

Goethe-Universität, Fachbereich 10

Institut für England- und Amerikastudien

Abt. Sprachlehrforschung / Didaktik der englischen Sprache

“Exploring and Researching Teacher's Professional Vision in Multilingual Classrooms”

Dr. Niesen

13. Fachsemester, L3 (Kunst, Englisch)

Kleine Hausarbeit

31.03.2017

The Multilingual EFL Classroom

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Table of contents

1	Why does multilingual-sensitive teaching matter?	1
2	Taking a closer look at multilingualism in the EFL classroom	2
2.1	The Monolingual Approach.....	3
2.2	Supporter Languages	4
2.3	Code-Switching	6
2.4	Multilingual Discourses.....	6
2.5	Compensation Strategies	8
3	Conclusion	9
4	Development of my “professional vision”	10
5	References.....	12
6	Appendix: Video analysis: Observation matrix + alternatives	14

1 Why does multilingual-sensitive teaching matter?

The answer to the question why multilingual-sensitive teaching matters is as simple as it is complex: The content and the way we teach must be modified, since “classrooms around Europe are becoming increasingly more linguistically and culturally diverse” (Abney & Krulatz 2015: 1). This paper presents a selection of approaches and strategies adapted to the multilingual classroom¹ and examines the role of teachers, as well as of students. Besides advantages, demanding aspects that are worth being considered are mentioned, too.

Requirements for teachers in the 21st century include the creation of an atmosphere where diversity is welcomed and multi-literacy is facilitated, offering multimodal input and opportunities for interaction. Each classroom is unique and especially immigrant students let diversity increase. English turns away from being the object of study, but becomes a tool for meaningful communication (ibid.: 2f).

The presented authors demand the development of a linguistic repertoire, which includes all acquired languages. They argue that all participants in a classroom can learn from each other, valuing every language and making use of linguistic resources in a creative and conscious way, corresponding to the direction recommended by the Council of Europe. Furthermore, the results of two studies have been included, one concerning migrant students’ self-perception (Leichsering 2014), the other one focusing on the differences of applied learning strategies between monolingual and multilingual students (Mitits 2016). As multilingual-sensitive teaching cannot be defined as a strategy, but rather as a practice mirroring an attitude, this paper can only broach this complex discussion. Further reading containing reflected experiences is suggested to conduct an in-depth review.

¹ Some terms will not be defined and it will not be distinguished between a number of similar terms. For a sharp differentiation of the concept of code-switching and translanguaging, please see Üstünel 2016, p. 28. The terms multi- and plurilingualism are differentiated by De Florio-Hansen 2006, p. 27, as well as Council of Europe 2001, p. 4. A detailed definition of language awareness is given by Schuch 2015, p. 119f.

2 Taking a closer look at multilingualism in the EFL classroom

At the moment, we experience a paradigm shift and it's still being worked out and translated into action. The learners' varying needs, characteristics and resources need to be respected. English classes at school are not aiming at teaching a "given level of proficiency in a particular language at a particular moment in time" (Council of Europe 2001: 5). They offer more than the chance to learn English, but also the adaptation of learning strategies, communicative competences, as well as cultural competences, from which students can profit their whole life and not just when learning a new language. However, language proficiency is one of the most important factors for school careers.

Keywords such as semi-lingualism and language proficiency deficit are wide-spread in the mainstream discourse of teachers, and used to describe linguistic diversity as a problem, rather than a resource. Therefore, if heterogeneity is mainly discussed at a linguistic level and expressed in terms of a language proficiency deficit, the attainment of standardized language proficiency within a defined time frame forms the criterion of measurement. (Leichsering 2014: 110f)

Teaching in a multilingual setting can also be described as diversity management (Leichsering 2014), since one central goal is linguistic flexibility. This can be achieved by increasing students' awareness of and interest in language(s) and teaching strategies to communicate, learn and explore them, preferably based on self-regulated learning. By comparing and reflecting, they can build up metalinguistic and metacognitive skills (Saudan et al. 2005: 9, as cited by Reich & Krumm 2013: 95). Multilingual students will profit from this approach, because they bring their repertoire to different environments and need to communicate with very diverse speakers. The approach lets them transform this repertoire into applicable dynamic mobile resources (García & Wei 2014: 18). In general, it can be stated that all students need to be prepared to live in a complex world full of diversity, where additive concepts in foreign language classes do not meet the requirements of today's society (Reich & Krumm 2013: 91).

Multilingual-sensitive teaching units and tasks depend very much on the authenticity of the topic (ibid.: 105) and should balance the fostering of already existing language registers and their expansion (Schuch 2015: 29). Students' proficiency in the surrounding language will also increase, because concepts, academic content and learning

strategies transfer across languages² (Cummins 2005: 2). Due to this transfer and grouping of learning processes, teaching time can be saved (Reich & Krumm 2013: 91). Hufeisen and Marx adopt Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis³ to multilingual students. They see them having an advantage compared to L2 learners, as neurophysiological, learner external, affective, cognitive and linguistic factors are complemented by foreign language specific factors, which have a great influence, too (Hufeisen & Marx 2007: 313f). In how far this advantage can actually be used as such is discussed in the following chapters.

Multilingualism is not meant to be treated as part of another new method or strategy and the EFL classroom should not be replaced by a multilingual one, but instead be prepared due to the exploration of languages (García & Wei 2014: 93, Reich & Krumm 2013: 103). English as lingua franca plays a special role in the multilingual debate, since it connects people and gives everyone a voice (Abney & Krulatz 2015: 7). This unique position needs to be highlighted.

2.1 The Monolingual Approach

When considering the integration of multilingualism in the EFL classroom, the question arises as how to combine it with the predominant monolingual approach or whether this is possible at all. Especially when it comes to the instructional function of a language, the opinions vary.

Two things are most important in the EFL class. First, English needs to account for the greatest part and the instructions need to be understood. When using the target language also for instructional usage, it needs to be simplified. "Oral input can be adapted by using a slower rate of speech, clear enunciation, and increased wait time for responses. Written input can be modified by simplifying sentence structure, highlighting key words, and defining new terms" (ibid.: 4). Using gestures and visuals to support speech, handing out texts in students' L1 before a lesson to let them prepare it and working with a

² Cummins names five types of transfer: the transfer of conceptual elements, of metacognitive and -linguistic strategies, transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use, transfer of specific linguistic elements, as well as of phonological awareness (Cummins 2005: 3).

³ For a definition of the Interdependence Hypothesis see Cummins 2005: 2.

“classwork buddy” are techniques which already implement multilingual-sensitive teaching, but don’t decrease the amount of English spoken in class (ibid.).

It might need more preparation by the teacher; sometimes it is just easier for the teacher to use the surrounding language. However, a “learner’s language develops through imitation and habit formation” (Howatt 1984, as cited by Üstünel 2016: 32). When using English exclusively, learners are enabled to think in L2, with a minimal interference from their L1 (ibid.). Consequently, it will be easier for them to produce output in the target language. Additionally, Üstünel refers to Enama when pointing out that “the EFL teacher is not likely to know all his students’ L1s in a multilingual classroom” (Enama 2016: 21, as cited by Üstünel 2016: 32).

On the other hand, Cummins argues “that this monolingual instructional orientation is counterproductive and inconsistent with the reality of interdependence across languages” (Cummins 2005: 2). The monolingual approach contradicts the interdependent nature of L1 and L2, regarding his interdependence hypothesis. By integrating the students’ L1, “a wide variety of instructional opportunities arise” (ibid.: 7). By offering space for translanguaging, a creative use of languages in order to make meaning and learn is made possible (García & Wei 2014: 120).

Of course, English must be the main language used in class. However, tasks should be explained with various aids, and depending on the proficiency level of all the class members, it might be helpful to make use of a supporter language to make sure the instructions are understood. The monolingual approach does not have to exclude multilingualism, it is more about avoiding the surrounding language whenever possible to increase the students’ activation level of the English language.

2.2 Supporter Languages

The integration of supporter languages stands in contrast to the monolingual approach. Since this paper focusses on the situation in Germany, the standard supporter language would be German. It needs to be pointed out that German and English share the same origin and are therefore similar, related languages. This eases the implementation of German as a supporter language. However, it is also conceivable to let multilingual

students use their L1 as supporter language, although the teacher might not be capable of that language and even if that language doesn't share the same linguistic elements and structures. It is important to keep that difference in mind when considering the guided adoption of supporter languages.

Teaching intercomprehension enables students to notice similarities (e.g. in grammar or vocabulary) in related languages and lets them use them effectively as facilitators (Reich & Krumm 2013: 82). A transfer based on a supporter language “will consist of both linguistic and conceptual elements. However, in the case of dissimilar languages, transfer will consist primarily of conceptual and cognitive elements (e.g., learning strategies)” (Cummins 2005: 3). Therefore, a transfer will always have positive effects, since “there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another” (ibid.).

Furthermore, Cummins argues that “translation can serve useful pedagogical purposes” (ibid.: 13), because the L1 gives students a feeling of security and confidence and they can bring their full language intelligence into play (Üstünel 2016: 33f). Multilingual-sensitive teaching helps students to create their own repertoire, so that a new language is not exclusively connected to the environment or purpose it was learnt for (García & Wei 2014: 80). As it is not possible to activate or deactivate languages separately, students need to learn how to make use of their language repertoire effectively. De Florio-Hansen mentions that supporter languages are mainly helpful when it comes to reproductive processes and that similarities between languages might even lead to confusions or misunderstandings (De Florio-Hansen 2006: 28). Therefore, this strategy requires a high degree of language awareness and is dependent on the proficiency level of each language. If the learners are prepared to work with a supporter language and if they have adequate literacy skills in this language, they can profit from this learning strategy in many ways (Abney & Krulatz 2015: 6, Hufeisen & Marx 2007: 311, Reich & Krumm 2013: 93). In the ideal case, students with the same L1 work together, so they can support each other (García & Wei 2014: 110).

2.3 Code-Switching

Code-switching can be defined as part of a plurilingual and pluricultural competence and enables bilingual or multilingual speakers to go “back and forth from one language belonging to one grammatical system to another” (García & Wei 2014: 12) during a message (Council of Europe 2001: 134, Üstünel 2016: 27). This is possible, because the languages those speakers are capable of are always active to different degrees, even if the activation mode can be described as being just a stand-by mode (García & Wei 2014: 13). Moreover, code-switching can be viewed from a sociolinguistic, as well as from a pedagogical perspective and appears in different kinds of talk, such as ordinary or classroom talk (Üstünel 2016: 29), which this chapter concentrates on.

By allowing students to code-switch, keeping a conversation’s flow might be facilitated (ibid.). Other reasons students code-switch in class (consciously or unconsciously) are rooted in their insecurity whether the participants got their message right or not. They want to reinforce, emphasize or clarify the content (Eldridge 1996: 306, as cited by Üstünel 2016: 39). However, in a multilingual EFL classroom, this strategy must be planned and controlled by the teacher to be effective (Üstünel 2016: 177).

2.4 Multilingual Discourses

Especially in a multilingual classroom, implementing multilingual discourses has positive effects not just concerning all the students’ cultural competence, but also in regard of those students who share a migration background. Cultural competence (containing pluricultural and plurilingual competences) for them means that “the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact” (Council of Europe 2001: 6). Moreover, it “refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction” (ibid.: 168). The level of proficiency and the experiences regarding the languages and cultures might differ to a great extent (ibid., Reich & Krumm 2013: 83). Therefore, it is also possible for monolingual students who learn an L2 to improve their cultural competences, for example

by implementing short cross-curricular modules involving various languages and cultures (Council of Europe 2001: 175f).

Some of the aims when exploring languages and cultures are enabling students to deal “with misunderstandings in intercultural relations” (ibid.) and making them aware of linguistic discrimination and misuse of language through critical thinking, or how Luchtenberg calls it, a “sprachkritische Auseinandersetzung” (Luchtenberg 2001: 89, as cited by Reich & Krumm 2013: 99). Attentive students focus spontaneously on specific characteristics of language or similarities and differences. In this preferable situation, students “are likely to benefit from systematic encouragement by the teacher [...] and develop their language awareness” (Cummins 2005: 6).

Migrant students offer monolingual students the opportunity to profit from an access to languages which do not belong to the canon of school languages (Reich & Krumm 2013: 88). Unfortunately, there is the phenomenon that many migrant students feel ashamed of their L1 and do not have a positive relation to that language, which has a negative effect on their self-concept as bilingual or multilingual speakers⁴. This should be another motivation for teachers to implement multilingual-sensitive teaching in their classes, but on the other hand also warns teachers of the sensitivity of that topic. By highlighting the exceptional language situation, the gap between monolingual and migrant students might be widened, although they do not want to be identified as being different. This leads to the conclusion that multilingual discourses should include all students, for instance by working in groups (Leichsering 2014: 111, Reich & Krumm 2013: 102). Such group configurations must be carefully varied to increase students’ motivation (Abney & Krulatz 2015: 5, Reich & Krumm 2013: 93). Concerning a successful group work especially with less proficient students, the Council of Europe suggests:

Those with some knowledge [...] may use it to help those with none to communicate by mediating between individuals with no common language. In the absence of a mediator, such individuals may nevertheless achieve some degree of communication by bringing the whole of their linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression in different languages or dialects, [...] and radically simplifying their use of language. (Council of Europe 2001: 4f)

⁴ cf. Elsner 2015: 82, Leichsering 2014: 117f, Reich & Krumm 2013: 97. Leichsering explains that different values of languages can be detected in Germany and subdivides them into prestigious (e.g. French) and less prestigious ones (e.g. Turkish).

Such activities will teach students to make use of their whole linguistic repertoire, including not just spoken languages, but also mime, gesture and facial expression and make them more confident when meeting someone with a different L1. When exploring languages, the teacher should set a good example and participate as learner by, for instance, saying something in one of the students' L1 (García & Wei 2014: 94). By apparently giving up authority and the role of the language expert, students gain trust and are likely to use the target language (ibid.: 111). Such multilingual discourses are a great opportunity to create an atmosphere of confidence and value every language.

2.5 Compensation Strategies

In the dictionary language learning strategies are defined as “the learner’s goal-directed actions for improving language proficiency or achievement, completing a task, or making learning more efficient, more effective, and easier” (Oxford 2011: 167, as cited by Mitits 2016: 699). Compensation strategies in particular help to overcome limitations in communicating and compensate a lack of knowledge, for example by using a synonym or non-linguistic clues such as mime, gestures or intelligent guessing (Mitits 2016: 704ff). “Memory strategies help store and retrieve new information, while compensation strategies allow language use despite gaps in knowledge” (ibid.: 709).

According to her study, Mitits states that there are no statistically significant differences in frequency of strategy use (ibid.: 703). However, since multilingual learners didn't learn their L2 in a classroom setting like monolingual learners, they tend to use other strategies when learning an L3, such as compensation strategies. She concludes that all kinds of learners would benefit from strategy instruction to improve their individual learning process (ibid.: 708). In order to achieve this, group work according to the students' proficiency level and learning preferences with appropriate aid provided would be conceivable (Abney & Krulatz 2015: 7).

3 Conclusion

Integrating other languages than English in the EFL classroom does not happen at the expense of English skills. It is rather profitable for students, since it is the teachers' responsibility to react to changes in society. Additive language concepts are being replaced due to more diversity. Multilingual-sensitive teaching is not a new strategy or a method, but aims at realigning the attitude towards language learning of all the participants in a classroom. The teacher needs to be precise when choosing and allowing a language in the lesson and must communicate his decisions to the students. If the focus of a task or a lesson lies on making students talk or participate in a conversation, code-switching for example must not be forbidden. The monolingual approach shall not prevent helpful learning strategies, such as the use of a supporter language or the increase of language awareness by focusing on similarities and differences between languages. Expanding the students' language repertoire and giving them the ability to make use of their personal learning strategies in the most efficient manner will save time in class and lead to more confident individuals. Multilingualism should under no circumstances have negative consequences on a student's language learning process.

Language registers and repertoire turn out to have a much deeper impact on school careers than just the fact of children being multilingual. Thus, all educators should be aware that their approach to teaching languages and literacy should focus on the acquisition of these academic registers and that it will benefit both monolingual and multilingual students alike. (Leichsering 2014: 118)

In a heterogeneous society, cultural competences are the key to a successful communication. Additionally, students need to understand that language learning is a lifelong task and be motivated and confident enough to face new language experiences (Council of Europe 2001: 5). Valuing all the languages spoken by the members of a society can start in the classroom by actively changing the perspective on multilingualism. In how far the presented approaches and strategies⁵ can be realized in an EFL lesson or where possible problems might occur easily can be seen in the following example. An observation matrix based on a micro-teaching unit has been completed with regards to knowledge-based reasoning.

⁵ These are the monolingual approach, using a supporter language, code-switching, multilingual discourses and the exploration of languages, as well as teaching compensation strategies.

4 Development of my “professional vision”

After the first session of our seminar about multilingualism in the EFL classroom I remember being more confused than before. I mainly wondered how learning English could be improved by implementing numerous other languages and whether this approach was interesting for my future career at all. Moreover, I struggled with the tasks on the given micro-teaching units. Especially linking specific teaching situations to theoretical knowledge has been very difficult for me. Concluding, one could say I was very skeptical, and to be up front about my résumé: I still have many questions in mind. By writing them down, I noticed that most of those questions begin with “how”, which indicates that I am now not asking about the purpose anymore.

What did become accessible to me, however, is the noticing of situations where the opportunity of making use of multilingualism arises and where it is taken or missed. The observation tables, as well as the different difficulty levels one could choose between were useful facilitators. Talking about the results was more helpful to me than checking the solution paper. What fostered my opinion the most were the conversations with peers and colleagues, but the suggested literature including different perspectives also helped me developing my professional vision. I need resistance and statements I disagree with in order to approximate a topic.

In regards of the practical application, the micro-teaching units revealed how flexible a teacher must be, also concerning the teaching materials. Moreover, a consequent attitude when allowing supporter languages is necessary. One should not ask students to stick to the target language, but on the other hand react to comments given in the surrounding language. Especially in linguistically heterogenous classrooms, clear and precise instructions relating to the allowed languages in a provided time frame increase fairness and enable time saving. I did realize that including multilingualism in the EFL classroom is not time consuming, but supports the learning process in the long run by building up several competences and learning strategies.

However, it seems to me as if the purpose of this approach depends very much on the composition of the class. Multilingual-sensitive teaching in a class with students who do not speak any other L1 than German (the surrounding language) looks different than in a class in which the majority of students share a migration background. Also, in a class whose participants already learn an L3 related to the target language, specific learning

strategies, such as mnemonic aids based on similarities between those languages, are applicable. If there are only the two languages, namely the students' L1 and the target language, cultural competences and an opened attitude towards new languages can still be achieved by offering interesting and suitable contents. It might be the case that teachers are deterred from making multilingualism a part of their teaching, since it asks for creativity and flexibility and results cannot be seen immediately. Moreover, most of the literature I read was scientific and made a grandiloquent impression, without offering concrete, or only vague examples. Therefore, the analysis of the micro-teaching units helped me developing my ideas of how to make use of the students' linguistic repertoire.

All in all, multilingual-sensitive teaching asks teachers to be attentive, what I practiced during this seminar. However, I would argue that this topic is very much about the teacher's attitude towards language learning in general and that university students who want to be foreign language teachers should bring this positive, opened attitude of, for instance, denying a hierarchy of languages or being curious about cultures different from their own, either way. It is the analysis of authentic situations and the practice or experience from which we can learn teaching in a multilingual-sensitive way, but not the theoretical insights. I enjoyed the inspiring conversations and getting this new perspective on foreign language teaching and look forward to see how to realize my idea of a multilingual EFL classroom in the future.

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6 Appendix: Video analysis: Observation matrix + alternatives