

Chapter XXII

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF PLURILINGUAL COMPETENCE OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER

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Abstract: The focus of this article is the multilingual approach to foreign language teaching, in this case German language. In order to find out in which way the mother tongue and the first foreign language affect the learning process of second foreign language, a questionnaire was applied with students from Serbia, whose mother tongue is Serbian, L2 is English, while German represents L3. The research was done with first year students (N = 120) from the departments class teacher, pre-school teacher and boarding school teacher at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina, which can be one of the practical solutions for integrating plurilingualism and interculturalism into the school system.

Keywords: *plurilingual competence, mother tongue, first foreign language, second foreign language.*

Introduction

This work will examine the influence of the mother tongue and the first foreign language knowledge, in this case English, on the second foreign language teaching and learning, that is, German language teaching and learning, offered by the Faculty of Education in Jagodina, which began in 2015.

The questionnaire was conducted with students of the same faculty in order to find out on which language levels a plurilingual approach has a direct and positive influence.

A number of authors (Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis, 2007; Hall & Ecke, 2003; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2007; Odlin 1989) point out that there are several factors that influence the acquisition of a second foreign language L3, in our case German. The existence of similarities and differences between two foreign languages can occur on more than one level (ibid.). These may be, on one hand, at the level of lexis, orthography and phonology – the levels that have been studied more extensively according to Balla (2013) – and, on other hand, at

the level of syntax, semantics, grammar, and morphology – the levels that have been studied to a lesser degree. Having this in mind, we wanted to examine how the similarities and differences between mother tongue, English as L2 and German as L3 can be used in teaching of lexis, grammar, and set phrases or idioms. Hence, the research will be used to signal cases where the influence of a language acquired previously is visible in the target language, that is, the paper will deal with the cross-linguistic influence of the Serbian, English, and German languages.

Concept and aims

Our study from the aspects of education and of foreign language didactics has shown that the plurilingual competence of teachers has a decisive influence on the quality of students' learning processes, which suggests some qualification for foreign language teacher training, as plurilingualism.

Through such an training module, students are supposed to acquire foreign language and communication skills, to make a difference between two foreign languages, and to recognize cultural similarities and differences.

In order to meet the needs of specific linguistic diversity, educational institutions have to be open for a multilingual approach in order to promote intercultural relations. The Council of Europe has opened the question of plurilingualism beginning at an early age, advocated to have to at least two more languages adopted, in addition to the mother tongue.

A foreign language teacher presents in a certain way, a dominant figure in the process of learning a foreign language because s/he is the one who decides which activities will be represented in the classroom, how long it will take, and to whom s/he will give a word.

Based on the research results about the foreign language teachers training, the European Union had a need for one document such as the European Profile for Language Teacher Education, which is structured in four areas: Structure, Knowledge and Understanding, Strategies and Skills, and Values (Suvakovic 2017: 45–46).

Structure is the part that relates to the practical experience of teaching, European – level evaluation framework.

Knowledge and Understanding area offers advice on how to develop their own knowledge and research skills in the field of Didactics, Glotodidactics and Pedagogical work.

The third area, Strategies and Skills, predicts the promotion of training in ways of adapting teaching approaches to the educational context and individual needs of learners, training in methods of learning to learn.

The Values part describes the way of encouraging the sensitivity of teachers to convey social and cultural knowledge through teaching language to their pupils. It refers to training in social and cultural values, training in the diversity of languages and cultures, training in the importance of teaching and learning about foreign languages and cultures, training in teaching European citizenship, training in team-working, collaboration and networking, inside and outside the immediate school context, training in the importance of life-long learning (Kelly & Grenfell, 2004: 3–5).

The essence of our study is the part about the values, that is, about plurilingual approach as a way of training in the diversity of languages.

Mother tongue, the first foreign language and the second foreign language

The determination to mark the mother tongue as L1 implies that it is, chronologically seen, the primary language learned by the child. However, the dominant language certainly does not have to be the first language, but the language that eventually becomes the most developed by the individual (Durbaba, 2011: 60–63). Second language that is labeled as L2 is the language of the social community in which the child is located and the language is not his mother tongue.

Although in the literature today, the term of L2 (Second Language) refers to a foreign language, it is still important to make the difference between them for two reasons: the second language acquisition input is richer and the motivation is bigger because adoption of the second language is spontaneous and on a daily basis in order to integrate a individual into the society and the culture (Suvakovic, 2017: 16).

According to Durbaba (2011: 63) a foreign language is a language that is taught outside the country and society that speaks it daily. Prerequisites for learning a foreign language are the knowledge of the mother tongue and enrollment in a social institution (school) where the foreign language is taught. Students meet with a foreign language where they usually have some knowledge (movies, series, music, Internet) but the only direct link between them and the foreign language is the teacher, who is most often not a native speaker.

Plurinligualism

Teachers should be aware of the central notions of plurilingual competence and pluricultural competence set out in the CEF, especially in order to maintain linguistic diversity in Europe, given the impact of English as an emerging global lingua franca. It is clear that the language we teach is influenced by other

languages and is spoken in a number of different ways, contexts and countries. A teacher should employ teaching materials from as wide a range of linguistic contexts as possible which reflect social and linguistic diversity (Kelly & Grenfell 2004: 40).

The plurilingual approach is based on one of the key concepts of the foreign language learning process, that is the notion of the language transfer. The heart of the idea is that any new learned activity will be more successfully used if it finds a hold in already learned models, in the mother tongue and the foreign language **acquisition**. Transfer is an influence that comes from similarities and differences between the target language and all other languages previously adopted, so the transfer could be positive or negative (Suvakovic, 2017: 21–25).

In addition to the principles of the Bilingual method¹ of foreign language teaching, the plurilingual approach makes use not only of the mother tongue but of the first foreign language, English, in order to make the understanding of words and sentences in German easier. There is no need to create artificial situations for explaining the meaning of words and sentences of the target language.

There are many advantages of this method of teaching German, such as:

1. In the competence and the confidence of the teacher as he moves from L1 to L2 to L3 and back again students can recognize the aim of this kind of language learning and that is to become multilingual.
2. The mother tongue of the students is very important in the sense of the resources in the language learning process. This method allows easy understanding of difficult words and efficient explanations of grammar.
3. While English and German belong to the Anglo-Saxon Culture many phrases and word formations can be explained on the basis of similarities, so that this method ensures accessibility.

The students' native language and the first foreign language are used strategically when it would be futile to explain things in the target language, so L1 and L2 support can be part of students' overall language development.

There are plenty of reasons why the plurilingual method should be implemented and applied, and one of them is certainly the kind of preparation for multilingualism and interculturalism.

Globalization makes new challenges for foreign language teaching. In addition to linguistic qualifications, a teacher must also be prepared for ever-growing exchange with other cultures, that is, a teacher has to have multilingual and intercultural competencies. The language is not the only thing that a teacher

¹ The method was developed as a counterpart of the audiovisual method. Using this method students find a level of familiarity between the languages so that the process of learning is ensured. This method was developed in the 1960s and 1970s in order to make improvements to the audio-visual method (which has much in common with the direct method). The bilingual method makes use of the traditional three P's: presentation, practice, production (Saparbaevna 2016)

seeks to get closer to pupils, but also the culture of the language, which makes the language more accessible and closer. The contact between two languages and between the two cultural communities contributes to intercultural bonding and understanding. In this way, the teachers motivate students to enrich their personality and improve cognitive abilities (Kelly & Grenfell, 2004: 39).

Methodology

This report will examine the influence of the first foreign language, English, and the mother tongue on second foreign language learning, German, offered by the Faculty of Education, which began in 2015.

The author started this study in order to research in which way or how and on what language levels the plurilingual approach influences German Language Teaching and Learning. The instrument that was used in the study was a questionnaire consisting of three parts that referred to lexis, grammar, and phrases.

The paper will focus more on qualitative data because these can provide more in-depth answers such as why and how a student uses a certain learning strategy to solve a language task, not just 'what', 'where' or 'when' data presented in numbers. The analysis of the qualitative data were grouped for each specific language category: lexis, grammar and set phrases or idioms. For the purpose of this research we chose three types of tasks that refers to these three language categories to make it possible to provide a better understanding of the plurilingual approach. Qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher gathered through questionnaires or interviews with participants. In general, open-ended questions in the questionnaire allow the participants to supply answers in their own words.

Research questions and hypotheses

The main hypothesis for this study is: There is more positive influence in the process of learning German as the second foreign language (L3) when a multilingual approach is used.

The general research question we aimed to answer was – what was the level of positive influence of English as L2 in the process of learning German as L3 in terms of vocabulary, grammar and set phrases or idioms. In the present paper, these were two specific research questions the author wanted to answer: 1) In which way we may use English language knowledge to help students to understand German?; 2) On which languages levels we may notice that the mother tongue knowledge is better to use in order to explain German lexis, grammar and set phrases?

In addition to plurilingual method succes in German teaching, the author started this study in order to research whether Serbian students are aware of the knowledge of English and learning strategies they usually use and the ones they can use when solving tasks in German language. In addition, the purpose of this research was also to suggest possible ways of teaching/learning improvement for university learners who are less successful in learning the second foreign language. In this way it would be possible to suggest some learning strategies for organizing and storing information, learning grammar and vocabulary, and to encourage students to consider which strategies work best for them in learning German as L3.

Questionnaire

The number of respondents was 120 (18 men and 102 women). There were first and second year students at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina from the class teacher, pre-school teacher, and boarding school teacher departments. Students at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina are adult learners (between 19 and 21 years of age) who study English and German as foreign languages and their mother tongue is Serbian. All the participants started learning English from the first grade of primary school (at the age of 7) and then German at the Faculty (at the age of 19) as the second foreign language.

The research was conducted in January and February 2019. Before this research, piloting was conducted with 20 students at the same faculty. After the piloting was done, it was evident that the questionnaire was valid and relevant for this research. This was proved by the positive comments of our students who emphasised that they had not thought about certain actions when learning German as L3 before they had completed this questionnaire. They also said that the questions were clear and made them become aware of the 'connections that can be made between the languages'.

The questionnaire was originally given in Serbian (students' mother tongue) because we wanted to make sure that all the participants understand the questions. The first part was related to the area of vocabulary, that is, phonologically similar words in English and German and a positive or negative transfer in understanding the similarities/differences between the given words. Students were supposed to translate the underlined parts of the sentence into their mother tongue and to give an explanation of how they came to the conclusion based on the similarity with words in English. There were 13 sentences and 53 underlined words that had to be translated overall. We designed this task starting from the hypothesis that use of the mother tongue and use of English has a positive impact on learning and memorizing words in German as L3.

In the second task, we tried to use parallel grammar rules in English, German and in Serbian, which significantly contributes to the understanding and usage of the grammatical rules of the German language. Students were asked to translate sentences into the mother tongue and to explain which of the grammatical rules of the English language helped them in solving the specific task. The task consisted of 13 sentences. Students should have applied knowledge about the comparison of adjectives, the modal verb *can*, particle *too*, making questions by inversion of modal verb and subject of a sentence, construction of the past tense, expressing future actions, the use of the definite article, the position of negation in a sentence, the possessive pronoun.

The third part of the questionnaire was designed to show positive aspects in German language teaching when phrases and idioms are used which are similar in English and German, but with an evident difference compared to the mother tongue – Serbian. Phrases that we used in the questionnaire were fixed sets of words or idioms. These combinations of words are commonly characteristic for all the languages, consequently, we wanted to examine students' awareness of the level of similarity between English and German common set phrases.

Results and discussion

The teacher tried to bring students to the meaning of the words based on their phonological similarities with the words in the English language, so they could make a bridge to this way of learning, to know how to make associations and to use their former language knowledge.

Results have shown that three levels of language are the most accessible when it comes to plurilingual method, there are: lexis, grammar, phraseology.

Lexis

In terms of lexis students came to the solution in the task on the basis of phonological similarity of the mentioned words in the following examples: *Das Haus ist groß* – in case of words *Haus* (German) and *house* (British English), English word is pronounced in the same way but is spelled differently if we look at the orthographic level. The lack of the definite article 'the' in students' translation of this sentence into English can be explained by the specific features of their mother tongue (for example in Serbian: *Kuća je velika*, literally translated into English would be: House is big). All the participants answered this question so we had a 100% positive score in this language task.

In the second sentence, *Auf dem Tisch steht das Buch*, the participants solved the task by taking into account the similarities in pronouncing the

German noun *Buch* and English noun *book* even though there is an evident lack of voice change /h/ into /k/ in *Buch* while the mentioned change happened in English word *book*. This could be explained by the voice changes that happen in the group of Indo-European languages.

In the example, '*Am Sonntag spielen wir oft Handball*' students came to the conclusion based on the morphological and phonological similarity of the words in the sentence such as *die Sonne + der Tag = der Sonntag* – Sun + day = Sunday. In case of the phonological similarity of pronouns *wir* /vi:r/ or *we* /wi:/ used in speaking or writing to refer to the first person in plural, all students (N = 120) solved the task. English uncountable noun *Handball* is the same in orthography as German word *Handball* while there is a change in pronunciation such as British English /'hænd.bɔ:l/ versus German /handbal/.

In the next example '*Du bekommst viele Geschenke*' personal pronouns *du* and *you* point out to the phonological similarity and the similarity in meaning so all the students (100%) recognized this. On the other hand, lexis *bekommen* (here second person singular '*bekommst*') and *become* are often wrongly equated because of the phonological similarity so this example represents the negative transfer commonly known as 'false friends'. 92% of students thought that *bekommen* (meaning to get) means the same as the English word *to become* which is a linking verb meaning to begin to be something or to develop in a particular way (*Longman's dictionary of contemporary English*, (2005: 117).

In the sentence '*Mein Hobby ist Surfen*', students (95%) noticed that determinatives *mein* and '*my*' mean the same and could be used by the person who is speaking to show that something belongs to or is connected to himself or herself. German noun *Hobby* is borrowed from the English language and is the same in spelling and pronunciation. In addition, the plural form of this German noun is formed by adding -s in the end such as in many cases of English countable nouns which for this grammatical category in number refer to more than one, for example *tables*, *computers*, *streets*, *girls* etc. (Note: the English word *hobby* in the plural changes /y/ into /i/ and adds -es at the end of the word, i.e. *hobby*→*hobbies*). Correspondingly, students noticed the similarity in meaning and in form of the German noun *das Surfen* and English gerund *surfing* which is also considered as a noun in the form of the present participle of a verb.

Some more examples of the phonological similarities could be seen in cases of cardinal numbers *neun* – nine, *zehn* – ten. The same is with adjectives *gut* – good, *alt* – old, *wundervoll* – wonderful, verbs *singen* – sing, nouns *das Bett* – bed, *das Wetter* – weather or in case of adverbs *dann* – then.

In pairs of adjectives, German *windig* and English *windy*, we may notice the similarity in morphological and phonological level, meaning, both words are formed of the corresponding nouns *der Wind* and *wind*. Using the generative endings -ig and -y for forming adjectives (*Wind+ig=windig* and *wind+y=windy*),

these words still sounded similar and students (98%) recognised that pattern, both in pronunciation and in meaning, so that the way of word formation, derivation, is almost the same.

In contrast to the previous examples, there were examples in the questionnaire where students could not solve the task because of the differences in the meaning but similarities in the ortografical level of the two foreign languages. Namely, in one sentence, students thought that German particle *also* (meaning therefore, accordingly or hence) means the same as English adverb *also* /'ɔ:lsəʊ/ which means too, as well, or either in the negative context. Students explained this misconception because these two words are spelled the same and their pronunciation is similar. Similar to the previous situation, students made a mistake in the example number 10 (*Die Farbe ist hell*) and thought that German adjective *hell*, which means bright, has the same meaning as English uncountable noun *hell*, also *Hell*, the place where the souls of bad people are believed to be punished after death, especially in the Christian and Muslim religions (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 2005). The pronunciation of the word *hell* in both languages is the same so the negative transfer was more present in this example.

Yet, 8% of students tried to go deeper and analyse this sentence in depth, so they came to the conclusion that German word *hell* is similar in meaning to English noun *night* representing the darkness and misery of *hell*. The next sentence, number 11 (*Wer bist du?*) also represents the negative transfer occurrence. To be precise, all students (100%) made a mistake and thought that German interrogative pronoun *wer* (meaning who) is the same in meaning as English pronoun *where* /weə/ which is the interrogative pronoun used to ask for the particular place (for example, *Where is your house in this street?*). The practice has shown that the emphasis on differences can foster the memorizing the words.

In conclusion of this part of results, we may say that in terms of vocabulary usage of plurilingual approach was successful, that is, students used compensation learning strategies to guess German words by using their vocabulary knowledge of English. Students also used inductive differencing when guessing meaning from key words, structures, or context and deductive reasoning when they had to solve the task. Specifically, students were in the position to compare native and English language to target language (German), to analyse groups of words, and look for rules of co-occurrence (Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2014: 13).

Grammar

In the next part of the questionnaire, respondents were given the task to translate the given sentences from Serbian into German and to explain which grammatical rule from English helped or mislead them to do it.

In terms of adjective comparison, students reported that the similarity of comparing adjectives in German and English helped them to solve the task. In both languages we form comparative by adding *-er* ending on the specific adjective, for example, in German *neu + er = neuer* and English *new + er = newer*, *alt + er = älter* vs. *old + er = older*, and with some adjectives that have irregular comparison like *gut–besser–am besten* and *good–better–the best*. Attributive use of superlatives in German is similar to the attributive use of superlatives in English and students recognised that in the following examples: *die beste Sängerin* – the best singer.

Even though most of the students solved this task successfully, 75% of students did not use the article before the superlative form, definite article *die* in German and the *in* in English, explaining that they forgot to put it because in their mother tongue, Serbian, there is no such grammar category as article. Further, we noticed that students compared adjectives by using German quantifier *zu* (in 50% of cases and reported that they did it because of the phonological similarity of the mentioned quantifiers to the English quantifier *too*). In the same way, students explained the usage of German phrase *sehr gut* relying on the familiar English phrase ‘very good’.

Taking into account syntax organisation and word order in both languages, we might point out that in German sentences when we use a modal verb we need an infinitive at the end of a sentence, for instance, *Ich kann gut kochen*, while in English infinitive comes right after the modal (I can cook good). Although, the authors expected here the negative transfer occurrence, it was quite opposite: all students put the infinitive in the German sentence in the proper place. In line with the previously said, making questions and taking care of the word order in this task, students answered correctly and put the auxiliary verb in the first place followed by a proper pronoun and then an adjective: *Bist du gut?* vs. *Are you good?*

If we consider verb tenses now, we may conclude on the results from the questionnaire that examined students used the similarity in the structure of past tense in German and present perfect tense to translate the Serbian sentence *Ja sam napravila tortu*. [transl. I have made a cake] into German.

However, there are some notable differences in the ways each language uses this tense. Both English present perfect and German past tense have in common that they are compound tenses, formed with an auxiliary or helping verb together with the past participle (Ibid.). This auxiliary verb is usually to have (*haben*) and sometimes, in German, to be (*sein*). The main difference, however, is that the English present perfect refers to an action or state that begins in the past and continues into the present, whereas the German *Perfekt* is usually used to speak about completed states and actions, and is therefore rather the direct equivalent of the simple past tense.

In terms of possessive pronouns, we could notice that students made connections with German possessive article on the phonological level and with the mother tongue knowledge in order to make e-ending for female gender, as it follows: *mein Opa* (my grandpa) and *meine Oma* (my grandma).

If we take into account the usage of negative verb forms and negations, we may notice that negations in the German language comes right after the verb (*Ich mag nicht*) and the knowledge of English help them to understand this way of making negation. The explanation lies in since years long use of English so that for the students it was normal to use negation after the verb. Hence, the negative transfer from the mother tongue (in Serbian negation comes before the verb) was reduced. Even so, students were very successful in this task and only 4% of them made a mistake. Therefore, it could be said that 96% of students' knowledge of using the negations in German and English was well-founded.

To sum up, obtained results revealed that in terms of grammar there is plenty of authentic linguistic material that can help in grammar rule explanations. Negative influence (in 75% of answers) occurred in cases where in the German language students had to use the definite article (der, die or das in singular or die in plural) before a noun, then, proper gender use was a problem. On the other hand, positive transfer was evident in cases where students had to translate the sentence from Serbian into German and be careful about word order in a sentence (100% of students solved this task), take care of the preposition usage (55% of students used preposition on properly) and 96% of students were successful in using the negation in verb forms. In order to illustrate this, we would like to mention here students think-aloud answers when they were doing the language tasks. Accordingly, students reported that the grammar category of verb tenses was the most difficult for them in both mother tongue and in English as well and that was the reason why they made these mistakes. Also, using articles in German and taking care of gender issues was the most difficult part in the questionnaire, according to the students' reports.

Phraseology

Phraseology is divided into phraseology in the broad and in the narrow sense. In addition to the various understandings of phraseology, a minimal consensus has been established, according to which phraseology in the broad sense refers to all phrases that consist of more than one word. Phraseology in the narrow sense represents the science of words (minimum two), which build units that cannot be fully explained through the semantic principles and syntax principles of word connection. They can take the function and meaning of individual words in the system and can be partially or completely idiomatized (Burger et al. 1982: 1–6).

Hence, the third part of the questionnaire was created for the purpose of testing students' abilities to use the knowledge of English vocabulary and set phrases and to complete German sentences and German set phrases and idioms. Idioms represent groups of words that have a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 2005: 805) and because of this specific structure it is the category that students have to memorize.

In terms of the set phrases students were 100% successful and realized that the English idiom 'to get cold feet' (meaning to be afraid of something) is the same as in German *bekommen kalte Füße*, then English *hardworking [busy] as a bee* (meaning a person that works hard) is the same as German *fleißig sein wie eine Biene*, and also English *to be on/off* (some electrical device to be turned on or turned off) is the same as German *sein an* or *sein aus*.

Beside set phrases, we wanted to show a path to connect collocations both in English and in German that possess usual lexical connections but do not have such strong connections as idioms (Bugarski 2009: 200). The data showed that the knowledge of English collocations were helpful in the questionnaire and the students were very successful and these collocations were the following: I am 20 years old → *Ich bin 20 Jahre alt*; Then take a first street left → *Dann nehmen Sie die erste Straße links*; Take a seat → *Nehmen Sie bitte Platz*.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The above findings support the hypothesis that plurilingual method at the university level was successful in German language teaching. Every teacher initially uses the so-called teacher talk which is a simplified way of speaking. Research has shown that, in addition to, according to Suvakovic (2017: 25):

- 1) Slower speech,
- 2) The emphasis on paraphrasing,
- 3) Concrete examples,

it is also important to associate foreign language content with similar contents in English, since English is the first foreign language in Serbia and in a cultural sense it is easier to connect it with the German language.

The data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews has provided answers related to the students' own perceptions of their L3 learning processes. The interview data (think-aloud students' answers) provides an even more optimistic picture – students reported that they became more aware of the similarities and the differences of the two languages. Furthermore, the analysis of the questionnaire data reveals that the examined students relied on their L2 English rather than L1 Serbian in their own perception.

The conclusion would be that the decision for a combination of more languages in foreign language teaching helps promote social and cultural values such as respect for difference, active communication, a participatory attitude to society, and experience of a range of different cultures and lifestyles.

In addition, the research has shown how foreign languages improve mother tongue competence. Students start to think about their native language in the sense of word formation, phrases, they combine the knowledge adopted in other foreign languages with mother tongue knowledge and use it to learn a new language.

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