Heterogeneity: multilingualism and democracy

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Linguistic diversity and multilingualism on the part of individuals are a prerequisite and a constitutive condition of enabling people to live together in a world of growing heterogeneity. Foreign language teaching plays an important part in democratic education because it can be seen as a training in respecting otherness and developing an intercultural, non-ethnocentric perception and attitude. This is all the more important because of the necessity of integrating children from migrant families into school life.

My article argues that language education policy has to take this perspective into account, i.e., of establishing a planned diversification so that pupils (and their parents) will not feel satisfied with learning English only, but also become motivated to learn languages of their own neighbourhood, such as migrant and minority languages. However, in order to make use of the linguistic resources in the classroom, relating it to the democratic impetus of foreign language education, it is necessary to revise existing language policies and to develop a multilingual perspective for all educational institutions.

Introduction

Living in Vienna perhaps opens a specific perspective as far as multilingualism is concerned: it takes only 30 to 50 minutes to cross the borders to Slovakia, to the Czech Republic, and not much more to reach the Hungarian border. Italy and Slovenia are neighbour states as well. Minorities with these and other languages live in Austria. The Austrian constitution guarantees certain linguistic rights to the indigenous minorities, though the reality of Austria does not always reflect these rights (cf. Besters-Dilger et al. 2003). For migrants the situation is even more difficult because they do not have any constitutional rights at all.

In the Austrian classrooms about 30% of the pupils are of a non-German speaking family. In some areas, for example in some districts and schools in Vienna, the percentage goes up to about 90%. This may explain
why the question of language teaching and democracy for me is closely linked to multilingualism. But a number of European countries face a similar situation. The enlargement of the European Union, migration and globalization as well as political conflicts add to this development.

Globalization and rapid technological and economic progress are increasingly challenging the communicative and literacy skills of the individual. At the moment only a minority of citizens are capable of making effective use of the potential of technological innovations and of processing the wealth of information fruitfully for their own lives. If democracy implies accepting otherness not as an exotic phenomenon, but as a regular element of everyday life; if democracy implies being ready to negotiate with others, to listen to people, and perhaps the readiness to modify one’s own values, then the question is whether foreign language teaching can contribute to developing such a democratic attitude. I am personally convinced that, if we cannot convey the idea of multilingualism, we will also not succeed as far as a democratic and multicultural society is concerned.

These considerations make it necessary to analyse how educational systems and programmes in Europe deal with linguistic diversity and with a growing cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of classrooms, including the role of English.

The European reality already exhibits tendencies of linguistic hegemony: in practice English and sometimes French are the dominant languages of the European Union. Whereas the use of English is increasing, the figures of all other languages are going down. Europe’s most widely spoken language, Russian, with approximately 167 million native speakers, plays no role at all. The second most widely spoken language, German, with approximately 100 million native speakers, occupies third place in the EU, far behind French and English, although it is important as a regional language in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Other languages, those of smaller European countries and those of millions of migrants, do not exist on certain levels of the educational system; for example, they do not exist as languages that could be learned as regular foreign languages in schools.

In a top-down process of the making of Europe with a priority on harmonising the existing disparities, the concept of one language for all seems to be an acceptable solution for many people. However, making linguistic diversity invisible in public, or in the educational system, is not a way of equalizing but of suppressing; it is an antidemocratic assimilation attempt which will lead to strong reactions. There is strong evidence that such a concept will not work: globalization also leads to an increased aware-
ness of the contrasts between cultures and people with different religious, historical and value backgrounds, all the way to the danger of a revival of racism. People with a limited capacity to participate in public and political life, persons suffering from ‘poverty of expression’, are very susceptible to simplistic and radical ideologies. It is tempting to claim that as our society is becoming more international, it loses its ability to deal with differences, with foreignness and heterogeneity (de Cillia et al. 2001).

In recent years the Council of Europe and the European Union have become aware of this situation and the implied dangers for European democracy. Thus, since its founding, the European Union has officially followed the strategy to preserve and promote linguistic diversity, and to train people in accepting heterogeneity.

“The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity” is a provision of article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.¹

It is an important point that the official aim of European language policy is to achieve two closely related objectives: to make individuals multilingual and to establish linguistic diversity in all countries, that is, not to extinguish linguistic heterogeneity, but to promote the teaching and learning and the public use of several languages in educational systems, in the media, etc.

**Multilingualism and the importance of language learning**

In the beginning, economic reasons were the most important for the setting up of this language policy. The conception of Europe as the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy” – as the EU puts it – implies the idea of mobility. The European labour market needs people who are mobile with respect to both different jobs and geographical locations. English alone will not be enough if people are going to work in international teams in a globalized economy. The consequences of globalization and mobility, however, extend far beyond the needs of the labour market. It has a much broader dimension which finds expression in current tendencies to strengthen regions, to preserve cultural diversity against negative effects of harmonization. It can be seen as an attempt to build Europe not only top-down, but also bottom-up.

Thus, what we are discussing is not linguistic diversity for its own sake or because of the interests of the language teaching industry. The goal is to develop an attitude and a socio-political climate where the
existence of people with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds is regarded as normal – this is a precondition for living together in a world of open borders and intercultural understanding (cf. Busch 2004).

The mother tongue as an integral part of personal and cultural identity

Individuals first learn to say I and we in their mother tongue. It provides the linguistic framework within which we learn family and moral values. Consequently, our mother tongue is a key component of our personal, social and cultural identity. Some people even feel threatened if they have to learn and use another language, because they are afraid that this will have negative effects on their personal identity or cause them to lose their affiliation to their family or country. This is especially the case if a foreign language seems to replace the mother tongue, as is the case in countries where the mother tongue has been suppressed for a long time by occupying powers or in migration processes.

During the past ten years I have collected linguistic portraits of children and young people (Krumm 2001): they had to choose different colours for the different languages they speak, and to colour a silhouette to create a portrait of their languages. Some of these portraits demonstrate the importance of the mother tongue and the threats posed by other languages:

A boy from Albania, who knows German well, did not allow it to become part of his basic personality. It was restricted to one of his feet in his portrait; he lived in Germany and needed the language, but he did not want it to become part of his life.

A girl from Turkey divided her figure into two halves because she feels torn between the two languages she speaks and the two cultures in which she lives.

Most of the children paint their mother tongue in the heart area with bright and warm colours, stressing its importance compared with the other languages they use.

A 22-year-old student from China said it explicitly: “I put Chinese in my chest and heart area because that’s where my feelings are, and since all my morals and rules are in Chinese, everything to do with emotional evaluation etc. is done in Chinese”.2

These portraits signal clearly that, even though they are multilingual, people are not ready to give up their mother tongues. We have to realize that people will only accept the process of European integration if their mother tongues are recognized on the European level as legitimate and
valuable parts of this Europe. People will only be ready to learn another language successfully if that does not mean replacing their mother tongue(s). This made it very important for many learners to paint their language portraits: it was a first step towards seeing their languages acknowledged, giving them a voice.

If we neglect the languages already existing in our schools and society, we will not be very successful in convincing young people to learn other foreign languages (for other purposes than testing). To realize that the languages one is learning do exist outside the classroom, that they are alive, that it is worth learning them because this opens up possibilities for new discoveries, communications and friendships, is a very important step towards establishing a readiness for language learning.

Multilingual identities

Migration processes – especially during the past 30 years – have contributed to the fact that there are increasing numbers of multilingual people even in such so-called monolingual countries as France and Germany. Many migrants have developed multilingual identities, that is, the languages they have acquired during the migration process are no longer felt to play a conflicting role, but have become part of their lives and personalities.

Dyah, an Indonesian woman, grew up speaking four languages: the Timorese language of her father; Javanese, the language of her mother; the Batavian language spoken in the region where she lived; and Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of Indonesia. At school she also encountered Arabic, as the language of religion in which the Koran was read and copied from, and also English, German and Japanese. Later on, with her German husband, she has lived at times in Germany and Spain, which has led to a further mixing of languages in daily usage. She writes:

I also hope that my letter will encourage people to learn another language or even several languages and to use them. I always have a wonderful feeling when I notice that I can understand many languages at the same time. For example, I was sitting with an Indonesian friend in a café on the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, where there are always a lot tourists. I was speaking Indonesian to my friend and all around us people were speaking other languages that I also know – English, German, Spanish, Japanese ... I think that such situations are super, because I can understand these languages without any great effort. After a while it seems to me that all these people are speaking the same language.
Melanie, who studies at the European middle school in Vienna, writes the following about the colour picture she painted of herself (Krumm 2001, p. 68f.):

I always have Dutch in my mind, even when I am speaking other languages. You can tell this from the mistakes I make. I work only with German and English, which is the reason why I have the colours of these languages in my hands. I have placed French and Spanish on the smallest parts of my body, which corresponds to how much I know about these languages. But actually it all flows together to form a whole – it is all constantly spinning around inside my body.

Chloe, an English girl, is an interesting case: In addition to the school languages of Latin, French and German, she speaks a little bit of Greek because she spent her holidays there, as well as Italian and Spanish, which is “hot” for her, her favourite language because she likes the country.

All these students have developed multiple identities: they belong to different language and communication spheres at the same time. In such a case strict and restrictive dichotomies like ‘my language – foreign languages <not mine>, lose their influence on thinking and behaviour (cf. Wodak 2002, p. 23f.). Till now, neither our educational systems in general nor foreign language teaching make use of these resources; we rather regard this richness of languages as a disturbing heterogeneity.

European citizenship and multilingualism

The third point why multilingualism is so important for Europe is connected with the concept of European citizenship.

We all know that the exercise of democracy is to a large extent dependent upon literacy. If a person is not able to participate in public debate, to understand news reports and to make use of modern information and communication technology, he or she will be excluded from political discourse in society. A decision to have only one official European language would directly link democratic rights – such as becoming a member of the European Parliament – with linguistic abilities, such as the mastery of English or French. Such a development would be a contradiction to our understanding of participation and democracy. Since Europe is multilingual, both taken as a whole and with respect to individual countries, the sense of belonging to Europe and of participating in its democratic processes and debates, as well as the acceptance of European citizenship, is dependent on the ability to communicate – that is, to be able to make full
use of one’s linguistic repertoires in different languages, rather than to be restricted to one foreign language, whose native speakers are thus placed in a superior position (de Cillia et al. 2003).

The more strongly people are rooted only in their own language and the mental and behavioural patterns connected with this language and culture, the harder it is for them to accept foreignness.

In a recent document of the Council of Europe this is expressed as follows:

The significance of plurilingual competence is twofold: First, it allows participation in democratic processes not only in one’s own country and language area but in concert with other Europeans in other languages and language areas. Secondly, the acquisition of plurilingual competence leads to a greater understanding of the plurilingual repertoires of other citizens and a respect for language rights, not least those of minorities and national languages less widely spoken and taught (Council of Europe 2002, p. 17).

In a globalized world we have to live in different communication spaces: local, regional national and supranational communication spaces where participation requires different language skills. We need different languages for the different functions and spheres we live in – a growing number of people will have to move between different communities with differing language priorities. Those outside Europe should not be forgotten if we think of the language skills needed in the world of today and tomorrow. Besides English, languages like Chinese, Hindi and Urdu, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese, etc., are all languages with several hundred million first-language speakers – and although economic factors strengthen the position of English at the moment, demographic developments and migration processes contribute to the growing importance of other languages.

Investing in multilingualism

Although it is often said that all languages are equal, we know very well that they are not. We attribute different values to different languages. For example, most people in Western countries believe that languages such as English, French, German and Spanish are more important and more worth learning than, let’s say, Polish or Russian. History, the economic power of certain countries, the number of native speakers and other factors play important roles in such perceptions. This is one of the reasons why the Turkish language is not offered in European school cur-
ricula, even though it is the most frequently spoken second language in
countries like Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany and Austria.

In almost all non-English speaking countries, if the decision regard-
ing which foreign languages their children should learn were left entirely
to parents, they would no doubt say that English is enough.

The European 1 plus 2 model produces negative effects as far as the
support of linguistic diversity is concerned: if English is the first foreign
language, there is no motivation to learn a second one, since English at
an early stage seems to be very easy to learn and since it seems to work
all over the world. The dominance of English is to a certain degree counter-
productive to the promotion of linguistic diversity and to the linguistic
rights of minorities. Thus, at a conference of the Council of Europe in
1997, it was stated:

For many reasons, a self-reinforcing spiral operates in favour of English as
the first foreign language in almost all educational systems and in general
international communication, not only in Europe but on a global scale. ...
(Council of Europe 1997, p. 52).

The Council concluded:

The pursuit of diversity and plurilingualism requires ... a political will
and action to counteract economic factors and popular misperceptions,
which will otherwise lead to reduction and homogenisation in general,
with the plurilingualism of individuals only existing among social elites
(Council of Europe 2002, p 17).

One possible solution to the problem might be to offer a language other
than English as the first foreign language and to start teaching English as
the second one at an age when children start using computers and listen-
ing to pop music, that is, when it fits in with their social and psycholo-
gical development. This would, however, require public investments to
inform parents and to finance an educational system in which language
choices are possible from the very beginning.

Generally speaking, to make multilingualism a reality, especially if
neighbouring and minority languages are to be included, means over-
coming resistance from almost all sides, The educational system and lang-

uage teaching should not be obliged to fight these battles alone. On the
contrary, we have a right to expect policy support, of a publicly resonant
kind, from politicians and the media.
Promotion of linguistic diversity in the educational system

It is not primarily the responsibility of teachers, but of educational and political bodies and policies, to create conditions for a successful outcome. Nevertheless, teachers and researchers can contribute to the promotion of multilingualism as part of a democratic community.

Planned diversification

At the moment a majority of schools offer the same limited set of languages instead of offering choices between a variety of languages. Diversification naturally exposes the teaching of a certain language to competition from other languages, but it also gives it the chance to distinguish itself with respect to instruction in these languages. In a world in which parents and pupils are demanding more of a say in educational systems, in which schools are insisting upon more autonomy and English plays such a predominant role, diversification with attractive options is the only promising way for other languages to assure a place for themselves in curricula before, alongside and after English. However, diversification and offering, for example, languages of migrants, require:

1) that, with respect to different languages, school authorities also allow smaller teaching groups, that is, learning groups of 5 to 10 pupils;

2) that parents and children get precise recommendations as far as linguistic profiles for their children are concerned, including a guarantee that they will learn enough English – though not necessarily as the first foreign language;

3) that teachers understand this situation to be an opportunity, and a challenge, to develop an attractive language programme and to implement it as part of European multilingualism, that is, that language teachers stop playing off one language against the other, giving up their mono- or bilingual bias.

There are many indications that the 1+2 sequence of learning foreign languages beginning with English does not work and that a 1+3 sequence of languages, which is actually already followed in many of the new EU member states, could provide a better long-term perspective:
1) contact/neighbouring/minority language which is alive in the everyday surroundings of the children; 
2) lingua franca; 
3) language learned for individual reasons in order to give oneself an individual profile of competencies.

There are also some short-term measures available, even if such a systematic concept cannot be realized. For example, a secondary school teacher of German and English at a school in Vienna, realizing that there were native speakers of ten different languages in her classroom, started a project called ‘Our ten languages’: each of the language groups in her class was asked to present a text or song in their language and to prepare for teaching the language to the other students for 90 minutes; they produced an anthology with poems from all these languages, etc. This teacher ‘wasted’, one might say, one hour per week of her German and another hour of her English lessons – but she gained an increase in language awareness and an integration of students from migrant families who were suddenly accepted as ‘language experts’ in the class. This had altogether a very positive effect on the learning attitude of the students as far as the learning of German and English was concerned.

Making use of synergies: curricular multilingualism

When pupils learn more than one language, the learning of these languages should be coordinated. Teaching of the first language should also pave the way for learning other languages – for example, in the development of strategies for learning vocabulary and understanding texts and, in general, in the enhancement of linguistic perception. Expressed metaphorically, the teaching of one language opens the door to other languages; it creates language awareness. The teaching of further languages should then systematically build upon what has already been learned. A second or third foreign language should not be presented as though the classroom were filled with absolute beginners. Pupils who take a second foreign language already know a lot about learning a language, e.g., how to memorize vocabulary, how one goes about understanding a text even if one doesn’t know all the words. They already know that languages differ from their mother tongue – in the way they are spoken and written, in word order, etc. The teaching of languages can take advantage of all the existing linguistic resources of the students. No one has to relearn all the most basic things with every new language. This is a great chance to make use of the
multilingual experience and awareness of children with a migrant background; they should be regarded as language learning experts.

“Synergies in Foreign Language Teaching” (as a project at the European Foreign Language Centre in Graz is called; cf. Hufeisen & Neuner 2004) involves taking advantage, in actual practice, of transfer possibilities between different languages.

Up to now our foreign language teaching has been additive and uncoordinated in the settings in which several languages are offered. Many language teachers know as little about what other languages their pupils are currently learning or will learn as they do about what languages they already know and use outside school. The task of establishing order in their many languages is left to the pupils themselves. What is needed is what I call ‘curricular multilingualism’, a coordinated diversity. That is: teachers of one language are informed of what the teachers of other languages do, they are informed about the other languages of their students. Their task as, let’s say, teachers of German is to teach this specific language – if they do this in a professional way, they make use of the linguistic knowledge of their students as well as of the multilingual richness of reality (all the multilingual instructions and inscriptions present in everyday life). In consequence, teachers and researchers may no longer stick to a simplified L1-L2 contrastive view but have to develop multi-contrastive approaches and materials, for example, dictionaries with three or four languages (Swedish – English – Turkish ...).

Short, intensive courses versus long-term programmes

The world of schoolchildren – even more than ours – is one that is dominated by possibilities of accessing things quickly and practically simultaneously. They no longer have to decide whether they want to concern themselves with Paris, Vienna or Berlin, or with German, English or Spanish, or with literature or everyday life – the Internet and satellite and cable television allow them to click their way from one website to another, and to zap from one channel to another. In hypertext they can stay in many places at the same time and explore them in depth, get additional information or, using available links, jump somewhere completely different. Anything they don’t like can be dismissed at a click of the mouse. They are looking for activities and encounters.

Long-term programmes, such as five years of English, French or German will have to give way to what we may call the modular principle.

After two years at the most, intensive language teaching must allow for continuous instruction to be replaced by electives, courses, projects
or the use of the foreign language as a working language. Attractive, effective language teaching does not develop in two hours a week over a number of years involving the same kind of lessons, but only if schools offer communication rooms and opportunities in a variety of languages.

In a Carinthian secondary school, for example, the pupils started to offer guided tours to Carinthian historical sites in Italian for Italian classes visiting Carinthia – this led to a very positive echo in the media.

“Near nativeness” as a goal of multilingualism?

Samuel, 12, is very proud of the fact that he is familiar with seven languages:

- My languages are Italian, Hebrew, German, English, Japanese, Styrian and Vienna dialects. German is my mother tongue; I am learning English at school. In Hebrew I know one word only: Shalom (peace), we have learnt this word in religious instruction. My father speaks Styrian. I often hear people speak the Vienna dialect. I do a Japanese kind of sports. Jiu-Jitsu (that is ‘soft arts’). I was in Italy and have talked to an ice salesperson.

Most teachers would not regard Samuel as multilingual, because our goal is usually a complete mastery of a language, i.e., from the very beginning pupils are assessed in terms of the end objective of having a complete and impeccable command of the foreign language.

Until this final state of perfection is attained, the pupil is regarded as deficient. This, of course, is also the usual perspective of linguistics. Based on the end goal, it naturally continuously uncovers deficits in the language use of learners, which it compares with that of native speakers. A reversal of this situation is urgently needed: Those who are learning languages are not empty deserts where input is necessary before anything will grow. Learners bring to the task of learning a particular language rich experiences from other languages and are, from the very first word in a foreign language, richer, more communicative and more competent than monolinguals. They are, as Claire Kramsch (1997) puts it, speakers in their own right. And, depending on the situation and the combination of languages involved, it can be entirely enough to attain partial competence in a language rather than absolute perfection. This would enable students to choose whether they want to learn one or two languages up to a high standard or whether they prefer to acquire a partial competence in three or four languages.

Portfolios are perfect instruments to document such individual linguistic profiles. And choice, by the way, is an important element in a democratic society and in identity formation.
Multilingualism: a door to intercultural understanding

Eugene Ionesco, in his confessions, writes about his language learning experiences; he says that he was confused by language learning. In the French school he had learned that the French language was the most wonderful language in the world and that the French are the bravest people in the world. When he came to Bucharest, he had to learn that the Romanian language was the most wonderful language in the world and that the Romanian people had always defeated their enemies. Thus he had to learn that not the French but the Romanians were the best, and superior to all other people. “Thank God!”, he concludes, “I did not have to go to Japan afterwards.”

Languages cannot be detached from the respective political and cultural histories and present-day life of their native speakers. Thus, what is involved is not only the ability to use a language in a grammatically correct way, but also the ability to appreciate the value systems linked to the language and to know how to deal with misunderstandings. This leads to a shift in emphasis in language teaching. Language learning for a linguistically and culturally diverse world means learning languages for intercultural communication.

The more completely people are immersed in their own language and the value systems, mind-set and patterns of behaviour bound up with this language and culture, the more difficult it is for them to accept cultures other than their own and to regard differences as normal. Only after contact is made with other languages do the different perspectives languages have of the world really become apparent. Especially for young people, language teaching can serve the important function of helping them keep an open mind and protecting them from rigid ethnocentrism. This is of great importance to our ability to live together harmoniously in a multicultural and linguistically diverse society and to the development of deterrents to racism.

Some children get an early insight into this cultural function of languages. A boy from Iceland wrote the following about the colours of his portrait:

Icelandic: blue. I’m born in Iceland so I think, see and am Icelandic. Blue because of the see and blue is a colour I really like.

German: I have to start talking and using German to speak and so it is starting in my hand because I have to talk with them to get people understand me.

English: I talk with my hand when I speak English and I think in English when I speak.
Green because of the countryside.

Danish I only use when I have to go to another Scandinavian country. Red because of the flag (Cf. Krumm 2001, p. 85).

And 12-year-old Christoph speaks or understands several languages. His spelling is very poor but he understands very well what languages are for:

Without languages we could not understand each other. Understanding is important.

Marina, 17, living in Estonia, has understood that living in a multilingual world requires integrating different languages and cultures:

Russian is in my heart, it is my mother tongue. I love the Russian language. The Estonian language – my hands. I need this language as I need my hands. I live in Estonia and I have to learn this language. It is green because of the beautiful landscape in Estonia. German is in my head. This is my favourite language. It is blue because blue is the language of my dreams – and I hope that one day I will be able to speak German very fluently (Krumm 2001, p. 94f.).

Language teaching has to pick up such attitudes. Learning foreign languages as a means of enabling “otherness” to help shape and reconstruct one’s identity into a multilingual, multicultural identity is a key issue of language teaching for a multilingual world.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe “aware of the growing need to equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation” and “anxious to promote mutual understanding and tolerance and to respect identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication” stressed the importance of such an orientation of language learning in Recommendation No. 6 from 1998. The Council stated that

the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe can be met only by appreciably developing Europeans’ ability to communicate with one another across linguistic and cultural boundaries and that this requires a sustained, lifelong effort which must be encouraged, put on an organized footing and financed at all levels of education by the competent bodies.  

This is the reason for the necessity of public funding and financing of language teaching and learning. It is also an important reason for not limiting
language teaching to preparing for tests. If it were left to the market of private institutions and testing institutes alone the intercultural dimension and orientation of language learning and teaching might get lost.

**Conclusion**

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism on the part of individuals are a prerequisite and a constitutive condition for enabling all people to live in a world of growing heterogeneity. An important goal of foreign language teaching is that pupils learn that what people have in common is not that they are all alike and speak the same language, but that they are different and that different languages are important for them. And we have to enable pupils to see this not as something threatening, but to experience such heterogeneity as richness.

If we accept the principle that responsible participation in democratic society necessitates such social skills as readiness for dialogue, peaceful conflict settlement and mutual understanding, then language learning and linguistic diversity can help people acquire these metaskills (Cecchini 2000, p. 57).

**Notes**

References


