MULTILINGUALISM: STUDYING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN POSTMODERNITY

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Abstract: *Knowing and using two or more languages has obvious benefits - personal and social - in an increasingly globalized world. The phenomenon of multilingualism has been much studied in the last decades, due to its importance in social life. Besides the obvious and immediate advantages of multicultural communication or interaction, the research in the field of neuroscience and psychology has revealed the fact that bi- and multilingualism are fundamental factors that influence cognitive abilities. With the extension of intercultural and international dialogue, multilingualism should therefore be seen as one common phenomenon rather than an exception. This paper attempts to give prominence to the positive effects of multilingualism for higher awareness.*

Keywords: *speaking, foreign languages, education, multilingualism*

The concept of multilingualism refers to both the ability of a person to use several languages, and to the coexistence in the same geographical area of different language communities. The ability to understand and communicate in multiple languages is already a daily reality for most people around the globe, and it is a desirable competence for everyone. Social and economic transformations imposed changes in education. Thus, foreign languages, which until recently have been considered an optional, even elitist object of study, are now becoming one of the nodal points of the educational network. The knowledge of foreign languages turns, in a broad sense, the individual's access to social life and success in professional life. The promotion of linguistic diversity and the learning of foreign languages, which emphasizes the fact that a good knowledge of languages is one of the basic skills that every person needs for a true integration in contemporary society, as a facilitation of integration and social cohesion. The ability to understand and to communicate in several foreign languages means, in today's society, an important asset both on a personal level as well as on a social level, encouraging communication,

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fostering a deeper cultural understanding and the desire to extend that knowledge. The term "diversity" is considered more appropriate to the type of society based on equality, and "intercultural" is a vision that can demonstrate that individuals and cultures are in a dynamic process of interaction on various levels.

However, full success does not depend only on linguistic competence in the target language, but also on an accumulation of communication and sociocultural skills that allow both the approach, perception, interpretation and understanding of the foreign environment, as well as intercultural dialogue. Psychological research on multilingualism has shown that adults who have learned several languages communicate more effectively, have a better memory, an increased ability to effectively apply several learning strategies, they also have advanced critical thinking skills that are applied in solving problems. Polyglots prove more than a single philosophical view of the world, have a larger perspective on everything, show greater empathy and understanding for the opinions of others; they have exhaustive and inclusive cultural approaches, and are more objective towards their own ethnic groups' culture due to a greater cognitive flexibility. In order to be able to improve these skills, it is necessary for learners to listen and speak several languages frequently in a variety of circumstances.

The need to prepare multilingual students has given a new direction to the research in the field of foreign language didactics with the view to promoting innovative teaching and learning methods. Language teaching has evolved as a result of didactic interactions with several domains. The biggest change seems to be the introduction of pragmatic component into the education system. The idea that learning a foreign language must be done mainly by means of pragmatic situations is unanimously accepted at present. The acquisition of vocabulary in a few foreign languages may have a larger scope than memorization and comprehension:

> "Concerning the notion of a common lexical-semantic system, just such a system appears to be evidenced as lower levels of proficiency in additional languages, but there is also evidence that, as proficiency in additional languages increases, each develops a semantic system which has a degree of autonomy. Once again, it

would be premature to see neurolinguistics as having said the last word on this question; more research is clearly called for[1]."

ERASMUS is a program in the field of higher education which encourages transnational cooperation between universities in order to increase quality and emphasizing the European dimension of tertiary education through more mobility, by increasing transparency and full academic recognition of studies and qualifications in bachelor's and master's programs. It has become a part of the continuous learning program. Learning a foreign language involves not only perception, but also understanding the elements that make up a cultural system other than one's own. The relationship between the acquisition of a foreign language and cultural acquisition corresponding is found in the formation of the competence of intercultural or multicultural communication. Linguistic diversity in the world led implicitly to an increase in the need to know several foreign languages. Knowledge of foreign languages thus becomes a basic ability in this multilingual society. Moreover, plurilingualism, understood as a competence in at least two foreign languages, appears to constitute the central objective of the educational, cultural and social policy of the present and future in many countries.

"The way we use our language reveals our sense of 'who we are' – our personal and social identities. We are many things, though; we have multiple identities, so our language can be expected to be variable to allow us to construct these different aspects of our identities as we speak. Furthermore, since language is intricately related to the social, political and cultural contexts in which we live, analysing current processes of continuity and change in language behaviour can provide us with insights into trajectories of continuity and change in social life generally.[2]"

The main means by which plurilingualism can be promoted is the educational institutions is through teaching foreign languages along with their corresponding culture, a way by which one of the strongest formal areas of linguistic and cultural confluence is achieved. In this sense, the

[1] The Multilingual Lexicon, *Jasone Cenoz* ed., USA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, p. 176.

[2] Beyond Boundaries, *Language and Identity in Contemporary Europe*, Paul Gubbins and Mike Holt ed., UK: Cromwell Press Ltd., 2002, p. 19

acquisition of foreign languages should be stimulated from early childhood, and in the span of a lifetime the contact between speakers of different foreign languages should be strengthened. On the current language market, the process of teaching and learning foreign languages has acquired a different value for these obvious reasons. The transmission of foreign language knowledge can no longer be separated from the transmission of knowledge of foreign cultures and civilizations. This means a transition from the traditionalist model, strictly philological, to a new model oriented towards the practical use of foreign languages based on new quality standards:

> "Whereas previous research has predominantly looked at the spectrum of varying language constellations, including aspects of multilingual oral and written proficiency, the time has now come to look in detail at the form-function relationship between the languages involved in multilingual communication and the mechanisms relating multilingual communicative processes to fundamental social structures.[3]"

Languages define personal identities but are equally part of a shared cultural heritage. There are many arguments in favor of bold educational policies regarding language learning. As for learners, there are new perspectives, personally and professionally, while for society they bring cultural awareness, mutual understanding and social cohesion. In all type of business, employees with linguistic and intercultural competences represent an essential ability, helping them succeed and grow in global markets. A research strategy whose main goal is the acquisition of the social-cultural pluralistic dimension should be applied in the study of foreign languages through an interdisciplinary methodical process.

The management of plurality in the educational space brings to foreground a new form of pedagogy, specific to the postmodern paradigm, that of sociocultural diversity as natural states of contemporary societies. Effective multilingualism policies and initiatives can multiply opportunities for citizens; at the same time language skills increase the chances of getting a job, facilitate access to services and rights and strengthen solidarity by improving intercultural dialogue and social cohesion:

[3] Multilingual Communication, Juliane House and Jochen Rehbewing ed., USA: John Bejamins BV, vol. 3, 2004, p. 9.

"The increasing spread of multilingualism and the importance of language within society have led several scholars to investigate multilingual behaviour over the years, as evidenced by the strong tradition of work on sociolinguistic and educational aspects of multilingualism.[4]"

There are various typologies of multilingualism, which are based on various criteria such as sociological, psychological and linguistic ones. The following distinctions though are common in specialized literature:

a) as to the degree of social inclusion of the phenomenon it is generally called social multilingualism, that can be further be collective, of an entire community, or group multilingualism; there is also individual multilingualism:

b) depending on the age of formation: successive or sequential multilingualism - the second language is learned after the fixation of the first language after a few years or late multilingualism - similar distinction to the previous one, but which allows the identification of some subtypes depending on the age at which it is learned second and third language. The multilingual speaker can acquire languages without formal education. Even in case in simultaneous bilingualism, usually one of the languages dominates. This type of bilingualism usually occurs in children raised by bilingual parents in a predominantly monolingual environment or in children raised by monolingual parents in countries where different languages are spoken;

c) as to the relationship between languages reflected by usage, compound multilingualism refers to the case when languages are viewed as functionally similar, their units being in a correspondence relationship like languages learned at school. Speakers can usually be fluent in two or three linguistic systems but in coordinated multilingualism languages are functionally separated, as if their units expressed partially or totally distinct meanings in the case of languages used in official situations as opposed to the ones used in the family or with friends. Speakers use for each language an intonation and a different pronunciation, associated with different social behavior;

d) as to the degree of knowledge there is a symmetrical multilingualism when all languages are equally known and asymmetric

[4] De Agelis, Gessica, *Third or Additional Language Acquisition*, UK: Cromwell Press Ltd., 2007, p. 1.

multilingualism when there are differences in the levels of language knowledge;

The study of multilingualism allows the identification and description of the mechanism and its structural consequences of contact between languages. Multilingualism determines the appearance of interference phenomena at all levels of the structure of idioms in contact, triggering processes of reorganization of such patterns. Although being composite in nature, multilingualism is associated with permeability to interference when playing its communicative role.

Code switching usually occurs in multilinguals. The concept of code switching denotes the individual's ability to switch from one language to another, from one dialect or a style to others in the course of verbal interaction, or, in the terms used by Carol Myers-Scotton, bilinguals' selection of embedded language forms, in matrix language statement, during the instance of communication.

It is assumed that the bilingual or generally multilingual speakers can intuitively identify matrix languages, like the one that allows the mixing of some elements belonging to another but at the same time there is always the possibility of changing between them, depending on various factors, either synchronically, in the same interaction, or diachronically, as a result of a certain historical-political development of a community. The shift corresponds to the act of assuming one identity or another, situationally motivated, and it is considered to be a common phenomenon in multilingual communities. The constant interest in the dissemination of multilingualism is the highest motivator of learning, once with the increase of awareness of its importance in personal and social environments through various programs dedicated to linguistic acquisition in formal and informal situations. In addition to tourism and the Internet, which represent real engines for the development of multilingualism, education through entertainment is, undoubtedly, one of the most powerful and effective ways of motivation as an alternative to the study of languages at school.

Conclusions

Language learning has an intercultural value and this activity generates benefits for the individual but also for society as a whole. Training in accordance with the new requirements of the current context is subject to transformations at the theoretical and psycho-pedagogical level, education based on a pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity mobilizing

complex cognitive, affective, actional and social resources. From this perspective, the process of teaching and learning foreign languages acquires an integrative content.

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