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EFL teacher agency in mediating the socialisation of multilingual learners

ABSTRACT. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers are seemingly ideally placed to mediate the successful socialisation of multilingual learners into the new school environment for two major reasons. Firstly, as they have effective command of both L1 and L2 and often have experience of living abroad, they tend to exhibit higher levels of openness to new situations, empathy and understanding of the difficulties faced by multilingual learners. Secondly, the English class can itself be a platform for mutual understanding where learners are able to develop both English communication skills and intercultural competence (cf. Hopp, Jakisch, Sturm, Becker & Thoma 2020; Krulatz, Neokleous & Dahl 2022). As English is the language of instruction, it also has the potential to maintain levels of multilingual competence among those learners who already speak English as their heritage language (Banasiak & Olpińska-Szkielko 2021), e.g. migrant children returning from the UK/Ireland. Drawing on data from a larger project (Rokita-Jaśkow, Wolanin, Król-Gierat & Nosidlak 2022), which consisted of interviewing 23 primary school EFL teachers in various contexts, this paper analyses the possible factors that impact teacher agency in the socialisation of multilinguals. It has been found that teacher agency in that respect appears to stem from teachers' plurilingual competence and prior teaching experience. Surprisingly, personal experiences of intercultural encounters (e.g. time spent living abroad) or verbalised empathy, had little impact on teacher agency. This finding implies that even language teachers find it difficult to put themselves in the position of the multilingual learner and need specialist training in order to work with multilingual learners, which may convey an important message for educational decision-makers with reference to the formulation of future teacher education guidelines and curricula.

KEYWORDS: EFL teachers, multilingual learners, socialisation, teacher agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, there has been a steady increase in multilingual and migrant learners in the Polish school environment. Multilingual learners comprise children of mixed-heritage couples, of return migrant families and migrant learners, particularly from behind the eastern border, mainly Ukraine, whose number has increased dramatically since the outbreak of war in the spring of 2022. The migration processes have changed the linguistic environment of Polish schools consider-

ably, from being purely monolingual to becoming much more linguistically and culturally diverse. Since migrant learners hardly ever speak Polish, the language of school instruction and communication, EFL teachers seem to be at the forefront of migrants' integration and socialisation processes, at least in the initial stages, for two major reasons. Firstly, since EFL teachers have effective command of both L1 and L2 and often have experience of living abroad, they tend to exhibit higher levels of openness to new situations, empathy and understanding of the difficulties faced by multilingual learners. Secondly, the English class can itself be a platform for mutual understanding where all learners are able to develop both English communication skills and intercultural competence. Additionally, as English is the language of instruction, it also has the potential to maintain levels of multilingual competence among those learners who already speak English as their heritage language (Banasiak & Olpińska-Szkielko 2021), e.g. return migrant children from the UK/Ireland. Yet, it must be recognised that these opportunities can only be developed if teachers adapt their mindset and do not look at their learners purely through the monolingual lens, i.e. not only teaching EFL to a monolithic group of Polish native speakers, but to learners of varied cultural linguistic backgrounds, for whom English may be a foreign, additional (third, fourth etc.) or even a first language (in the case of return migrants). This shift in perspective calls for new teaching approaches and the reevaluation of teaching/learning goals, which is already being pursued in many Western European language classrooms (cf. Hopp, Jakisch, Sturm, Becker & Thoma 2020; Krulatz, Neokleous & Dahl 2022). Obviously, not all teachers are prepared for this shift, as firstly, the presence of multilingual/multicultural learners in an EFL class is still a relatively new phenomenon, and secondly, EFL teachers, just like other subject teachers, have not received any explicit guidelines, nor training, in how to work with such learners. The reason for this is the lack of an explicit migration and educational policy. Existing regulations concerning the education of migrants only concern support in mastering the language of school instruction, i.e., Polish. EFL teachers are therefore left to their own devices, in the hope that by drawing on their own plurilingualism, teaching and learning experience, they will manage to cope with the challenge of socializing multilingual learners. The goal of this paper is to identify those personal characteristics that may be conducive to fostering teacher agency in this respect.

2. TEACHER AGENCY IN SOCIALISING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Teacher agency is a key factor in describing teacher identity, defined as a "teacher's competence to plan and enact educational change, direct, and regulate their actions in educational contexts" (Sang 2020: 1). This concept has been

particularly publicised in recent times as a factor empowering teachers to break free from the constraints of educational policies and to act independently, which in consequence can bring about educational change at local and macro-levels. Thus, it is also seen as related to autonomy, i.e. teachers who are reflective and capable of their own decision-making are also more likely to put their decisions into action (Cummins 2014). There is a slightly different understanding of the term in socio-cognitive and ecological approaches. In the former, agency is the “dynamic competence of individuals to act independently and to make their own actions and decisions” (Sang 2020: 1). This denotes an individual’s engagement with the environment which can take place in three ways: “(1) individual, when influence is exercised directly with the aim of affecting one’s circumstances or environment, (2) proxy, when, lacking direct control over one’s life conditions, influence is exercised through intermediaries in possession of more power, and (3) collective agency, where ‘multiagent mode’ is employed and people ‘achieve unity of effort for common cause within diverse self-interests and coordination of distributed subfunctions across a variety of individuals” (Bandura 2008: 92–93). In ecological approaches, agency should not be perceived as a trait or characteristic of individual teachers but as “a ‘quality’ of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves” (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson 2015b: 3). This means that agency is manifested by individuals’ interaction with the environment and their willingness to initiate and implement change. This perspective indicates “how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints” (Priestley et al. 2015b: 3), as well as how they are limited and empowered by various social constraints in their environment.

Teachers’ agency implies that teachers are expected to act as “agents of change”, which denotes its iterational and projective aspects (Priestley et al. 2015a). The first aspect emerges out of an interaction of individual propensities, such as skills and knowledge about teaching, beliefs in relation to goals and effectiveness of teaching, values (e.g. commitment), as well as societal conditions, such as role expectations, school culture, social change, support networks etc. Clearly, iterational aspects are rooted in the past experiences of the individual as well as current engagement with various agents of the environment. The projective dimension of agency signifies that “it is interlinked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past” (Priestley et al. 2015b: 5). Thus it signifies motivation and aspiration to reach certain short-term and long-term goals.

Clearly, in response to a novel phenomenon, such as the presence of multilingual/migrant learners, and in view of the lack of explicit educational policy, teacher agency in transforming educational practices to accommodate the needs

of such learners seems to be of vital importance. It seems to be shaped by teachers' beliefs in respect of multilingualism, their past experiences of working with such learners (or lack thereof), their experiences of living in multicultural/multilingual societies, their attitudes, as well as their sense of competency in working with multilinguals. In western societies, which have a long tradition of integrating learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ample research evidence has been collected that shows correlations between positive teacher beliefs and attitudes towards multilinguals and their willingness to promote their well-being in class, by e.g., implementing elements of multilingual pedagogy. These in turn have been found to be related to such factors as teachers' knowledge of heritage language(s) of the learners or having a joint language (Haukås 2016), teachers' own plurilingual competence and plurilingual awareness (Gilham & Fürstenau 2020; Otwinowska 2017), experience in teaching migrants, a teaching area (subject), prior training in linguistically responsive teaching (Alisaari, Heikkola, Commins & Acquah 2019), prior training in multilingual pedagogy (Gorter & Arocena 2020). Apart from training and experience, certain personality characteristics seem also to play a role, such as empathising with the learner (Dewaele & Wei 2012) and being able to position oneself in the situation of the learner in order to understand his/her needs and difficulties (Calafato 2021). Furthermore, intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity (Benett 1993) have been identified as competences that allow teachers to place themselves better in the position of the multilingual learner, and these have often been developed through living abroad (Wolff & Borzikowsky 2018).

Translanguaging in the EFL classroom

The presence of multilingual learners in an EFL class raises the question of which languages to allow in the classroom. Should only English be allowed, so as not to create confusion among different language users and in order to adhere to one (target) language policy, or should learners' languages be allowed and translanguaging be used as a strategy to promote participation and the involvement of all learners in the class? The answers to these questions are not simple as monolingual ideologies fostering target language use seem to prevail even in western European classrooms despite the advocacy for translanguaging (Alisaari et al. 2019). Whereas acknowledging the presence of various first languages in an EFL class would result in greater inclusivity of learners and a shift in the perception of multilingual learners, i.e. from the deficient EFL learner to an emergent multilingual.

In recent years, a proposal to abandon such monolingual bias, that is teaching solely in the target language to the same-language speakers has been advocated (e.g. Rabbidge 2019; Otwinowska 2017). Gallagher (2020), in an Irish context, ob-

served different teacher attitudes to code-switching depending on whether they taught EFL in multilingual or in shared-L1 contexts, i.e. when all learners spoke the same mother tongue. She recognised that “the particular learning environment, group dynamics, linguistic resources and teaching challenges are very different in each context and call for different approaches to the use of the L1 in the classroom” (Gallagher 2020: 9). The teachers were more likely to code-switch to L1 in the same L1 class, while in the multilingual class the results were varied. Some teachers confessed to not taking into account the multilingualism of their students, and became aware of this fact only during the interview study while others tried to conform to speaking only the target language, i.e. English, so as not to confuse the learners. Avoidance of code-switching signifies adherence to the monolingual ideology. Gallagher (2020: 10) concludes that “the prevailing monolingual orientation in foreign language teacher education, which continues to see codeswitching and other bilingual practices as a hindrance and a distraction from effective language learning needs to be revisited”. In this respect, Calafato (2021) argues that teachers who know other (or more) languages than English are more likely to implement plurilingualism as a resource in their teaching and allow for translanguaging. Similarly, Mieszkowska and Otwinowska (2015) posit that “more experienced multilinguals tend to notice and use crosslinguistic similarity that aids comprehension and production of the new language. Thus, the cumulative language learning experience and metalinguistic awareness may be said to trigger affordances available to the learner” (Mieszkowska and Otwinowska 2015: 218). In their study of inferencing strategies used when handling a text in an unknown language (Danish), the speakers who knew more languages were better at the task than those students who knew only one foreign language which was typologically related (German). This finding led the authors to conclude that “combined L3-Ln proficiency and typological relatedness of the language might constitute a set of affordances available to the learner” (Mieszkowska and Otwinowska 2015: 233). In other words, teachers who know more languages than just the subject of their teaching, develop strategies that allow them to initiate and maintain communication even with interlocutors with whom they do not share a common language. Thus, the plurilingual competence of the teachers themselves seems to be a prerequisite for multilingual awareness and adopting a plurilingual approach to teaching in a foreign language class. This viewpoint has been further corroborated in another study by Otwinowska (2017), in which she surveyed pre-service and in-service teachers of EFL and their plurilingual awareness. Bearing these findings in mind, it may be questioned whether EFL teachers are significantly better equipped for encounters with migrant and multilingual learners than other subject teachers. Knowing a second language and the theory of how it is acquired may not be sufficient. Perhaps some other fac-

tors and skills may also play a role in the socialisation of multilinguals. The goal of this study is to shed more light on the possible factors that may play a role in fostering teacher agency to meet the needs of multilingual learners. Little is known as to why some EFL teachers are more willing and able to exert their agency in this respect while others are not. The findings of the study may constitute an important message to educational decision makers in reference to the formulation of future teacher education guidelines and curricula.

In order to meet these goals, the following questions have been posed:

- 1) How did EFL teachers' agency manifest in the socialisation of multilingual learners?
- 2) What individual propensities relate to EFL teachers' agency in the process of socialising multilingual learners into Polish schools and classrooms?

3. METHOD

The research design of the study was qualitative as its major goal was to gather an in-depth knowledge of the new phenomenon i.e. how the EFL teachers dealt with the presence of multilingual learners in Polish schools and in the EFL class.

3.1. Participants and context

The participants of the study were 23 teachers of EFL in primary schools in Poland. The teachers were recruited for the study by means of convenience and snowball sampling methods. The individuals contacted were either graduates of MA or Postgraduate programmes of the Pedagogical University of Cracow and/or their acquaintances. A few individuals were contacted via social-media sites and online groups dedicated to teachers. Whilst non-probabilistic sampling methods were used, care was taken that the teachers were selected from different teaching environments (i.e. city, town and village) and of varied characteristics (female/male) so as to obtain a diversity of voices from varied teaching environments. There were 23 teachers in total, 20 females and three males. They worked both in state (n=19) and in private primary schools (n=4), in the city (n=9), a small town (n=6) as well as a village (n=7). Their age range was between 27 and 50 years (Mean=35.4), and correspondingly their teaching experience was between six months and 25 years (Mean=10.8). They all evaluated their language competence at B2+/C1 or even C2 levels. All but one had an MA level of education. Nine of them had enhanced their teaching skills through various postgraduate studies (a form of in-service teacher education), one of which was

a course in *Teaching English to learners with Special Education Needs* offered by the university. As regards their knowledge of other foreign languages, 16 of them knew languages other than English, yet only seven had a command of those additional languages to at least B1/B2 level. These languages comprised Russian (T1), German (T4, T10, T16), Italian (T3, T21), Slovakian (T12). A few other teachers knew other languages at lower levels. In this respect, T22 distinguished herself from the others in that she claimed to know four other languages, one of them being rather rare, i.e. Georgian. Among these, 17 teachers claimed to have spent significant periods of time abroad (over one month), which could have contributed to their intercultural experience and competence. These were mostly in English-speaking countries (USA, UK, Ireland), in one case it was Germany. The sample studied is described in greater detail in another paper (Rokita-Jaśkow, Wolanin, Król-Gierat & Nosidlak 2022), but the impact of teacher characteristics on teacher agency is not considered.

The study was conducted online during the pandemic in December 2021 and January 2022, but the respondents were asked to talk about their experiences of working with multilinguals in retrospect. The teachers studied reported their experiences of working with multilingual learners in retrospect (prior to the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022). They described working with immigrant children from countries behind the eastern border (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia) as well as return migrant children, mainly from English-speaking countries. Only single cases of children came from other countries, such as Romania, Italy, Brazil, Norway, Spain, India.

3.2. Data collection tools and analysis

The data in the project was solicited by means of interviews held online. Each interview lasted ca. 40–60 minutes. In order to ensure interviewer reliability, each interview followed a prepared script (cf. Rokita-Jaśkow et al. 2022) and solicited data on teacher demographics, teacher beliefs about multilingualism as well as their experience and applied practices when working with multilingual learners both in an EFL class and in the larger school environment. The initial part of the interview asking about the teacher's demographics and teaching experience was aimed at establishing a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee and allowed the latter to present as a professional, which are the conditions to be met if valid answers are to be obtained (cf. McDougall 2000). Additionally, the interviewers made every effort not to interrupt the interviewees, nor react or complement their responses, so as to acknowledge teacher professionalism and guarantee the study's validity (cf. McDougall 2000; Tomoda et al. 1997).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis within the framework of content analysis (Saldana 2009) by means of the NVivo software. In order to ensure accuracy, the transcripts were read three times, firstly for general orientation of the content and distinguishing key codes, secondly, in order to assign key codes to words, phrases and fragments of text depicting certain phenomena, and thirdly to ensure check on inter-rater consistency, as well as to distinguish key superordinate themes. Each time the data was coded by two persons in order to ensure inter-rater coding consistency (Krippendorf 2003). Although altogether 27 different codes were distinguished in the study the data was coded under the headings *teaching practices*, *emotions* and selected demographic variables (foreign language knowledge, length of teaching experience) were applied.

4. RESULTS

Key findings are presented with reference to the research questions posited.

4.1. Manifestation of EFL teacher agency in class and in the school environment

Bearing in mind the fact that Poland is undergoing a transition from a monolingual to a multilingual society and that there is no official policy on how to integrate multilingual learners into Polish schools, teacher agency in that respect comes to the fore. It depends solely on teachers if and how they engage in helping newly arrived multilinguals in that respect. Manifestations of teacher agency were identified in activities the teachers undertook in order to make the multilinguals feel welcome both in class and at school. Yet, not all teachers were willing and/or prepared to undertake this task and presented different attitudes: from expectations of student adjustment, through expressed compassion to proactive attempts at socialising young learners.

In relation to the latter, different activities were undertaken in reference to migrant multilinguals, who knew neither Polish, nor English and could be described as emergent multilinguals, which would facilitate mutual communication, and in reference to English-speaking return migrants, who usually spoke some Polish and possessed native-like competence in English, much above the level of the classroom instruction. In reference to the former, the following instances of agentic behavior were noticed (The number in brackets denotes the number of teachers who referred to a solution):

- Asking foreign learners about English word equivalents in their native languages, which could signify an implicit use of translanguaging pedagogy (4)
- Allowing and encouraging students to use mobile dictionaries for translation into the learners' mother tongues (2)
- Intercultural mediation: comparing aspects of three cultures, i.e. Polish, English and that of the learner (1)
- Adjusting selected teaching tasks to the level/ability of the learner (1)
- Seating the learner with a Polish student (2)
- Engaging with the learner in conversation after class, during the breaks etc. (2)
- Help in doing homework (2)
- In reference to English-speaking return migrants, who caused a different challenge to the EFL teacher due to higher language proficiency than the class, the following solutions were used:
 - Preparing additional (challenging) lexical tasks (5)
 - Individualised homework (usually written essays) (1)
 - Using the students as a resource on English language and culture (3)
 - Assigning the role of teaching assistant, to perform certain tasks instead of the teacher, e.g. reading texts aloud (3)
 - Nominating the student to participate in language contests (6)

It must be noted, however, that this is a cumulative list of solutions and actions taken by individual teachers in the sample studied and not by all of them. The majority of the teachers did not pursue any particular actions and simply treated the newly arrived learners in the same way as Polish learners, not taking into account their previous educational and cultural backgrounds, nor knowledge of language(s).

One other solution that was mentioned by teachers (7) was granting the return migrant child access to the Individual Teaching Programme, upon certified recommendation from the Pedagogical-Psychological Centre on the grounds of giftedness, which led to individual tuition but thereby excluded the learner from class and thus prevented integration. For this reason, such an act was recognised as a lack of teacher agency and delegating the problem to other agents.

4.2. Individual propensities marking EFL teacher agency in the socialization process of multilinguals

This section will focus on those teachers, who particularly enacted agency in their work while working with multilinguals with a view to identifying factors that may have impacted socialization. On the basis of a review of relevant

texts, the following features have been focused on: the teacher's plurilingualism, time spent abroad/possessing intercultural experience, teaching experience, emotional engagement (empathy, enthusiasm etc.)

Teacher's plurilingualism

In the sample only six teachers indicated English as the only foreign language known. The majority of the teachers seemed to show interest in foreign language learning more generally and had much more varied language learning experience. These were T03, who knew Italian (B2), T04, T10, T16 who knew German (B2-C2). A few teachers claimed to have a truly plurilingual competence with more than 2 languages. These were: T1, who also knew Russian at the B1 level and French at the A2 level, and actually used to be a Russian language teacher; T12 who knew Slovakian (B2) and German (A1); T19 knew Japanese (A2) and German (A1); T21, who knew French (A2) and Italian (C1); T22, who had learnt a few different languages, although only at the elementary level, i.e. Georgian (A2), Russian (A1), Italian (A1), Spanish (A1). As can be seen, the constellation of languages was varied. Apart from knowing English, the teachers studied also showed interest in rarer languages, which might signify a plurilingual competence and pluricultural interest, which may, in turn, result in cross-linguistic awareness (Jessner 2006), i.e. observing similarities and differences between languages. This competency may facilitate the teachers' comprehension of the challenges faced by multilingual learners if any of the learners' languages is at least partly similar (i.e. belongs to the same family) to the languages known by the teacher. Furthermore, it may also stimulate the teacher's creativity in inventing tasks and activities to develop the metalinguistic awareness of Polish learners while utilizing the presence of multilingual learners in the English class.

However, when looking for signs of teacher agency in respect of plurilingualism, only a few teachers tried to prepare activities that would both enhance the growth of metalinguistic awareness in Polish learners and help integrate multilingual learners at the same time. T1 used an English version of the well-known cartoon series titled *Masha and the bear* as a basis for her lesson. She recognised that "these Russian-speaking children were so happy that this was their story", and added that she even sometimes played video material in Russian, just to please them.

Other plurilingual teachers mentioned the following solutions:

We have a Ukrainian, we also have a boy from Romania and when we learnt the word "train" recently, the learners asked: "And how will it be in Belarusian?", "And in Russian how will it be?", "And in Romanian, how would you say it?". And they're

learning these words... from each other, and they're already curious about how it sounds in another language, because they're developing that English as well [N04].

Sometimes I even specifically ask them how to say a particular word in Italian, in Spanish. Maybe it is similar sometimes. When I know it's similar, I even ask them on purpose, just so they can see that the languages have something in common. And just sometimes Sofia and Leo compare Italian with Spanish, which I think is very cute [T22].

Additionally, T4 sensitised Polish children to the melody of the Romanian language by asking them to overhear what the Romanian child was saying to his mother in an online class. T3 recommended using mobile dictionaries in class which would allow foreign children to check the equivalents of new English words in their native language. T4 teacher created a picture book, where key Polish terms were illustrated. The book was later used by the teacher in order to teach a multilingual child a few basic words, so that he could communicate his basic needs, e.g. going to the toilet.

The aforementioned instances of teacher agency were the only ones manifested. As can be seen, among 16 teachers who knew more than one foreign language (English), only three teachers (T1, T4, T22) seemed to recognise opportunities for using their plurilingualism as an asset in the English class.

Time spent abroad/possessing intercultural experience

By looking at this variable, it was hypothesised that teachers who had the experience of living abroad may have more opportunities for intercultural encounters. This, in turn, could contribute to their own level of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence (cf. Piechurska-Kuciel & Rusieshvili 2020; Wolff & Borzikowsky 2018) which subsequently could be utilised when interacting with multilingual learners in the language class. The teacher's own intercultural competence and sensitivity may manifest themselves in an ability to adopt and take into account a different cultural perspective in lesson planning and delivery. In this respect, one teacher (T4) manifested intercultural sensitivity when recalling the example of a Hindi child, who had a different religion and celebrated different holidays. The teacher used the presence of the children to explain to Polish learners why Hindi children do not celebrate Christmas or take part in the school Nativity.

They live in Poland at the moment, but we require them to become Polish. They have their own culture. And another thing – we, as teachers, should also help them to experience their culture. We cannot overlook the fact that they come from a different country, that they have different traditions or even their own national holidays, and so on. I had a situation like this – Indian children were coming to our school

and their parents excused them, saying that it was a big holiday there now, so they wouldn't be at school that day, and we talked about it with the children, that they were just celebrating. Likewise why they don't perform in the nativity play... Although afterwards dad was so open-minded that he said why not in principle [T04].

The same teacher raised doubts about the necessity for foreign children to take part in a school entrance ceremony that involved taking an oath to be a good Pole. This teacher had not lived abroad for a significant period of time, which could aid the development of intercultural sensitivity, but did know another foreign language (German) at an advanced level.

In the sample studied, only one teacher (T20) noticed an opportunity to develop intercultural competence in an EFL class.

[i]t often happens to these cultural realities, if we talk about something, that for example we compare, let's say the lifestyle in Great Britain or some different things, and she refers to her experiences in Germany, so we are no longer comparing only Poland and English-speaking countries, but we are also comparing some other countries [T20].

The teacher concluded that in class she always asked students not only to compare aspects of Polish and English culture but also those of some other countries. This solution probably did not show the teacher's plurilingual/pluricultural awareness as much as her didactic skills. Since she catered for the developing intercultural competence of the Polish learners on a regular basis, she found it relatively easy to include a foreign child in the task as well. This teacher had not only made short visits abroad but also knew two other foreign languages (French and Italian) apart from English, which may have influenced her ability to place herself in the position of the multilingual learner.

Time spent abroad does not necessarily contribute to the growth of intercultural competence, greater openness, or the development of pedagogical and didactic skills that would accommodate the needs of multilinguals. T15, who had spent 3 years in the UK, found an English-speaking return migrant learner to be particularly problematic:

She absolutely refused to let any child say a word. There was her hand up all the time and I already knew we had to do something about it. It got sorted out very quickly because from the middle of fourth grade she already had this individual tuition. And she is my biggest failure [T15].

This instance showed that the teacher lacked pedagogical and didactic competences to work with heterogeneous classes, as she found individual teaching

of the child to be the only solution to the problems encountered. It also shows that even if time spent abroad impacts the teacher's own intercultural sensitivity and competence, it may not necessarily impact the teacher's ability to develop the same competencies among her learners.

Teaching experience

In view of the findings of Alisaari et al. (2019), it was assumed that more experienced teachers would focus more on meeting the needs of individual students rather than on merely delivering the course curriculum, and therefore they should manifest didactic skills in lesson planning to accommodate the needs of multilingual learners. This means the students should neither get bored, which was the case with English-speaking return migrant children, nor feel excluded from class participation if English is an unknown additional language for them.

The most experienced teachers in terms of the cumulative number of years were T1 (aged 50, 25 years of teaching experience which included working with Special Educational Needs (SEN) children), T6 (aged 45, who had been working as a teacher for 23 years), T7 (aged 40, with 18 years of experience), T11 (aged 39, with 15 years of teaching experience), T17 (aged 40, with 15 years of experience), T18 (aged 44, with 25 years of experience). The majority of the other teachers (T3, T4, T5, T8, T13, T14, T15, T17, T21) were moderately experienced, having been working between ten and 12 years in the profession.

When analysing whether teacher experience reflected teacher agency in mediating the socialisation of multilingual learners in either an EFL class or school in general, T1 was found to be the most experienced and the most enthusiastic about having English-speaking children in her class (Grade 2). The following citation marks a shift in the teacher's attitude in respect of her teaching experience.

When I learnt this new student would be coming to class I was very happy. But let me be honest, I can say that today... I was happy because I already had this experience behind me. But I remember my first experience when I found out that I was going to have an English-speaking child in class. That scared me at first. I was really scared. Somehow I was frightened that he would be better than me and so on... because that I think accompanies every one of us. I talked to other teachers, even Russian teachers who had Russian-speaking children – children who are Ukrainian – they experience the same thing at the beginning.

But this turned out not to be the slightest obstacle at all. On the other hand, they are wonderful material for dialogue and for setting an example for other children. When I found out that I was going to have two boys in the second grade, I already knew what to do with them to get them interested too, because everything we did

in English was very simple for them in the second grade, because it was the beginning of learning for Polish children and for them it was funny. I used them to read aloud [T1].

This shows that the teacher realised the children were, in fact, native speakers of the English language, and tried to use their competence in class so that they were not without a role and did not get bored. She emphasized a few times that she did not want the children to be bored, so she did not insist on them doing homework if this involved doing repetitive coursebook tasks. This also shows the teacher was capable of making independent decisions and took individual children's interests and abilities into account when planning her lessons.

Other examples of facing the challenge of English-speaking multilinguals were given by younger teachers. T16, with six years of experience, set up tasks which were more difficult and complex, as described in the following extract:

But I don't want the boy to go backwards, so I make the case as follows.... When we go, for example, to a new chapter with the kids, I check what range of knowledge we have in that topic. And I present the chapter to David in the same way as I did to the kids, only with expanded material, expanded vocabulary, expanded grammar. If we had Past Simple with the kids, then I still throw in Past Continuous, right away in sentences where we have both tenses, etc. So David is challenged in this chapter. That is, David has such a challenge with me that he has to do a bit more than the class, because if I get vocabulary to learn from a chapter, we always learn the vocabulary at the beginning of the chapter so that the chapter goes easier for us [T16].

This solution shows the teacher tried hard to motivate all learners in her class and took into account the needs and abilities of all learners. T12 mentioned always having a spare worksheet to accommodate the needs of English-speaking children, who finished their tasks first, in order to occupy them with new work. These attempted solutions show that classroom level heterogeneity seemed to be one of the most difficult problems that English teachers faced. They also indicate that teacher awareness of students' varied abilities and teachers' agency in accommodating the needs of multilingual learners did not depend solely on age/length of teaching experience.

In reference to speakers of other languages, T1 observed the inappropriacy of using translation into Polish in the multilingual class. Although she did ask students to translate some dialogues from English into Polish, she never asked multilingual children to do so, realising the difficulty of the task, as Polish was also a new language to them. Furthermore, she took the opportunity to explain

to the Polish children why she excused the multilinguals from doing the translation task, and explained that they could do it in their native language. This was also justified as teaching tolerance to Polish children. The following citation illustrates this point as well as showing the teacher's confidence in her didactic (including assessment) skills,

It seems to us that the child does not know this or that, but he simply does not know how to say that in Polish because he still does not know this third language yet. The students also learn tolerance, because I cannot demand as much, and lower the grade for the fact he does not know Polish. I know he knows English as I know how to check this [T1].

As regards the other experienced teachers, T6, T7 and T18 did not report any activities specifically directed at multilingual learners. Among the less experienced teachers, T11 recognized that she had to adjust the pace of working in class to the level of comprehension of migrant learners and noticed possible problems in understanding instructions for tasks, She reported allowing the students to use translation apps on student mobiles as a solution.

I asked him to bring a phone with internet access and translate what I wanted from him, for example. He translated from his language into Polish so that I could know what he was having trouble with, especially as the instructions in our English textbook are in Polish. So he didn't know that at all either [T11].

As regards English-speaking children, for whom English was often the first/ dominant language, an experienced teacher (T17) emphasised that it was necessary to challenge their abilities. However, this teacher, like five others in the sample (T3, T5, T16, T7), did not look for pedagogical solutions to cope with class level heterogeneity but opted to grant these learners access to the Individual Teaching Programme and/or enrol them in English-language contests. It is notable that this solution was chosen by teachers (except for T3) who did not speak any other foreign language, which could signify teachers' insecurity and/ or inability to put themselves in the learner's position. At this point, it must be highlighted that opting for individual teaching programmes and contests does not indicate the teacher's agency but rather denotes delegating the responsibility for the teaching of multilingual learners to other parties.

Emotional engagement (teacher's empathy, enthusiasm etc.)

Teacher emotional engagement was noted in how the teachers talked about and what they attempted to do in order to help migrant learners integrate into

the class. The themes that emerged from the narratives were coded as *support, emotions, and attitudes*. Few teachers openly empathised with the migrant learners' difficult situation. In this respect we distinguished only three teachers as showing an empathetic stance: T6 who had spent three years in the USA when he was a child (aged 7–10), T10, who was one of the youngest teachers and had only 2.5 years of teaching experience, and T1, who had the experience of working with SEN children.

In the case of Teacher 6, it seems his own bilingual experience made him particularly empathetic towards the newcomers. As he recollected, he always tried to approach multilingual students who seemed to be isolated from the rest of a group, e.g. in the playground, or in the corridor during the break and tried to strike up a conversation, drawing on their common bilingual experience, and hoping this exchange would make the student feel at ease. However, when it came to his teaching practice, the only activity tailored to the needs of multilingual learners was allowing them in an English vocabulary quiz to draw picture answers rather than require an equivalent in Polish.

Teacher 10 expressed her pity over the difficulties one of her Ukrainian learners had experienced before joining the private school where s/he was teaching. The boy suffered from isolation and lack of progress in the state school, mainly due to problems with learning Polish and a lack of support in learning it from either his parents or from the school. These difficulties led the family to move the child into private education, where in smaller groups and with support the boy slowly started to open up, speak Polish and make progress. The teacher recalled that progress was possible thanks to working with the learner on an individual basis and a friendly teacher approach.

I don't think we can cross anyone out prematurely because he is proof that the right intentions intensified work and also his stamina, because without that it's impossible, and this is a child who, despite these enormous difficulties, because, I think, we also liked each other, and that's also an important factor, I think the contact with the teacher, and I was also the form tutor, it also went on in such a way, this atmosphere, this relationship of ours, also somehow positively influenced here, I think [T10].

T1 is already referred to above as the teacher with the most experience and who appeared to introduce elements of plurilingual and intercultural competence the most. In her case, empathy and emotional engagement manifested in deliberate lesson planning and tailoring the teaching contents to the needs of other learners. This example also shows that empathy alone is not sufficient to realise the didactic and pedagogical abilities needed to engage multilingual learners in the learning process.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We investigated how EFL teachers cope with multilingual learners in the hope that they would be the most skillful in facilitating the socialization process due to their own bilingual learning and teaching as well as intercultural experience, which hypothetically could enable them to put themselves in the position of migrant multilingual learners, who face difficulties in socialisation to the new learning environment.

In that respect, the first research question inquired about manifestations of EFL teachers' agency in relation to working with multilingual learners. In answer to this question, it has to be acknowledged that it manifested only in a few teachers and amounted to 32 instances of acting in total. Surprisingly, the majority of the teachers, despite generally verbalising positive attitudes towards multilinguals, did not try to adjust their teaching to their level of English, nor did they try to deliberately integrate newcomer students with the Polish group. This could have been achieved by either using communicative and intercultural activities for which lingua franca English can be a key or by means of introducing elements of multilingual pedagogies (Garcia & Flores 2012), which would foster cross-linguistic awareness in all learners. This finding is contrary to that of Banasiak and Olpińska-Szkiełko (2021), who believed that languages present in education are more likely to be developed. This study shows that the potential of using the English class as "a communication bridge" between Polish and foreign learners was not effectively developed or applied. One possible explanation for this fact is that for all EFL teachers, the presence of multilingual learners in an EFL class is a new situation, unlike in western societies where multilingualism is a common phenomenon and teachers are prepared to have such learners in their classes. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that even in western societies, EFL teachers find it difficult to abandon their monolingual bias (Alisaari et al. 2019; Calafato 2021). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in a transitioning society such as Poland, the change of teacher outlook on working with multilinguals is only germinating and will take time to develop. Secondly, it is surprising that the teachers did not show agency in seeking/developing their own solutions to meet the needs of the multilingual learners, as "teacher agency may not always be about instigating change, but rather, a responsive behaviour embedded in daily practice" (Pantić et al. 2021: 170), i.e. supporting learners and catering for their well-being as they progress through their new school reality. Clearly, this responsive behaviour is lacking in many teachers which may signify a serious predicament. Their inability to (re)act may be caused by two aspects: the novelty of the phenomenon for which teachers have not been prepared by e.g. in-service teacher training courses (cf. Gorter & Arocena 2020), as well as a lack of support

from social networks at school, an unsupportive school environment, constraints of their expected role, which may counteract what Prestley et al. (2015a) consider to be prerequisites of boosting teacher agency. Despite these unfavourable conditions a few teachers managed to mobilise their resources to act, which seems to be a result of an interaction of both personal and situational factors.

Following this, the second research question aimed to identify individual propensities that may have impacted teacher agency. Among the individual propensities studied, it seems that plurilingual competence of the teachers comes to the fore, as it prompted teacher preparedness to foster intercultural competence in their learners. Using multilingual learners' languages as affordances was particularly practised by teachers who knew languages in addition to English at an advanced level, which seems to corroborate the findings of Wernicke (2018) who observed the link between teacher plurilingualism and teacher agency as well as Otwinowska's (2017) statement that "the degrees of multilingualism have an impact on the teachers' noticing of cross-linguistic similarities and their readiness to use cross-linguistic comparisons when teaching. It does not suffice for the teacher to know only L2 or even several languages but weakly (Otwinowska 2017: 318)". It seems therefore that teacher plurilingual and intercultural competences coincided with teacher didactic skills, which materialised in lesson planning that took into account the presence of multilingual learners in the EFL class. This finding corroborates those of other researchers (Calafato 2021; Gallagher 2020; Gilham & Fürstenau 2020; Otwinowska 2017; Mieszkowska & Otwinowska 2015) who unanimously point to teacher plurilingual competence as a prerequisite for using learners' varied languages in an EFL class and allowing translanguaging.

Little connection in that respect was observed in relation to the length of teaching experience, i.e. teacher experience alone did not seem to matter but did play a role in connection with plurilingual competence. In that respect, T1 instantiated a combination of desirable factors, such as plurilingual competence and long teaching experience, and exhibited the highest level of agency, but should be regarded as unique rather than the norm. What was unintentionally observed was the relevancy of the teacher's experience of working with SEN learners (multilingual learners could be considered as such) as possibly the most important factor as it prepared the teacher to adjust to the learners' abilities.

Contrary to predictions, time spent living abroad, even if it did contribute to the teacher's own intercultural competence, did not transfer to the ability to develop it in the learners. This finding is consistent with those of Dewaele and Li Wei (2012) who observed that time spent living abroad was not related to the development of cognitive empathy, but that advanced knowledge of a few languages was. One possible explanation for that fact may be that time spent

abroad interrupted the teaching career. Due to the passage of time since graduation from a teacher education institution, certain facts, theories, pedagogical approaches learnt in higher education could have been forgotten, and an interval away from teaching could cause a setback in professional development.

Empathy, or the ability to put oneself in the position of the multilingual learner, did not impact teaching solutions. This observation contradicts the findings of Calafato (2021) who observed that teachers who were able to position themselves as learners and also had knowledge of two foreign languages were more likely to implement multilingual pedagogies. This means that empathy alone does not mean that the teacher will know how to work with multilingual learners. Similarly, Dewaele and Li Wei (2012) argue that what contributes to the growth of empathy is frequent use of multiple languages, i.e., multicompetence, which again points to the connection between plurilingualism and possible enactment of agency.

To summarise, the findings show that neither length of teaching experience, nor time spent abroad/intercultural sensitivity, nor empathy will suffice to work efficiently with multilingual learners. The teacher needs to know how to do it, not only to empathise with the learners. Only in combination with teacher plurilingual competence and growing cross-linguistic awareness do these features become significant in the context of language teaching didactics.

Certainly, the limitation of the study is its small sample and qualitative nature, which does not allow extrapolation of the results onto the entire population of EFL teachers in Poland. The study should be treated as a preliminary analysis of how teachers cope with the challenge of working with multilingual learners. Any hypotheses about the factors impacting teacher agency in that respect should be verified in a larger cross-sectional study.

To conclude, agentic behaviour of some EFL teachers could be observed, which was probably the outcome of their own personal predispositions, such as length and type of teaching experience, plurilingual competence, enthusiasm, and intercultural sensitivity. Yet, even though a significant number of teachers showed these characteristics, not all of them could transfer them into their teaching practices in a multilingual EFL class. For this to happen, both the skills and preparedness and willingness to do it are needed. Whilst the former can be developed through additional training, teacher agency, which is a dynamic factor (Sang 2020) in that respect can be boosted if teachers obtain support to implement change from educational decision-makers, from ministerial to local school level. As Priestley et al. (2015b: 8) highlight, "teacher agency offers considerable potential in enabling those who frame policies to more fully understand the implications of those policies for those who enact practice." Therefore the findings of this study bear practical implications for both pre-service and in-service

teacher education programmes, which should revise their curricula and prepare language teachers to work with learners of diverse language repertoires as well as teach them how to utilize the phenomenon of multilingualism.

It seems that where society is in a state of transition, i.e. changing from a dominantly monolingual environment to become more multilingual, teachers, and language teachers in particular, have an important role to play. By accommodating the needs of both multilingual and Polish learners they will not only aid integration, but also implicitly encourage in their learners attitudes of openness and tolerance, as well as plurilingual and pluricultural interest, which should later lead to greater social cohesion. However, they will not be able to enact their agency with this new challenge, if they are left without support.

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