linguistic behaviors and the language used as a medium of instruction have an effect on learners' language awareness?

4. Subjects/Setting

The research included the investigation of eight schools (both primary and secondary) from Central Transylvania but for the purpose of this paper I am using data collected in three secondary schools.

Fieldwork was carried out in two towns from Central Transylvania, two secondary schools from a bigger town with a population of 145,000 out of which 46% Hungarian minority population and one secondary school from a smaller town with a population of 18,000 out of which 25% Hungarian minority population. This region is selected, first, because it is multilingual in nature, consisting of a high rate of ethnic minority population, and, secondly, for practical reasons, it being my actual residence where I can have an insider's knowledge of the community and can, therefore, gain easier access to schools and the student population.

The reason for selecting these three schools is that all students are Hungarian minority high school learners. Students were in the 12th grade, their age ranging between 18 and 19. The chart below shows the description of the classrooms visited:

	Classroom 1	Classroom 2	Classroom 3
School type	Hungarian	Mixed[1]	Mixed
Teacher L1	Hungarian	Hungarian	Romanian
Student L1	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian

At the beginning of the research process field relations were established, consents were gained from stakeholders. The data gathering procedure included several steps from which I am going to analyze the data from classroom observations and interviews with students. In each classroom there was an EFL class recorded, placing several digital recorders around the classroom. Observations are a useful means for gathering in-depth information about such phenomena as the types of languages, activities, interactions, instruction and events that occur in second and foreign language classrooms (Mackey and Gass 2005: 186-7). Then semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with 3 students in each class. The interviews aimed to explore the students' perception on language use during the EFL class and their views on their own multicompetence and language use. The interviews were carried out in Hungarian, the mother tongue of the students and were recorded by digital voice recorders. Unlike observations that focus on people's behavior, interviews examine people's views and values, and therefore can be much more in-depth in discovering, uncovering, unmasking feelings, thoughts, views and

---

[1] Mixed schools are schools with two parallel sections, Hungarian and Romanian. This does not mean that students are mixed within one class, but there are for example two 12th grade classes, one Hungarian and one Romanian.

conceptions. As Jones (2003: 258) argues, "in order to understand other persons' construction of reality, we would do well to ask them".

5. Classroom observation results

In order to analyze the recorded classroom interaction, a qualitative means of data analysis was used. As I am particularly interested in the language use and linguistic behavior of teachers and learners, the transcripts were analyzed mainly for code choice and code-switching patterns. The framework used for classroom discourse analysis was ethnography of communication approach, which "recognizes the influence of culture and social realities in seeking to find holistic explanations for meaning and behavior" (McKay 2006: 102).

Concentrating on the behavior of multilingual individuals I examined teachers' and students' language use during English classrooms. Understanding multicompetence as a technique and an ability to use the languages existent in an individual's linguistic repertoire I focused on code-switching and language shift inside the English class.

A general overview of classroom language use in these settings would look like the following:

Hungarian school/ HU teacher	Mixed school/ HU teacher	Mixed school/ RO teacher
Teacher language use: ONLY ENGLISH	Teacher language use: English and Hungarian	Teacher language use: English and Romanian
On-record student language use: English mainly and some informal matter in Hungarian	On-record student language use: English, Hungarian and Romanian	On-record student language use: English, Romanian
Student-student interaction: Hungarian	Student-student interaction: Hungarian	Student-student interaction: Hungarian

Research has observed that teacher-initiated code switches are most likely to occur in cases of giving explanations, asking/answering questions and exercising discipline. As for student-initiated code switches, they are most frequent in asking and answering questions, which are "on-record" and student-student "off-record" conversations and during group work.

The recordings from the Hungarian high school showed that the teacher used TL (English) for classroom management, for presentation of material and for interaction with learners. The dominant classroom discourse was TL discourse and the mother tongue of students/teachers was totally disregarded, although they shared the same mother tongue. In the Hungarian school there is one attempt from

the part of the learners to use their mother tongue in relation to some off-task interaction with the teacher about a tap that went wrong. The teacher clearly rejects the use of the students' mother tongue and she exerts her authority in class by repeating the students' explanation in English. Her authority is clearly manifested as well as her preference for using exclusively the target language.

There is an important observation to point out in the case of the mixed school with Hungarian teacher, namely, if both teachers and students learning English are of Hungarian mother tongue, what role does the occurrence of Romanian language have there? The variety of languages used in mixed schools is wider and teachers are more flexible in terms of code switches. In this case, a student signals that she has problems with translating a part of the text and after the teacher's encouraging and eliciting words she does the translation into Romanian. The teacher repeats the same words in Hungarian and continues to translate the text.

In the mixed school with a Romanian teacher again there are at least three languages used. The children speak Romanian to negotiate disciplinary issues and to ask for clarification in both meaning and task instructions. As students are native speakers of Hungarian they also use Hungarian among themselves for off-task communication, group discussion and meaning clarification. Hungarian is not used in communication with the teacher as she lacks Hungarian language knowledge. Therefore there is no explicit reference to the students' native language, though it is present in the transcript.

In spite of the great variety of in-settings there are some general "trends" that could be traced. Teachers and students draw on (parts of) their plurilingual repertoire in a common sense way, to advance the orderly progress of instruction (code-switching between languages, e.g., to negotiate new meanings, to manage the classroom and to discuss metalinguistic concepts). Still the setting/environment and the teachers' linguistic repertoire in particular, have a great influence on language use in the classroom. Teachers model and control classroom language use through their linguistic behavior and practice (manifest authority or prove flexibility). Although classroom observations reflect the existence of at least three languages (Hungarian, Romanian and English), these languages are not compared or contrasted; the other language (RO/HU) serves as a tool in making the target language more accessible.

6. Student interview results

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to gather information about students' perspective on classroom language use and their language awareness. Thus, 9 students were interviewed in the three high schools from Central Transylvania. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and are between 15-40 minutes.

Interviews also show a great variety in the languages used during an English lesson. Students confirm our results from classroom observations, namely, other languages than English are used as well during an English class. The use of these languages differs from class to class as it was presented before.

The most surprising observation for me was that students from the Hungarian school – when asked about which languages they consider helpful in learning English – did not mention Romanian at all as being helpful in learning English but referred to their German teacher using English as language of instruction. This could be partly explained by the attitudes of Hungarian students towards learning Romanian, perceived as an obligation and partly by the official status of the school, being a monolingual Hungarian high school. Though the school is officially a monolingual institution, its teachers and students cannot be called monolinguals as they are to a greater or lesser degree already multilinguals.

The interview results show that students who come from the town with a smaller Hungarian population (Classroom 2) or students who have Romanian native-speaker English teachers (Classroom 3) claim to use more Romanian during class. Interviewees who have a greater exposure to Romanian language tend to be more aware of the help that Romanian language represents in learning English.

Below I am going to present some extracts from the interview transcript showing students' perception of the help of Romanian in learning English.

(1)

Könnyebb nekem angolról románra fordítani, mert könnyebben megtalálom a szó értelmét, magyarra pedig nehezebb, mert könnyebb angolról románra, mert hasonlítanak a szavak.

(IntMSPrim)

[It is easier for me to translate from English into Romanian, because it is easier to find the meaning of the word; translation into Hungarian is more difficult, because it is easier to translate from English into Romanian, because the words resemble.]

(2)

Milyen más nyelveket használtok angol órán belül?
A magyart, és a románt is egyszer-egyszer.
Azt mire használjátok?
Amikor nem tudjuk lefordítani magyarra, könnyebb románra, egyszerűbb.

(IntLUDSec)

[What other languages do you use during English classes?
Hungarian and sometimes Romanian.
What do you use them for?

When we cannot translate it into Hungarian, it is easier into Romanian, it is simpler.]

What we can see from the two interview extracts above is that Romanian represents mainly an aid in the case of translations, due to its typological closeness and cognates viewed by students as "words that resemble". It is interesting, how the typological closeness between learner's L2 and English, mentioned as a resource already at the beginning of this paper, is being noticed by the students and perceived as a useful strategy in foreign language learning. The perceived typological closeness between languages can represent further evidence for Ringbom's statement that language learners, when learning a new language, tend to rely on their prior knowledge and connect new elements to whatever linguistic or other knowledge they have (Ringbom 2007: 1).

(3)
   A tanárnő elmagyarázza románul, van amikor angolul is.
   Miket szokott románul elmagyarázni a tanárnő?
   Hát például a szavak értelmét elmagyarázza, hogy ha lefordít egy szöveget, elmagyarázza, hogy mit jelent, mert vannak nekünk is olyan szavak még, amiket románból nem tanultunk s még nem értjük, s még nem tudjuk azt a fogalmat.

                                                                              (IntMSPrim)
   [The teacher explains it in Romanian, but sometimes in English as well.
   What are the things that are explained in Romanian?
   Well, for example, she explains the meaning of the words, or when she translates a text, she explains what it means, because we also have some Romanian words we haven't learnt yet and we don't know, and we don't know that notion.]

   Using more languages in the class is thought to be beneficial and students say that they spare time by having things explained in their mother tongue or second language, as they can understand it better and move on to the next task. They understand grammar better if it is explained in Hungarian or Romanian respectively. The most common picture of an English class, on the basis of the interviews, is that "things are explained to us in Hungarian, the examples are in English" (translated from Hungarian). During group activities students use their mother tongue to discuss the task and present their answers in English. Interviewees favour multiple language use in the foreign language classroom and formulate their needs referring to the use of the other languages they are competent in.
   As a concluding remark, we can say that interviews also witness the existence of multiple language use during English classes no matter what classroom setting

we are looking at. Students tend to use those languages in which they are more proficient or languages they are exposed to at most as strategies in foreign language learning. The three interview transcripts above bring evidence not solely to the need of using more languages but also show a certain degree of learners' linguistic awareness existing mainly at an intuitive level.

7. Conclusions

Both classroom observations and student interviews showed that the use of multiple languages is indeed present in a real-life, natural classroom context, where both students and teachers bring other languages into class.

We have seen examples of teacher and student code switches serving different purposes: enhancing understanding, encouraging, resolving problems, etc. The differential effects of teacher code switches had already been rendered in previous research (cf. Lee 2009) and the author's conclusion was that code-switching young and adult learner groups qualified significantly better in comparison to the English-only groups. Looking at our data, where both teacher and student code switches are present and where students perceive teacher code-switching as a useful strategy in language learning we may suggest that teacher's code-switching might be more beneficial as translations or quick discussions may save time for more or other type of learning.

We have also seen examples of student's code switch, where the other language served as a resource to solve a language problem during translation exercises. Several studies touch the topic that language users choose the typologically closest, i.e. the most similar language to transfer. Learners who know a number of languages are more likely to show influence from the foreign language typologically nearest to the target language (cf. Williams and Hammarberg 1998, Ushioda 2007).

We could see that even if some teachers try to stick to the idea of separating languages in the class (Classroom 1), these other languages are still activated during an English class and switches between languages occur. Instructional goals, target language activities and metalinguistic activities concern target standard language only and other languages are invisible from this point of view. The results of the present study show how teachers' linguistic behaviour and practice model and control classroom language use. While teachers from monolingual schools favour an exclusively target language education, mixed-school teachers allow for a more varied use of the available languages, however, these languages are not used consciously for an integrative foreign language learning. Thus teachers may need to develop ways in which to promote multicompetence in the foreign language classroom, firstly by they themselves modelling and reflecting upon multiple language use and communication strategies.

Overall, on the basis of these findings, I suggest that instructional goals in language education should be reviewed and adjusted to the needs of today's multilingual society. If we accept the multicompetence approach, then language education needs to move on from an additive view of multilingualism towards a more integrative one, where prior linguistic knowledge of the students can be exploited and metalinguistic awareness is developed within foreign language instruction.

Acknowledgements

References

Cook, Vivian. 1991. The poverty of the stimulus argument and multicompetence. *Second Language Research* 7: 103-117.

Cook, Vivian. 1992. Evidence for multicompetence. *Language Learning* 42(4): 557-591.

Cook, Vivian. 2002. *Portraits of the L2 User*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cook, Vivian. 2006. The nature of the L2 user. Written draft of EUROSLA Plenary. http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/Writings/Papers/EURO2006.htm, Date of access: January 28, 2008.

Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dewaele, Jean-Marc & Aneta Pavlenko. 2003. Productivity and lexical richness in native and non-native speech: A study of cross-cultural effects. In Cook, Vivian (ed.), *The effects of the second language on the first*, 120-141. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Edwards, Malcom & Jean-Marc Dewaele. 2007. Trilingual conversations: A window into multicompetence. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 11(2): 221-242.

Hall, Joan Kelly, Cheng An & Carlson T. Matthew. 2006. Reconceptualizing multicompetence as a theory of language knowledge. *Applied Linguistics* 27(2): 220-240.

Jessner, Ulrike. 1999. Metalinguistic awareness in multilinguals: Cognitive aspects of third language learning. *Language Awareness* 3&4: 201-209.

Jessner, Ulrike. 2006. *Linguistic awareness in multilinguals: English as a third language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Jessner, Ulrike. 2008. Teaching third languages: findings, trends and challenges. *Language Teaching* 41(1): 15-56.

Jones, Sue. 2003. Depth interviewing. In Seale, Clive (ed.), *Social research methods*. 257-260. London: Routledge.

Kramsch, Claire. 1998. The privilege of the intercultural speaker. In Byram, Michael & Michael Fleming (eds.), *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography,* 16-31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laufer, Batia. 2003. The influence of L2 on L1 collocational knowledge and on L1 lexical diversity in free written expression. In Cook, Vivian (ed.), *Effects of the second language on the first,* 19-32. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Mackey, Alison and Susan M. Gass. 2005. *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McKay, Sandra Lee. 2006. *Researching second language classrooms*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pavlenko, Aneta. 2003. 'I feel clumsy speaking Russian': L2 influence on L1 in narratives of Russian L2 users of English. In Cook, Vivian (ed.), *Effects of the second language on the first*, 32-62. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Ringbom, Håkan. 2007. Cross-linguistic similarity in foreign language learning. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Ushioda, Ema. 2007. Motivation, autonomy and sociocultural theory. In Benson, P. (ed.), *Learner autonomy 8: Teacher and learner perspectives,* 5-24. Dublin: Authentik.

Williams, Sarah and Hammarberg, Bjorn. 1998. Language switches in L3 production: implication for a polyglot speaking model. *Applied linguistics* 19: 295-333.