

Plurilingual and Intercultural Awareness of Future Teachers

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2015.42.4.06

Abstract

The study focuses on some aspects of plurilingual and intercultural competences of future teachers – their theoretical outcomes and data from comparison of two research studies. After presenting the main concepts and situation in Slovakia, it describes and compares aims, samples, methodology and data from 2 studies (2002, 2015) on the perception of the need to use various foreign languages and cultures, especially in the performance of the teaching profession. Their comparison gives evidence about areas in which it has grown.

Keywords: teacher, plurilingual, intercultural, awareness, competence

Introduction

Requirements on the scope of teachers' professional competence are continuously increasing. As a consequence of growing globalization and the current massive wave of migration, teachers' intercultural and plurilingual competence has become crucial. It is emphasised in documents of the Council of Europe (*Guide 2007*, Beacco et al., 2010; *CERR, 2001*), *FREPA* by the European Centre of Modern Languages ECML (Candelier & Camilleri-Grima, 2012) as well as the European Commission (*Key Data*, 2012).

First, some terms should be explained. The prefix “multi-” means simultaneous presence of several cultures (*multiculturalism*) or several languages (*multilingualism*) in a given geographic area (Guide, 2010, p. 16), where also people speaking one language may live. “*Plurilingualism*” designates a person's ability to use more languages, even if not mastering them perfectly (SERR, p. 12). The prefix “inter-”

indicates willingness to dialogue with “other” cultures. *Intercultural competence* is an ability to “understand different ways of perception of the world, thinking, customs and behaviour of members of other cultures, perceive mutual differences, an ability to communicate with one another also in foreign languages” (Mistrič, 2008) and act in intercultural situations so as “to promote an understanding of the participants in interaction without compromising their integrity” (Zelenková, 2015). Both competencies are closely interconnected since it is the language that is the means enabling the “cultural understanding among culturally different participants” (Kollárová, 2013).

The “top-down” pressure of EU institutions, as well as the “bottom-up” awareness of the social reality result in implementation of intercultural education and plurilingualism in school curricula. All teachers are expected to have adequate *plurilingual and intercultural awareness*.

“*Language awareness*” (Hawkins, 1984) includes, in addition to explicit knowledge, also conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, teaching and use. Like a “bridge”, it connects various aspects of language training, thinking about a language and a discussion about language diversity. It does not directly mean learning languages/cultures, but learning about learning languages/cultures. It is connected with *cultural awareness*, i.e. perception of cultural diversity, one’s own cultural identity and the identity of the partner in communication and the necessity of dialogue.

A *plurilingually aware teacher* is able to stimulate interest in languages and cultures, their observation and analysis with the aim to internally adopt the idea of plurilingualism or pluriculturalism (Bernaus, 2007, p. 14). An *interculturally aware teacher* understands the substance of socio-cultural phenomena and the “subsequent adequate implementation of cultural elements in subjects ... which represents the first step toward the inclusive strategy for bridging cultural differences, thus also pupils’ success at school” (Cabanová, 2006). They can actively mediate not only semantic models of multiculturalism, but also their axiological dimensions (Vančíková, 2013). They focus education not only on superficial information of cultural differences, but in particular on the interiorization of principles of tolerance and justice (Kosová, 2013), which is manifested at 3 levels: cognitive (knowledge about cultures), affective (understanding, tolerance, empathy, appreciation of diversity) and conative (behaviour towards “others”) (Zelenková, 2010, p. 26).

Thus, the *plurilingual and intercultural awareness* are complex constructs including not only knowledge about languages/cultures and opinions on them, but also their value classification and formation of positive attitudes towards them.

They are manifested by an ability to sensitively perceive one's own and foreign languages and cultural needs/contexts; an active approach to learning about other cultures and languages. One characteristic of a plurilingual and interculturally aware teaching professional is an awareness of the needs for and opportunities to use foreign languages in life. From the psychological point of view, they belong to the needs for social inclusion, social activity, self-realization, prestige as well as curiosity (Oravcová, 2004, pp. 157–161). Therefore, the aim of our research was to find out how much the awareness has increased in our current student teachers over the past decade, of ***when, how and in what cultural context foreign languages can be used.***

Research Context

Slovakia is a multilingual and multicultural region with a Slovak majority, some “historical” minorities and a growing number of representatives of other ethnicities. In 2008, *multicultural education* became a cross-cutting theme in the national education programme (ISCED 0–3). All teachers should develop the intercultural competence in pupils. However, are teachers prepared for this? Their university training is carried out only through the elective subject “Multicultural Education”. Poor development of the language awareness (e.g., according to research done at teacher training faculties in the SR (Hanesová, 2013) is also a shortcoming. Although multilingualism is not a prerequisite for the teaching profession, it is considered to be beneficial for the identification of the socio-cultural context of pupil development and overcoming communication barriers between family and school (*Profesijný rozvoj učiteľa, 2006*).

The assumption that teacher graduates are adequately familiar with this issue was not confirmed even in the research carried out in kindergartens in 2013 (Hutková & Vančíková, 2013).

2011 research on *multicultural education* in elementary schools (Rosinský, 2013) revealed misunderstanding of this curricular area. Out of 2218 schools, the questionnaire was completed only by 12%. Out of them, 82% had no qualified teachers for such an education, 82% had difficulties to answer the question about the time devoted to it. Up to 4% of the schools did not perform it, because they “have few Roma pupils at school”, while 51% of positive answers indicated its focus on the Roma culture, approx. 5% on the Arabic, Vietnamese, Jewish or Ruthenian culture. The teachers did not perceive the Roma language as equal to other languages, showed no interest in new information about other cultures.

Reid (2009, 2012) found out a low awareness of the importance of such an education in a large part of English teachers in the SR. Even teachers who included cultural elements in teaching focused on visible (material) aspects of culture and either ignored invisible (socio-cultural) aspects or were not aware of their importance for the development of the intercultural communicative competence.

Research Methodology

The above results in the **research question** of whether and how the awareness of real needs/opportunities to use foreign languages is being continuously developed in student teachers of various subjects (*not foreign language teachers*). The answer requires vertical comparison in time.

The retrospective view is enabled by the use of outputs from wider **research carried out in 2002** (Hanesová, 2003), examining the general profile of students of the teaching profession as foreign language users. The issue of plurilingual and intercultural awareness was covered by some questionnaire items about *future teachers' needs to use foreign languages in various cultural contexts – in the past, at present as well as in future*. **The 2002 research sample** consisted of 547 student teachers from the whole SR (out of them 83% women), 95% of them under the age of 30.

For the sake of comparison, **2015 research** conformed to the defined data from 2002; quantitative methods were considerably replaced by the qualitative methodology while enabling to extract also quantitative data. **The 2015 research sample** was thus composed only of 111 student teachers (out of those 90% women), 97% under the age of 30, which is a sufficient sample for qualitative research conducted using a half-structured interview. The respondents answered 3 questions revealing not only their opinions, but also actual attitudes and the importance of foreign languages for them: Which foreign languages and knowledge of cultures did you actually need in the past and for what purpose? Which do you perceive at present? What needs do you anticipate in future? In addition to real situations, the respondents could indicate also hypothetical situations of their use of languages. This field of research in the SR attracted interest also of ECML representatives in Graz (at the conference in 2014).

The aim of this study was to present a sample of some results from 2 research studies different in time (2002 and 2015). Data from the questionnaires of 2002 as well as the interviews of 2015 were analyzed and categorized according to groups of language use needs. Further, quantitative tables with data on the data

occurrence were processed. The processed data were then compared and evaluated qualitatively. Since the data on existing needs were partially published (Hanesová, 2015), after their summary herein we focus on foreign language needs anticipated in future.

Research Results and Interpretation

The 2002 research indicated the following categories of cultural contexts creating the need to use foreign languages: communication with foreigners in the SR, foreign tourism, work or study abroad, conferences, contacts with relatives and colleagues. It was established that the respondents felt the need for 5 foreign languages **in their past till the time of the questionnaire completion** (Table 1). Most frequently it was the English language (EL), which the respondents needed the most for communication with foreigners in the SR (33%). The need for it in activities abroad increased from 2% to 18% in comparison with the past. Other categories of the need for English did not exceed the limit of 10%. In total, approx. 42% of the respondents needed English in the past and the present time. The second most important language was the German language (GL) with the 14% need to communicate in it with professionals and other foreigners in the SR. Its need in communication during stays abroad was expressed by 11% of the respondents; in total, the need for the German language was expressed by approx. 18% of the respondents. The Russian language (RL) was the third most required language (6%). Values of the need for the Russian language were stable for a long time, with the greatest scope of interaction with foreigners in the SR (5%). The fewest of the respondents positively expressed their need for the Spanish language (SL) and the French language (FL) (from 0.2% to 1.2%). What is startling is the fact that more than 10% of the respondents had either no opportunity or need to use foreign languages *in the past; in the year the research was conducted* indeed even 1/3 of the respondents.

Table 1. Increase in the common categories of existing language needs (2002 and 2015) in %

Language	Year	Work abroad	Work in Slovakia	Foreign tourism	Foreigners in SR	Colleagues & relatives	Professional information
English	2002	8.7	7.1	2	37.8	11.3	5.2
	2015	12	16.2	58	22.5	18	7.1

Language	Year	Work abroad	Work in Slovakia	Foreign tourism	Foreigners in SR	Colleagues & relatives	Professional information
German	2002	4.2	3.8	12	2	11	0.9
	2015	14.4	7.1	26.1	4.5	0.9	1.8
Russian	2002	1	0.9	2	5.8	1.6	0.2
	2015	0	7.1	2.7	1.8	1.8	
French	2002	0.4	0.5	3.1	1.5	0.4	0
	2015	0.9		8.1	0.9	0.9	
Spanish	2002	0.9	0.8	4.3	4	1.5	0.5
	2015		0.9	4.5	0.9	0.9	

All the participants in the 2015 research confirmed their foreign language needs *in the past*. In addition to the 5 languages mentioned in 2002, the respondents indicated additional 14 foreign languages they had needed/used *so far*. In addition to the languages from 2002, they mentioned also the Italian, Croatian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian and sporadically also the Greek, Bulgarian, Ukraine, Japan, Arabic, Dutch, Rumanian, Jewish and Turkish languages. It is surprising that none of the respondents indicated potential usefulness of the Roma language in the past.

In addition to the number of languages, in 2015 also the scope of situations increased in which the respondents had needed a given language *as yet*. In addition to communication with foreigners in the SR, foreign tourism, search for a better job position, work or study abroad, the respondents expressed a need to obtain professional information not only through meetings with colleagues, but also studying professional literature. A specific need increased, namely the respondents' communication with relatives or colleagues abroad. A new group of needs appeared – the area of explicit cultural needs – to become familiar with foreign literature, art, following the media. Less frequent were foreign language needs for the purpose of mobility, internet communication (purchase, social networks), instructions, giving additional training, translations, and communication with neighbours – foreigners.

As can be seen in Table 1, comparing the intensity of personally experienced need to use a foreign language in the past (before the research), an increase was recorded almost in all the areas of the needs. The need to communicate with foreigners in their language on the territory of the SR decreased (by 40% in English, 70% in Russian, similarly in Spanish and partially also in French). Only the need for German gained intensity in this area. All other contexts of the needs showed an increase.

Having established the existing needs or opportunities to use foreign languages, we were interested in **anticipated needs for the use of foreign languages in future** (Table 2). First, the finding of the comparison should be stated, i.e. that there was a radical decrease in the number of respondents with zero anticipation of foreign language needs in future. In the sample of the 2002 research, almost 8% could not imagine any opportunity to use any foreign language or they commented on that subject in the questionnaires. In the sample of the 2015 research on the use of languages *in the performance of their profession*, there were only 2 answers explicitly expressing a negative opinion of the type: “So far, I have got by using only the Slovak language. I used English only at school, on lessons. I don’t think I’ll need any foreign language in my future profession, perhaps partly English.”

Table 2. Comparison of anticipated future language needs (2002–2015) in %

Language needs (respondents in %)	English	German	Russian	Roma	French	Chinese	Czech	Polish	Spanish	Hungarian	Korean	Italian
In any context (2002 sample)	52	24	5	-	2.5	-	0.3	-	-			0.25
In performance of profession (2015 sample)	100	40	20	4.5	3	3	3	3	2	2	1	

In 2002, more than 50% of the students anticipated the use of English, 24% of German, 5% of Russian and even fewer of French, Spanish and Italian (only in communication with foreigners in the SR and foreign tourism). In addition to the need for those languages, the sample in the 2015 research anticipated also the languages of the minorities in the SR and neighbouring countries (Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Chinese, Korean) and especially Roma (even if only 4.5%) in their future profession.

The data about the *scope of foreign languages* show a significant increase in the plurilingual awareness in the younger generation of student teachers. Not only do all the respondents of the 2015 research consider English inevitable for their future profession, which is certainly a logical result of the legislative preference for this language in ISCED1, but the increase in the anticipated need for languages spoken by minorities and in neighbouring countries, when compared with 2002, is encouraging. In 2002, no respondent mentioned Hungarian. It may be speculated that the respondents either mastered the Hungarian language (as their second

language), or, on the contrary, did not feel the need to learn it (no questionnaires returned from Hungarian speaking faculties).

Although the respondents of 2015 consider English the most important, universal language, also interest in German (2x) and Russian (4x) has developed. These three languages are characterized as world languages. One student argued against the plurilingual approach by Europe-wide coverage of English, which is why he could get by with English, e.g., in Germany. It is interesting that in 2015, also Czech appeared among foreign languages (in 2002, the respondents did not include it in foreign languages).

A positive sign of the teachers' increased plurilingual awareness is the explicit expression of the need for the Roma language, which the respondents explained by the anticipated presence of Roma pupils in their future classes (at kindergartens and primary school).

As far as the *scope of anticipated situations* with the need to use foreign languages is concerned, the **respondents of 2002** expected the widest use of foreign languages during *communication with foreigners in the SR* (42% in EL, 17% in GL, 3% in RL) and also during *foreign tourism* (33% in EL, 12% in GL, 2% in RL). Surprisingly, the second largest area of perceived needs was the area of *cultural experience (literature, media)* – 43.4% in EL, 10% in GL, 2.2% in RL. Other needs were a *better job position in the SR* (33% in EL, 12% in GL, 1.7% in RL) and an *opportunity to work or study abroad* (31% in EL, 8% in GL, 1% in RL). Even up to 1/5 of the respondents expected the inevitable use of English in *contacts with colleagues*, 15% during *international conferences* and 7% for *obtaining information relevant to their profession*. Anticipation of other languages in the mentioned areas ranged from 0.07 to 2.2%.

The data from 2015 (Table 3) show a higher degree of receptiveness to various cultural contexts than in 2002. Even up to 1/2 of the respondents are aware of the diversity of the existing school setting and consider situations of linguistically and culturally mixed classes a matter of course. They perceive more reasons for the necessity of intercultural and multilingual approach even already at kindergarten and primary school (pupils from minority families, families of foreigners working in the SR, bilingual families). In their opinion, the school staff should be equipped with at least the basics of languages for communication with such families, also in the case of Roma children. Some respondents prefer a better command of a smaller number of languages, others recommend learning as many languages as possible, in addition to a good command of English. The second largest group of respondents was marked with ambitions to found foreign language clubs or schools, develop plurilingual projects or directly teach English. Similar needs,

although a lower percentage, appeared also in the case of German. There were also examples of other needs for both languages, ranging from mobility (7% in both languages) through study of professional literature to the use of the Internet for various reasons.

Table 3. Overview of anticipated future language needs (2015) in %

Anticipated use of language/ambitions	English language	German language	Russian language
Inevitable for direct performance of the teaching profession (teaching children, contacts with parents, communication with schools abroad)	54	8	2
Wish to teach a foreign language at kindergarten / run a foreign language club, found a school supporting foreign languages	11	4	1
Conferences, exchange stays, teaching abroad	7	7	
To read professional literature, about cultures, discussion forums, blogs, information about further education abroad	4	1	
To use the Internet, media and IT technologies (for the purpose of teaching)	4	2	
Awareness of the inevitability of mastering as many languages as possible due to the current situation in society	2	2	
To understand product manuals (software, interactive board, etc.)	2	1	
School trips abroad		1	

Discussion

The decision to compare the research studies distant in time made us realize the limits of the 2002 research and the presented data leave several questions unanswered. The result was that in addition to establishing facts about real needs to use foreign languages as well as anticipation of their needs, this study did not enable us to make a deeper comparison of the language and cultural plurality awareness formation. On the other hand, these research studies deliberately avoided direct questions (Do you consider languages important?), with the intention to prompt the respondents to formulate real positions of their needs in the face of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the school context. We are of the opinion that accounts about one's own need/decision to use or learn a foreign language represent more

than only an opinion on the foreign language usefulness. They also present a certain view of the value of a foreign language in one's own life and attitude towards it.

The majority of the respondents did not express their opinions on the studied needs from the position of a professional sufficiently sensitive to teach multicultural education, cognizant of the issue, actively using its terms and reflecting the studied issue (only 2 students in 2015 argued with technical terms). A prevailing part of the answers made a considerably "egotistical" impression, without overlapping to "others". From this point of view, the results of our research would confirm conclusions of the previous studies on teachers' preparedness.

Although the results show an obvious increase in the plurilingual awareness, the original needs had surprisingly low values (in comparison with other study courses) and therefore the resulting values are relative. Further considerations require examination of the correlations of these needs with other socio-cultural, economic and regional aspects.

Conclusion

As emphasized in the first section, a multicultural and multilingual society presents increased demands on teachers' professional competencies – on their plurilingual and intercultural awareness. Examples of some previous studies indicated shortcomings in the application of such requirements. They probably resulted from a superficial, mostly formal way of introducing multicultural education to schools in the form of training courses, not experiential education in values and attitudes. However, this hypothesis is a suggestion for further research.

The results of the comparison of our research studies in the student teacher samples (in 2002 and 2015) confirmed an increase in their awareness of the needs and real opportunities to use foreign languages in various cultural contexts, in the past, at present and also in future.

Naturally, an awareness of such needs in future teachers is not sufficient. Another step is the person's decision to act – learn about languages and cultures, and if possible, also to invest in effective study at least of their basics, to encourage pupils to the same and gradually change school to an environment professionally responding to the linguistic and cultural diversity. The educational practice should aim at the development of a) higher cognitive functions – not only knowledge about the diversity of cultures/languages, but also their understanding, analysis and creative application (e.g., how to learn a new foreign language on the basis of one's existing knowledge of another language); b) the

affective area – attitudes of empathy, tolerance and justice; and c) corresponding social skills and conduct.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the project Mobility – enhancing research, science and education at Matej Bel University, ITMS code: 26110230082, under the Operational Program Education co-financed by the European Social Fund.

References

- Beacco, J.C., Byram, M. et al. (2010). *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Bernaus, M., Andrade, A.I. et al. (2007). *Plurilingual and Pluricultural Awareness in Language Teacher Education*. Graz: ECML.
- Cabanová, V. (2006). Implementácia kultúry do obsahu vzdelávania. In *Didaktika v dimenziách vedy a praxe*. Prešov: Vydavateľstvo PU, 306–309.
- Candelier, M., Camilleri-Grima, A. (2012). *FREPA – A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages/ Cultures*. Graz: ECML.
- Cavalli, M., Coste, D. et al. (2009). *Plurilingual and Intercultural Education as a Project*. In *Languages in Education*, DG IV/EDU/LANG (3).
- CERR – *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. (2001). Strasbourg: CUP, Council of Europe.
- Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*. (2007). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Hanesová, D. (2003). *Odborná angličtina na PF*. Banská Bystrica: Trian.
- Hanesová, D. (2015). Plurilingualism – an Educational Challenge. *JoLaCE*, 3(2), 111–131.
- Hawkins, E. (1984). *Awareness of Language. An Introduction*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Huťková, K., Vančíková, K. (2013). Pripravenosť materských škôl na realizáciu multi-kultúrnej výchovy ako prierezovej témy. In Vančíková, K. (ed.) *Multikultúrna výchova – jej miesto v príprave učiteľov*. Banská Bystrica: PFUMB, 31–50.
- Kasáčová, B., Kosová, B. et al. (2006). *Profesijný rozvoj učiteľa*. Prešov: MPC.
- Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*. (2012). Brussels: Eurydice, Eurostat. 176 p. http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143EN.pdf,
- Kollárová, E. (2013.) *Hovory o kulturologickom smerovaní cudzojazyčnej edukácie*. Bratislava: ŠPÚ.
- Kosová, B. (2012). *Filozofické a globálne súvislosti edukácie*. Banská Bystrica: PFUMB.
- Mistrík, E. (ed.) (2008) *Multikultúrna výchova v škole*. Bratislava: Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti.
- Oravcová, J. (2004). *Sociálna psychológia*. Banská Bystrica: FHVUMB.

- Reid, E. (2009) Kurikulárna reforma na Slovensku. ZŠ. In: Pokrivčáková, S. (ed.) *Cudzie jazyky a kultúry v modernej škole*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 88–106.
- Reid, E. (2012). Development of Intercultural Communicative Competences in Foreign Language. In Žemberová, I. *15 rokov KLIŠ PF UKF v Nitre*. Nitra: UKF, 191–198.
- Rosinský, R. (2013). Multikultúrna výchova ako prierezová tém v slovenských školách. In: Vančíková, K. (ed.) *Multikultúrna výchova – jej miesto v príprave učiteľov*. Banská Bystrica: PFUMB, 7–30.
- Vančíková, K. (ed.) (2013). *Multikultúrna výchova – jej miesto v príprave učiteľov*. Banská Bystrica: PF UMB.
- Zelenková, A. (2010). *Interkultúrne vzdelávanie v cudzích jazykoch na vysokej škole. Metódy a ich reflexia*. Banská Bystrica: EF UMB.
- Zelenková, A. (2015). Particularities of English for Specific Purposes and Development of Intercultural Competence *Xlinguae*, 8(1).