

The Importance of Being Multilingual

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Abstract

1. Globalization has impacts on the language policies throughout the world. Awareness of the multilingual diversity of mankind inaugurates a world-wide recognition of multilingual education as a necessity. Bilingual education, in many respects, is the first stage in multilingual education.
2. Bilingualism has many facets pertinent to a great variety of potential application of language(s) in a person's everyday private life, interpersonal relations, and social activities, working life, political affiliations, civic performances and international networks.
3. Due to the multifaceted essence of bilingualism its most typical forms are asymmetrical instead of earlier presumption that bilingualism *per se* is a symmetrical or nearly symmetrical command of two languages: L1 and L2. Nowadays when bilingualism is a widely spread phenomenon in human intercourse ample evidence testifies to the fact that the scale of variations in the degrees and levels of L2 competences is immense. Therefore it is more precise to say that in the majority of cases bilingualism is asymmetrical.
4. Recognition of asymmetry in the bilingual practice has important connotations in bilingual education in particular. A logical impact of asymmetrical bilingualism in methodology and curriculum planning has led to the implementation of the so-called modular teaching and learning styles which allow responding to the individual needs and adapting to the requirements of the given learning situation.
5. Bilingual education is a highly potential kind of education that according to the assessment of many researchers is the most fruitful approach to education in the 21st century.
6. Methodological, pedagogical and psychological aspects of bilingual education offer wide vistas for research, discoveries and innovations. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL), knowledge and language integrated learning (KLIL), leading to interactivity and creativity in the learning process are but a few of them.

Bilingualism is the first step towards multilingualism. From the point of view of social intercourse and inclusion strategies, bilingualism is a must for any human who is active and wants to be socially and intellectually effective in our global world. Almost two thirds of mankind are bilingual, trilingual or multilingual. Thus, this ability is not an exception; rather, I would say, it is a rule. In this context, monolingualism is an aftereffect of isolation, segregation, exclusion — all of which are socially and economically non-productive phenomena.

Decades were needed to convince educators and society at large that linguistic competence in more than one language is an asset, not a threat either to the psychic health and well-being of the individual or to the educational success and intellectual achievement. In Europe, multilingualism is one of the corner-stones of a true European identity building and a pre-requisite of the enforcement of the freedoms and

rights enshrined in the treaties. Among them an important right is the freedom of movement — free movement of individuals, of goods and of services. If the citizens of EU27 had been mainly monolingual, each speaking only his or her native language, the implementation of this fundamental right would have been virtually unrealistic because of the impossibility to find a common language in the new contacts that this free movement offers. Thus bi/multilingualism is a benefit, the beneficiaries being individuals, countries, people and society.

Thus nowadays, we can definitely say that a wide spread of the notion of language economy indicates that investment in linguistic education and development of language competence “pays off” because it bears noticeable economical profit.

At the same time, language economy is an ambivalent notion. It provokes us to think about linguistic education from the point of view of the greatest returns on the input cost, effort and capacity. If cost-effectiveness alone is promoted as the ultimate goal, two or three “big” languages of the world can be regarded as the most "profitable" and competitive ones in such a market values oriented approach. Unrestricted predominance of the economical approach in language planning and language policy would facilitate certain “linguistic imperialism” which could be devastating for many other languages that are less powerfully represented in the “linguistic market place” but not less significant from the point of view of linguistic diversity which is the common wealth of mankind.

However, the language ideology of the European Union also rests upon the recognition of the linguistic rights of people which explains why EU recognizes the languages of all the 27 member states as the official languages of the EU. This is the logical basis of the support to language teaching/learning and the promotion of a requirement for each individual European citizen to learn at least 2 languages besides his/her native language. This creates a strong impetus for the development of language acquisition, theory, methodology and practice. This is a strong impetus not only for the Europeans but for people all over the world.

Latest research and academic studies have proved that bi/multilingualism provides for broad and deep content acquisition at school and development of creativity in everyday activities. Linguistic skills mean wider possibilities for any individual being – that is a plain truth. The development of bilingual skills and multilingual awareness enhances the creative potential and achievement of individual, enlarges his or her outlook, world perception, ability to perceive the “holographic universe” where everything rests upon interlinking and reciprocity. It positively influences the results in all the walks of human life and activities. Thus the productivity of bilingualism can be experienced not only in the linguistic area alone. The development of special thinking habits and abilities to get actively involved in a great variety of processes and proceedings has produced a significant added value to what originally started as a modest attempt to teach/ to learn a second language, to develop an applicable and effective second-language-teaching methodology, to create a body of well-educated and methodologically equipped teachers and teacher trainers, to establish university programmes in bilingualism and bilingual research. In this field, Latvia started from a scratch, so did Georgia. Today, more than ten years later, we can assess the results achieved and review the road map for further activities. We have gathered useful

experience that needs to be compared, evaluated and appreciated and adapted, if need be.

Learning for real, not for a curriculum-driven test

More than that — the experience in bilingual education that has been accumulated during the last decade in the European Union has enabled teachers, educationalists and language ideology makers arrive at a conclusion that linguistic competence cannot be achieved in language classes alone.

Curriculum planning ought to get adapted to the fast developments of the educational scene. Never has this area been so populated by vast varieties of learners practically representing all the age groups starting from the pre-school age and ending with persons approaching the end of their lives. It is a real field of life-long-learning and a real challenge for educationalists, in particular for language and second language learners and teachers. As regards adult learners, much prejudice has been voiced against adults as potential language learners. Especially, politicians often reiterate that there after a certain age an individual can hardly learn languages. Apart from the fact that it is, in fact, discriminatory on the grounds of age and it does not comply with the fundamental rights of each individual's development, this prejudice is an unsubstantiated attempt to mystify language learning and limit the developmental capacities of a healthy human. Educationalists know that each age group has specific abilities, needs and possible ways how to achieve the desired result. For adult learners whose needs are usually immediate and practical, one of possible learning tools are modules — like mini-programmes that can be adapted to any learner audience, its prerequisites and needs. Module oriented strategy has several advantages as well as a number of limitations.

As to the advantages; modules are based on very concrete and therefore narrow subject, function or attitude, since its content is finite, it can be applied with the help of computer based instruction. With the help of IT technologies the instruction can make use of the benefits of cooperative learning for clearly defined purpose. Community building on the basis of learning activities enables to achieve additional positive results, e.g., broader learning environment, better interaction and support (via questions, answers, clarifications, and evaluation and mutual control) within the community of learners. The adult learner manages i) to master the given linguistic material in the module; ii) to acquire and consolidate communicative skills that are applicable in a broader context and give the learner additional feeling of continuity. Therefore in module-based language teaching the instructor and/or material developer should highlight the stable, basic formulas, patterns or invariants on the one hand, indicating that this pattern can be used in many other situations. Usefulness and applicability is helpful to all learners, but adults in particular, since such an emphasis enables them to concentrate their attention on the essentials. (About the peculiarities of adult learner learning strategies rich material is accumulated thanks to life-long-learning programmes); iii) self-directed learning (SDL) is combined with team-based learning (TBL) An experiment of this type of learning process is described by Susan E. Conway, Jeremy L. Johnson and Toni L. Ripley. (See: Integration of Team-Based Learning Strategies Into a Cardiovascular Module, 2010-American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy: In: Am J Pharm Educ. 2010 March 10; 74(2): 35). It is noteworthy to point out that the assessment of the strategy contains also such a statement: "Student and faculty satisfaction improved with the addition of SDL

assignments and TBL cases without adverse effects on grades in the wake of the 14% decrease in lecture time. Total faculty time required increased primarily in the first year because of development of course materials.” (Underscoring mine – B.Š.); iv) acquisition and enhancement of active learning strategies lead to increased social and professional activity that is characterized by a higher self-awareness and self-confidence. Consequently, the quality of life improves exponentially. Larry Michaelsen elaborates a Team-based learning concept. Among its beneficial effects he marks as follows: *“As the students begin to trust each other and develop a commitment to the goals and welfare of the group, they become a team. When they become a cohesive team, the team can do things that neither a single individual nor a newly-formed group can do.”* (See: in Professional Development Module on Active Learning by Diane Starke, El Paso Community College, website Texas Collaborative for Teaching Excellence, May14, 2011, <http://www.texascollaborative.org/activelearning.htm>); v) the temporal aspect in module based learning strategy is also an important advantage since it allows for individualized options of the speed or tempo of the learning process. It can be easily adapted to any concrete case and adjusted to specific needs. In self-directed learning it is an obligatory prerequisite. Module-based strategies ensure it.

The list of advantages might be continued, since the positive effects are numerous and many-sided. Nonetheless, it is likewise important to be fully aware of the factors which, if disregarded or neglected, may create problems and lead to zero result or even failures. Bilingual studies presuppose a two-track learning activity — the content track and the language track. In order to achieve good results these tracks should be carefully coordinated and structured. For the teacher and/or material designer the both tracks are equally demanding. Ideally, both in the process of instruction and in material development a team of at least two teachers would be desirable: a subject teacher, who takes care for the content aspect, and a methodologist, expert in bilingual education. The essential task of the team is to produce a material, a module, an activity or a course book or whatever might be necessary for learning purposes, keeping in mind the two purposes and the two-track compositional structure of the whole thing. All the learning is dealing both with the subject matter, on the one hand, and its linguistic form of representation, on the other hand. Each of these aspects is equally important; none of them is truly effective without the other. In a bilingual educational situation when the subject matter is presented, represented, processed, assessed and reviewed in L2, the linguistic track needs to be particularly attended to and carefully structured, and balanced. Additional methodological support and language tools should be provided. Content teachers who are not linguists sometimes tend to think that glossaries, dictionaries, word lists are the needed support in bilingual education. They certainly do provide support, no doubt. However, they do not exhaust the whole range of possible didactic material and methodological support that can be used to a greater effect than the above-mentioned traditional resources. Reference can be sought in instructions, guide-books and handbooks, maps, plans, schemes, documents, minutes, surveys, interviews, tables, questionnaires, pictures, broadcasts, videos, databases etc. The list is practically infinite because it relies on real life as the main resource of linguistic reference. Thus the material designers and instructors in bilingual educational ought to encourage and empower the learner to make use of the wide learning possibilities that real life offers to each of us, first of all, by creating problems that we are to face and try to solve.

A factor that creates difficulties to module designers and learners is the relatively loose link between different modules. Module itself is a small piece of a large entity. There is a risk that in a module-based learning some relevant part of the whole pattern may fall out or be overlooked. There are ways how to compensate for this risk by approaching a problem from many perspectives. Among many other possible options it is advisable to a learner (especially to adult learner who consciously has decided to master an area) to seek a real life or on-line contact with an instructor or professional for an informal session of questions and answers which may be a pleasant reassurance for the learner that he or she is heading in the right direction; or else - receive directions for further improvement.

Admitting the great variety of factors that are to be taken into account when organizing educational process in general and that of bilingual education in particular, one initial thing is of paramount importance — the need to recognize the simple truth that to know a language theoretically (i.e., to be perfect about “grammatically correct” forms) is not identical with the ability to use the language adequately in real life situations according to the functional need. On the other hand, the functional linguistic needs do not obligatorily and not always demand a very high level of the linguistic competence. There are many stories that circulate in popular memory about cases when very limited education and partial knowledge of another language has been sufficiently helpful in a needy situation. It can also be observed in many cases with children, for example, who in a multilingual environment react adequately and can communicate with a person in a foreign language because children more often than not are intuitively responsive to the situation, its requirements and its meaning and are more readily adapted to these requirements. To understand, and to communicate in this environment requires not so much knowledge of purely linguistic forms and norms (grammar rules and patterns of syntax) but beyond that – also something else, motivation, communicative flexibility, ability to interact with the interlocutor and desire to establish a contact. In other words, bilingualism, in contrast to an occasional tendency to mystify and misrepresent this trend among many non-specialists, is not a formal language skill with very strict requirements and standard norms regulate and which you either have or have not.

It would be naïve to believe that once you have this skill, especially as confirmed in an adequately documented and asserted test assessment, you can rest at peace; you will always be the very same bilingual you were at the moment of the test. The actual reality is much more complex. Like the proof of the pudding is in the eating, bilingualism is an endless actualization and sharpening and enhancement of bilingual competences. Unless this competence is regularly practiced, it may get lost. It is comparable to a complex process of negotiations. Some of the language devices used in this process of negotiation are repetitions, recasts, confirmations, reformulations, comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests and other adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content until an understanding is achieved. Thus the truth that it is important to keep in mind is that bilingual competence and skills are variables in a social environment that functions as the argument. If the argument loses meaning, the function gradually grows superfluous and inevitably becomes redundant, at the end passing into oblivion.

Consequently, it is an axiomatic truth that bilingualism is never static. It is constantly changing, dynamic, it is fluid. The level of individual bilingualism, the bilingualism

of a certain group or community fluctuates. In a way, it might be compared to tide with its rises and falls, except for the lack of strict regularity. Fluctuations in bilingual competences depend on a great variety of contextual factors that determine the need of bilingualism and motivation to strengthen it, as well as possibilities to exercise these skills. In case the motivation, need and chance complement each other and are steadily positive, there is no fall in the development of bilingualism. This seems to be true not only regarding individual educational development but also the development at the nation level.

Bilingualism (and multilingualism) is a life-long aspiration, its end is a never ending consummation. To end this brief elaboration of the importance of being multilingual, I want to cite an anonymous educationalist: "As education throughout the world becomes increasingly multilingual and multicultural, we must look beyond the individual learning the language system and consider language as a medium of learning, the coordination of language learning and content learning, language socialization as the learning of language and culture... and discourse in the context of social practice." How true!

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