

MULTILINGUALISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Multilingualism

In the European Union, multilingualism has become a political goal but also a political need.

Today nearly 500 million people with different historical, social and cultural backgrounds live and work in the European Union. Out of many diverse nations, communities, cultures and language groups, a single European Union is built around the equal interchange of ideas and traditions.

There is therefore a political need to increase multilingualism in the European Union. The goals of forging cohesion between Member States, and enhancing the feeling of being European citizens in the citizens of those States, can be reached through intercultural understanding and enhanced communication skills (Commission of the European Communities 2003).

Yet there is also an economic need to increase multilingualism in Europe. Trade between the Member States of the European Union is growing every year (Biancone 2006). So-called Euregios are being developed across the borders of the Member States (Perkmann 2002). Exchanges between the inhabitants of the European Union are becoming more and more frequent.

Moreover, even though many Member States of the European Union are officially monolingual countries, the linguistic situation is more complex. In each State, there is an official language, one or more minority languages, and other languages spoken by large groups of immigrants (Nelde, Strubell and Williams 1996).

Therefore, not only single individuals, but also States are interested that all people can speak one or more languages, besides their mother tongue.

Language acquisition

What is the best way to develop adequate linguistic proficiency in several languages?
This research field was investigated not only by linguists and educators, but also by psychologists and neurophysiologists.

Speaking and understanding speech, reading and writing depend upon the usage of certain specialized areas of one brain's hemisphere: the dominant hemisphere.

During the first years of their life, children listen to other speaking subjects, who utter specific verbal sounds. In this way, children program their brains with the phonemes (basic phonetic sounds) of the language they hear all around them. Later, they will use these basic units to form words and sentences. In other words, during the early period of life, children deposit, in a specific area of the

brain, language units which they will use later for additions to their vocabulary. These words and sentences will form the basis for all motor activity, thinking and other intellectual functions (Crowell, Jones, Lee, Schuchert, Schumann and Wood 2004).

If, during the early period of their life, children are in contact with people who speak other languages, they will lay down language units of each of those secondary languages, and these language units will remain life-long (Mayberry, Lock and Kazmi 2002).

Years later, the few hundreds of words which a child acquires early in each language can seem to be lost, but the speech units, the deep structures of each language, will never be lost.

For this reason, if a child is casually exposed to a second language, he will be able to speak both languages easily, and to switch effortlessly from one to another.

But learning a second language later in life is fundamentally different from acquiring it early. After the age of 10 - 12 a child's brain can no longer encode new basic language units in the same way.

If a subject tries to learn a second language as a teenager or adult, he will use a mental translation process and will speak the second language with the accents of his native tongue (Singleton 2001).

In fact, linguists claim, the processes used by early learners and older ones in treating both phonology and morphology are fundamentally different (Lightbown and Spada 2006).

Phonology is the system of the specific speech sounds which characterize a language. Phonological production and perception are especially affected by the critical period, so that older learners have accents and often misperceive phonetic features (Flege 1987; Scovel 1989).

As regarding morphology, which is the system of word-forming elements and processes in a language (such as inflection, derivation, and compounding), early learners treat morphology analytically, whereas older learners treat it holistically. It follows that early learners know more about the details of lexical items than older learners (Newport 1990).

Researchers investigated why language is acquired best in early childhood and found that the age constraints on language acquisitions seem to be caused by brain maturation. In other words, the superiority for language acquisition shown by young children is due to the plasticity of their younger brain (Penfield and Roberts 1959; Lenneberg 1967).

Using magnetic resonance imaging techniques to map brain activity in healthy, bilingual adults, researchers found important differences based on the age at which the second language was acquired. Researchers found that the brains of the adults who had learned two languages as very young children stored those languages together in the same area of the brain. On the contrary, those who acquired a second language in adolescence, used a second region of the brain near the first, but separate.

The research suggests that babies and preschoolers learn languages in their environment without apparent effort because their brain encodes these languages into specific hardwired neuronal circuits. Yet when adolescents and adults learn a second language the language acquisition process is quite different.

Therefore, in accordance with the demands of the brain's physiology, since the specific brain areas are more plastic and receptive in the first decade of life, the optimum age to begin general schooling in secondary languages is between 4 and 10.

For this reason, according to the Action Plan, Member States of the European Union offer their pupils the opportunity to learn one or two foreign languages from the first years of primary school.

Teaching foreign languages in the primary school: general aims

In each European primary school the percentage of immigrant children has grown very much in the last years (Bosisio 2005). Moreover, in some Member States, among which Italy, children with special needs, regardless of the severity of their illness, attend regular classes during compulsory school.

Therefore there is a need to integrate these children in their class group, promoting the harmonic development of their personality, while paying particular attention to emphasizing the individual abilities and potentials not only in learning contents, but also in communicating, socializing, and forming relationships.

Indeed, the present theory of integration emphasizes the specific differences of each individual. It points out that every single difference can be, for each member of a group, a source of stimulation and proposal, reflection and discovery of his own identity.

In this way ethnic, cultural and physical diversities are not emphasized in order to create divisions, but on the contrary take on great value in uniting individuals in the group. In other words, pedagogists claim, each child can contribute to the psychological, emotional and cognitive development of the class group with his/her experience and culture.

Therefore, specific didactic methods are required when there are immigrant children (who use different languages, which are embedded in different cultures) and children with special needs in a class. These methods must aim at promoting communication, socialization and relationship-forming, emphasizing that diversity is a source of psychological, emotional and cognitive development for each participant in the group (Milani, Cambiaghi and Pontani 2005).

Teaching foreign languages in the primary school: methods

As at the primary stage pupils' attention time is quite short, teachers have to diversify methods and forms of teaching and learning, as regards to

- time-table of foreign languages courses
- classroom social climate
- presence of children of immigrants and children with special needs (Balboni 1989).

The first important aspect of modern didactic methods is their effort in sustaining pupils' motivation: in fact, when learners are interested in a topic, they are motivated to acquire a language to communicate (Mariani and Pozzo 2002).

Indeed, there is a so-called "affective filter", which can prevent or block the input necessary to acquisition. A low affective filter is therefore desirable. Learners who are motivated, relaxed and have a good self-image and self-confidence are more receptive to the input they receive. On the contrary, bored learners have a high affective filter which can prevent acquisition. (Krashen 1981)

A second important aspect of modern didactic methods follows from the concept that language learning has to be meaningful (Novak 2001).

As pupils need time to acquire a new language, it is important to offer them a natural, meaningful system for language development, which includes both interaction between teacher and pupils, and between pupils, for instance through working in groups.

Indeed, there are two different ways of developing skills in a foreign language (Porcelli 1994). In the first way the foreign language acquisition develops similarly to the acquisition of child's mother tongue – with no conscious attention to language form. In this way acquisition is an unconscious process, and is used to create spontaneous messages in the target language.

Then there is a second way of developing skills in a foreign language, which should not be considered alternative, but complementary to the first way. In this second way learning is considered as a conscious process: the aim of this process is to develop conscious rules about the foreign language. Yet even grammar can be presented in a playful style (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva 1981).

For instance pupils can write short sentences on paper strips and color nouns and pronouns with a red, verbs with a blue, adjectives with a yellow, and articles with a green background. Then they can substitute each “brick” with another brick of the same colour: a noun with another noun or with a pronoun, a verb with another verb, and so on. In this way they can do grammatical exercises without getting bored, and practise not only an unconscious, but also a systematic methodological approach to language.

A third important aspect of modern didactic methods is their “interdisciplinarity”, that is their use of other communication media that can help comprehension: pictures, mime, gestures, music, and so on.

In the primary school most activities are aimed to develop perception and processing of different kinds of visual, auditory and gesture stimuli (Richieri 1988). For this reason, foreign language lessons can be integrated with graphs, tables, maps and charts (Taeschner 2002). Many terms and grammatical rules can be acquired “in a musical way”, through pronunciation exercises, popular music, hits and songs. Specific mimic and movements can be added to spoken or sung texts, and vice-versa, suitable songs and verbal texts can be uttered in walking/running along routes (Margarito 1991).

Through organized play, singing, mimic activities, etc., teachers can help pupils to use and interchange the various languages, so becoming able to make better use of their physical, expressive and communicative means (Semola 1996).

Conclusions

To conclude, using music, mime, movements, etc. in teaching foreign languages in the primary school can be useful and effective to:

- improve pupils' overall/specific competence in the foreign language
- develop multilingual interests and attitudes
- increase pupils' motivation
- raise standards of attainment across the curriculum
- develop an interdisciplinary approach to some subjects

Last but not least, acquisition of foreign languages can improve understanding of the partner communities and open pupils' minds to the thought and the culture of other communities, thus building a bridge to peace (D'Andretta 1999).

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