

“Multilingualism is the Real Thing”: Multilingualism from the Parents’ Perspective

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Abstract

Language heterogeneity in the classroom is quite a common phenomenon. For experts, it is a challenge; for teachers and parents, it is most often a problem. This challenge or problem will be discussed on the basis of the theory of multilingual education and migration pedagogy. The aim of this contribution is to present an app that can be regarded as a universal tool for fostering multilingualism and explaining it from the viewpoint of parents, since they are an important but often ignored aspect of multilingual education. The research analysis will illustrate and interpret the research results of a qualitative study in which parents from different countries participated. It is not country specific, but it highlights the key aspects that can foster multilingual education and that at least partly match with the underlying theory.

Keywords: Multilingualism, language heterogeneity, language learning, parents’ perspective, Kuarki app

Introduction

“You are lucky if you have a class of 25 students and only 10 different mother tongues,” said a teacher at a school in Germany. Nowadays, the various degrees of language heterogeneity in classes confronts teachers of linguistic and non-linguistic subjects with new didactic and pedagogical challenges (Klein 2016, Mercatorstiftung 2016). For those who deal with multilingualism, language

heterogeneity in the classroom is a challenge in the fields of research, concepts, pedagogy and didactics; for language teachers, it is often a dilemma, a gap, an obstacle or even a problem. That is because they have to guide, direct and teach all students irrespective of their home language¹ and foster them to reach the prescribed minimum standards of knowledge in a language that is not their usual communication tool. It must be remembered that, for students learning non-linguistic subjects, the language of instruction is important, if not decisive, for acquiring new content/knowledge, since the medium of communication is the language of instruction and not their home language. For teachers, there is no unique concept for working under such circumstances; therefore, teachers often have to rely on recommendations from fellow teachers, and on their own feelings, ingenuity and pedagogical-didactic flexibility. While learning in the language of the environment, multilingual learners must learn their home language, but this learning is often subordinated to the language and culture of the environment.

The aim of the contribution is to present an app developed within the framework of the project “Travelers Between Wor(l)ds”², through which learners can learn or extend their ability to read and understand their native language, as well as the language of instruction/environment and/or a foreign language. The selection of languages is limited to Slovene, Russian, Romanian, Lithuanian, German and English. In the following, the authors will focus on the views and opinions of parents from different countries who live with multilingualism and who shared their experiences with multilingualism within this project in the form of guided interviews. A qualitative content analysis of their statements revealed interesting findings, only partly coinciding with theory and partly not. These findings cannot be generalized, as the number of participants was too small, but there is no doubt that there is a need for reflection and discussion in the preparation of educational concepts of multilingualism. Firstly, the opinions of the parents and the app itself will be analysed based on the theory of multilingual education and migration pedagogy and, secondly, the app will be presented in more detail.

¹ The authors use “home language” and “language of the environment” in order to avoid the terms (1) *native language* and *foreign language*, as these are often inappropriate according to their meaning; (2) *first, second, third etc. language*, since the order of learning the languages is not important at all; (3) *dominant language*, since the domination of a language is changing all the time, and (4) *additional language*, as there is a dilemma around claims of which language is the “additional” one.

² “Travelers Between Wor(l)ds” is an Erasmus+ project (2016–2019; VG-IN-BE-16-36-02306) with 9 partners from 5 countries (Germany, Slovenia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia).

Pedagogical-didactic reactions to classroom heterogeneity

Overcoming language heterogeneity in the classroom becomes a special challenge for each teacher with each new class. There is no universally successful methodological-didactic path; nevertheless, there have been various models and suggestions, even new pedagogics and didactics developed. In addition to intercultural pedagogy, a new branch of pedagogy has evolved, migration pedagogy, the more prominent representatives of which are Paul Mecheril, Maria to Mar Castro Varela and Inci Dirim. Migration pedagogy is a young science that developed at the beginning of the 21st century in the context of the cultural and sociological sciences based on the critique of intercultural pedagogy, and claims to be a special school of pedagogy. Nowadays, migration is a global phenomenon appearing in a range of contexts. In contrast to intercultural pedagogy, which focuses on the differences between languages and cultures, migration pedagogy focuses on migration, on the processes that initiate migration and on the process of belonging. It is an analytical-reflexive science coping not only with migration and migrants, but also with all members of the migration society. Migration pedagogy offers the potential for theoretical analysis and transformation of power enforcement. The pedagogical concepts of migration pedagogy highlight an important goal, that is, the promotion of learning and teaching processes, which, as far as possible, circumvents "othering" (Arens & Mecheril, 2009). Some of the concepts have evolved from practice, some from theory and some from a combination of both. They have been proven, but they are effective only under certain circumstances, however, these circumstances are, in practice, always an original and unrepeatable combination of various factors. These include the type and number of languages in the classroom, the prevailing, favourable or less favourable language policy in an environment, as well as the professionalism and flexibility of the teacher.

Finding resources and effective concepts is very productive, especially in environments where multilingualism is already a tradition, if not a norm in education, work and people's daily lives, such as in Switzerland. A characteristic of the Swiss concepts is that they are very specific and bound to the unique Swiss context³; it was found, however, that they can form an important basis that can be adapted, upgraded and modified according to other circumstances.

In this contribution, the authors summarize a model by Berthele (2017) that systematically depicts possible pedagogical-didactic responses to linguistic and

³ The unique Swiss context includes the geographical, political, linguistic, sociolinguistic and ultimately, economic factors that create it.

cultural heterogeneity in the classroom. Interestingly, these responses can be both productive and counterproductive to multilingualism in the classroom.

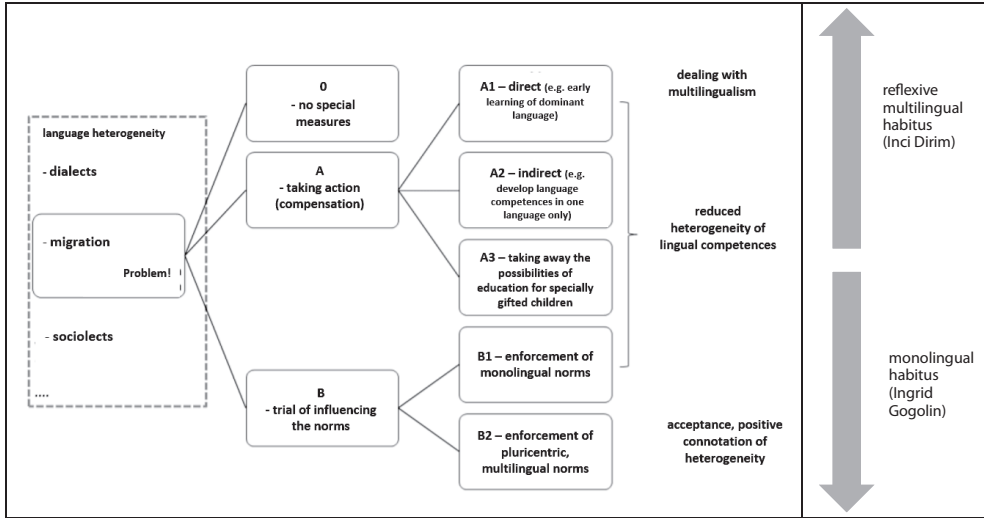


Figure 1. Adapted from Berthele R. (2017): *Language heterogeneity and school*

As can be seen from the diagram, linguistic heterogeneity in the classroom can be the result of dialects, migration, and especially in Switzerland, sociolects. In the diagram, migration as a reason for language heterogeneity in the class is marked and identified as a problem. According to the model, this problem can be solved in three different ways: The society either (1) takes no action and does not face the problem, or (2) takes action and seeks compensation options, or (3) tries to influence the valid norms. If the society is looking for compensation options, this may mean introducing early learning of the dominant language, developing language competences in one language only and eliminating some educational possibilities (particularly for specially gifted students). The decision to try to influence valid norms opens at least two additional routes: on the one hand, the restriction of multilingualism, by introducing a monolingual norm, or, on the other hand, the enforcement of pluricentric and multilingual norms.

Most uninformed pedagogical-didactic measures address multilingualism by essentially reducing the heterogeneity of language competences and thus reintroducing the “Monolingual habitus” (Gogolin 1994) into educational contexts, which Ingrid Gogolin questioned three decades ago. Another possibility for influencing norms is to enforce multilingual norms, suggesting the acceptance and positive

connotation of language heterogeneity. This is called the “reflexive multilingual habitus”, which is a more recent theory supported by the migration scholar Inci Dirim (Dirim 2016).

The ERASMUS + project *Travelers Between Wor(l)ds* and its products support the shift from monolingual norms to multilingualism and multilingual norms. The app *Kuarki* and the related documents (statements by parents and their analysis, a manual for teachers and parents, recommendations from parents for parents) seek to prepare a pathway for practice (see <http://kids.lingvo.info/en>).

The Kuarki App

The app is designed as a learning aid that will motivate students to take an early and successful journey into the world of multilingualism, thus leveraging linguistic skills in one of the selected languages. The app’s texts are interesting and informative stories from the world of science. These texts, which can be classified as popular-scientific texts, are visually supported by original authorial illustrations that were created exclusively for the needs of the project. The texts are intended for reading, but they are also didactic. This means that there are prepared tasks, exercises, puzzles, riddles and word games that the students solve interactively.

The learning app is suitable for tablets and mobile phones. Students and parents can use it for free and independently at home, while teachers can actively integrate it into the teaching process in their language classes and selected natural science classes. By using the app, students practice and improve their reading and writing competences in the chosen language; in addition, they get rewards for their knowledge of science, become acquainted with the diversity of languages and develop their ICT competences.

Empirical research

Research questions

In the empirical part, the views of parents collected by the authors in the framework of the project will be presented with the intention of analysing and illuminating multilingualism from a more practical point of view. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- What kind of experience do parents, who themselves grew up multilingual, have with multilingualism?

- What kind of experience do parents have with their children's multilingual education?
- To what extent does the parents' experience coincide with the theoretical findings concerning multilingualism?

Research method and sample

The analysed corpus consisted of 18 documents, comprising parents' written statements on their experience with raising multilingual children. The format was open, and the parents mostly chose the text type description. The parents wrote their statements (the descriptions) in a range of languages, i.e. German, Slovene, Slovak, Russian and Romanian. For research purposes, where the language was not German or Slovene, the statements were then translated into German. The corpus of texts was analysed qualitatively, focusing on content; the authors defined concepts and categories, ranked them and documented them with illustrative statements. Despite the quantitative limitations of the study, which analysed only 18 documents exclusively from those countries whose members participated in the project consortium, it was found that the views of parents who have direct experience of multilingualism are very comparable and not always consistent with theory.

Data collection procedure

The authors collected data in the countries whose partners were involved in the project *Travelers Between Wor(l)ds*. The study was carried out by means of a questionnaire, which consisted of an open-ended question with two sub-questions. Many parents were invited to participate, but only some responded. Thus, the final collection consisted of 18 statements that were written thoughtfully and mostly comprised more than a page. An interesting feature is that the content of the statements was so comparable that, after the translation of the texts into German, it was difficult, if not impossible to tell where they originated.

Data analysis and interpretation

Languages and language combinations in the statements analysed

In the corpus of statements, the authors first identified how many and which languages the students were speaking and learning, and what the language combinations being learned and spoken by the students were.

Table 2. Survey on language combinations in the statements analysed

Language or languages, spoken at home	Languages, spoken and learnt at school
Russian	Polish
Arabic	German
Russian/German	German
Russian	German
German/Russian/Turkish	German
Russian/German	Russian/German
German/Hungarian	German/Romanian (foreign languages: English, Spanish)
German/Slovak	Slovak
Slovak	German
Slovak/Czech	Swedish
Slovak/French	Dutch/German/French
Czech/Esperanto	Czech
Slovene/German	Slovene (foreign languages: English, German)
German/Slovene	Slovene/German
Hungarian/Slovene/German	Slovene/Hungarian (foreign languages: English, German)
Bulgarian/Slovene	Slovene (foreign languages: English, German)

As evident from Table 2, as many as 18 different languages are mentioned in the statements. These languages belong to different language groups, ranging from Germanic to Slavic, Romance, Finno-Ugric and even to the artificial language of Esperanto. The language combinations are also very interesting, specific and unique. While for most children, multilingualism means two or three languages, the statements also speak of children who are dealing with five or even six languages in their lives. The status of these languages varies, whether they speak the languages at home or at school, or learn them as foreign languages at school. Despite careful analysis, no language combining principle can be identified. We

can only state that this case study provides ample testimonial to how diverse, interesting and endless “living multilingualism” can be.

Qualitative analysis of parts of the parental statements

Table 3. Categories, concepts, along with the parents’ word-for-word statements

Categories	Rank	Concepts	Sample statements
SLOWER SPEECH DEVELOPMENT	1 (f=6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – panic – shyness – later start of speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – From experience I can say, don’t panic if a child growing up with multiple languages starts to speak later than other children. – The child was shy and didn’t speak for a long time.
PRINCIPLE “ONE PERSON, ONE LANGUAGE“	1 (f=6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – parents – consistency – separation of languages when speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – You have to stick strictly to one rule: One person always speaks one language. My children know that each parent speaks another language with them, and the teacher at school speaks a different language. – You have to separate the languages consistently, e.g. Mom speaks one language, the father another one.
BI- OR MULTILINGUALISM AS HUMAN POTENTIAL	2 (f=5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – advantage – travel – self-confidence – parallel use of multiple languages – self-evidence of multilingualism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – It is a big advantage if children speak different languages and can talk freely. We travel a lot and my children became more confident. – My children use more than three languages per day in parallel and it is no problem for them. It seems natural to them.
MULTILINGUALISM AS ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE PARENTS	2 (f=4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – concern for multilingualism – friends – parental engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In addition, you have to take care of multilingualism; you have to make sure your children have friends in both languages. – Multilingualism is the right thing, so, dear parents, encourage your multilingual children.
MULTILINGUALISM AS REQUIREMENT OF THE PARENTS	3 (f=3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – equality of languages – effort – perseverance – patience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Every language should be given the same opportunity; this is not easy and requires a lot of effort and perseverance. But the parents must insist and never quit. – [...] you must endure and not quit, even if it does not appear to be working - bilingual education requires a lot of patience, but it ultimately pays off.

Categories	Rank	Concepts	Sample statements
RESPECT FOR LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY	4 (f=2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - respect - diversity of languages - tolerance - openness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A multilingual upbringing that respects the diversity of languages and cultures is a very good basis for the education of the child, since it encourages tolerance and respect for others and different cultures. - [Children] are generally very open to other languages.

In their statements, most parents highlighted findings that belong to the most frequent category *slower speech development*. In theory, the fact that multilingual children speak later and that they mix languages at a certain stage is an indispensable part of linguistic development (Pinter 2011, Cook 2016). Some parents are very concerned about this, and they also take steps to abolish multilingual upbringing. The theory and the experience of other parents can significantly help concerned parents to be tolerant, to understand that this is a transitional phase and to continue with multilingual education. The next most frequently represented category, derived from the statements of the parents, is the *principle “one person; one language”*. With this, the parents confirmed another important principle of multilingual education: that a particular language be linked to one person. If the caregiver mixes languages, the child may become confused, and that can influence the child’s development counterproductively. Most parents have a positive experience with multilingualism, so they treat the ability to speak more languages and bi- or multilingualism as representing *human potential*. Statements in which this potential is explicitly or implicitly stated fall into third place among the categories identified. The next two categories, which are approximately equally represented in the ranking, are especially interesting for interpretation: *multilingualism as encouragement from the parents* and *multilingualism as requirement of the parents*. While the first promotes and advocates multilingualism in children, the second is demanded from the children. Although this may sound like compulsion, or like authoritative parenting, there is probably a hidden necessity of life behind it. Most parents who wrote these statements have their own experience of multilingualism and migration and link this experience to the struggle to survive, so their children have no choice from the start. Concerning this last category, there are deviations from the theory, where experts mostly talk about encouragement, support and multilingualism as a natural phenomenon (Tracy 2007). In opposition to this, these parents point out that encouragement and support are sometimes not enough and that even coercion does not lead to the desired results. The category

respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is only weakly represented. Nevertheless, the authors highlight this category as extremely important for parents with no experience in multilingualism, for speakers of important languages, for speakers of languages with prestige and for those who live a quality and satisfying life with and in an single language (Krumm 2001).

The most important findings of the study are, however, not the rankings, nor the categories or the identified foci, but the content of the categories themselves.

Parental guidance for parents

Textual analysis of parts of the statements shows that the informative function prevails (*the child was shy and did not speak for a long time* (parental statement)); occasionally, they also include a wider appeal to parents (*Multilingualism is the right thing for parents, to encourage the multilingualism of their children* (parental statement)). Table 4 below lists some illustrative statements by parents who explicitly addressed other parents and appealed to certain behavioural or educational measures. For the purpose of the analysis, the parents' statements were determined by a common denominator, i.e., in categories, owing to the low number of cases, the authors did not define terms and ranks.

Table 4. Parental guidance for multilingual education

Sample statements:	Category
It is necessary to begin early and read a lot of fairy tales, later they have to read them by themselves, listen to CDs, watch TV and have a lot of contact with people who speak a specific language.	media
You have to read a lot to the children, talk to them to learn Slovakian well. Do not correct mistakes – just answer correctly.	
Visiting families speaking the same language combination gave us courage, and it was always a great pleasure.	Communication in the target language
I have always worked hard and tried to find something interesting and funny for the children in Russian. We often went to Russia; I also sent them to camps so that they could hang out with Russian children.	Staying in an authentic environment
It turned out that a stay (even a short one) in a country where they speak a particular language works well.	

Table 4 reveals that parents emphasise the importance of early learning/acquisition of the home language, mostly in extracurricular frameworks through media. According to parents and experts, media, including books, are the key to

the development of multilingualism. Parents emphasise the greater importance of intensive linguistic input, presumably intuitively, but in accordance with the theory of first language acquisition (Krumm 2001, Tracy 2007) over the linguistic output. Interestingly, some parents pointed out that parents should not correct mistakes in language learning. Accordingly, contemporary didactic concepts have also become relevant with the appearance of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) focusing on can-do-statements, and not on what we do not know. In contemporary concepts of learning, errors are treated as an indispensable, constructive part of learning (Apeltauer 1997, Demme 2007). The next important aspect noted by parents is the possibility of living in an authentic environment, that is, in an environment where the language, which students have learned in more or less isolation, is spoken and flourishes. Such incentives for linguistic development are often associated with the parents' financial contributions and other circumstances and are therefore not necessarily viable for all children. For all three categories (media, communication in the target language and staying in authentic environments), special engagement by the parents is needed.

Conclusion

In the theoretical part, the authors emphasised the language heterogeneity of students that has become an indispensable part of pedagogical and educational discourse. While it is a major challenge for researchers and a new research field, for teachers who need to meet set goals and standards with all students, it is often a problem. There are no ultimate solutions to these problems for teachers, parents or other participants directly or indirectly involved in the process of language learning or multilingual upbringing. There are, however, some theoretical starting points in intercultural pedagogy, migration pedagogy, transcultural theory and migration didactics, providing a much needed basis for the realisation of various heterogeneous language concepts within and outside school.

Research emphasises that in multilingual education, it is important to simultaneously develop an individual's language skills in different languages, thus in the language of the environment and in the language spoken by the child at home (García 2014, Stratilaki-Klein 2016). Practice shows, however, that because of life circumstances, multilingual education focuses primarily on the language of the environment. The development of skills in languages that children speak at home stagnates or even stops. In order to allow the development of language skills among children who do not study their home language at school, the project team

prepared the Kuarki app, with a number of interesting texts and accompanying exercises. In this way, children can develop reading competence in their home language, as well as in foreign languages such as German or English. The app is a tool for learning the languages of the project partners (Slovenian etc.). The texts, types of tasks and attractive illustrations are universal and are not restricted to any of the target languages.

This article focuses on the role and opinions of parents in the process of multilingual education. Parents are only indirectly involved in the education process, but this does not diminish their key role. They are often ignored in theoretical discussions, so this study is devoted to their views and experiences. Parental statements showed that they did not explicitly report growing up with multilingualism or about their own experience, but focused instead on their experience of multilingualism as parents. The authors also wondered whether and to what extent the parents' experience coincided with the theoretical starting points of multilingualism. The qualitative analysis has shown that in their statements most parents confirm the theoretical starting points (one person – one language, the later beginning of speech in multilingual children, and the importance of and the need to promote multilingualism (media, communication and staying in authentic environments)). Certain parents also reported other, more radical processes of multilingual education. In their opinion, stimulation is not always enough; children must also be forced into multilingualism. It could not be deduced from the records of the parents whether it was a personal experience, a life need or something else, or whether the goal really justified the means. Since there are no theoretical starting points concerning these issues, all interpretations can only be justified speculations.

Despite considerable research in the field of multilingualism and the practical processes of multilingual education that take place inside and outside school, the authors believe that globalisation and migration processes have overtaken theory and are absorbing more and more new and unexplored pathways. Teachers, parents and all involved in multilingual education need high quality tools. The Kuarki app and the parents' statements, together with their analysis and interpretation, constitute important contributions to this set. Within theory, the authors once again emphasise migration pedagogy, which offers alternative paths, relativises existing paradigms of thinking and shifts the traditional pedagogical discourse. In this context, Mecheril argues that migration and the related heterogeneity in classrooms are neither a problem nor a challenge, but an opportunity to modernise the education system (Mecheril 2010: 19).

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