

MOSAIC

THE JOURNAL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Founded in 1993

by ANTHONY MOLLIKA

vol. 14 n. 1 2023

MILAN 2024

MOSAIC

The Journal for Language Teachers

vol. 14 - 1/2023

ISSN 1195-7131

ISBN 979-12-5535-423-9

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La pubblicazione del seguente volume è stata possibile grazie al contributo finanziario della
Società Italiana di Didattica delle Lingue e Linguistica Educativa (DILLE)



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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano | tel. 02.7234.2235 | fax 02.80.53.215

e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*)

web: libri.educatt.online

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di dicembre 2024

presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

SABRINA BERTOLLO

Only German in the German lesson? Fostering plurilingual awareness among (student) teachers of German

Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to analyze how a new linguistic awareness which goes beyond a monolingual approach can be fostered among (future) teachers of German. Based on an initial training course held at the University of Verona (Italy) in the A.Y. 2022-23, we will investigate the extent to which an explicit sensitization can prove fruitful and what paths can be thought of to integrate plurilingual competences into teaching practices. The training experience with student teachers will thus constitute a first step to prospectively design effective professional development courses also for in-service teachers of German, to promote plurilingual education.

Keywords

German as a foreign language (GFL), initial training, plurilingual competence, Companion Volume

1. Introduction

Modern societies are increasingly characterized by multilingualism¹. Monolingualism is becoming an exception: migrations but also language policies implemented in Europe have contributed to this social transformation. In its 2018/C 189/01 Recommendation on lifelong learning, the Council of Europe sets out the “multilingual competence” as a key competence. Moreover, in its Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages, the importance of multilingualism is further emphasized, as “multilingual competence is at the heart of the vision of a European Education area”. A further decisive step in the promotion of plurilingual competences has been taken by the Companion Volume to CEFR (2020), which introduces “plurilingual and pluricultural competence”.

In light of this scenario, the paper addresses four research questions: (RQ1) Are (future) teachers of German as a Foreign Language in Italy (henceforth GFL) aware

¹ According to the Recommendation of the Council of Europe CM/Rec(2022)1, plurilingualism is “the potential and/or actual ability to use several languages to varying levels of proficiency and for different purposes” while multilingualism “refers to the presence of two or more languages in a community or society”.

of the new paradigm of language learning, which has plurilingualism as its asset?; (RQ2) To what extent can an explicit sensitization of (student) teachers towards plurilingual competences really impact on their teaching practices?; (RQ3) What paths can be thought of for (future) GFL teachers so that they can develop their students' plurilingual and pluricultural competences?; (RQ4) After having received explicit education on this, are GFL (future) teachers in a position to translate the inputs into learning activities which foster these competences or do they tend to stick to more traditional approaches? Can this model be expanded also to in-service teachers?. The paper is organized in four sections corresponding to the four issues under investigation. The starting point for these considerations is a questionnaire distributed among GFL in-service teachers (RQ1) and a concrete case study on GFL pre-service teachers carried out at the University of Verona (Italy) in the A.Y. 2022-23 (RQ2)-(RQ4).

2. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence as an asset of linguistic learning and citizenship

The CEFR (2001) is the reference point for all foreign language teachers. The organization in A-to-C levels of competence has had the sure advantage of standardizing assessment in and beyond Europe. Nonetheless, a tendency to consider such conventions in a dogmatic way gave rise to the misunderstanding that the linguistic competence can be really framed into 6 (sub)levels and four abilities, as is schematically done for international language certificates. Balboni (2017) reminded that the levels are not a fact but a necessary simplification of a complex competence, which – as the Companion Volume (2020) effectively recalls – resembles a rainbow in which we can perceive different colors (like different abilities), which then merge and blur to give rise to the white light (the whole linguistic competence). To better afford such a complexity, the Companion Volume substituted the four abilities with the four modes of communication, which subsume them, and introduced competences which were not dealt with in details in the previous framework, i.e. “plurilingual and pluricultural competence” and “mediation”. The updates of the Companion Volume (2020) are just a completion point of a process which had started long before, both in the realm of research and of the formal Recommendations by the Council of Europe. One core aspect which is addressed in the 2019/C 189/03 Recommendation to support language awareness is “including preparation for linguistic diversity in the classroom in initial education and continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders”. More recently, the Council of Europe further reinforced this point in its “Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)¹ on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture” which “request[s] institutions responsible for the initial and further education of teachers to focus on pedagogies that foster inclusive plurilingual and intercultural education and enable student teachers and teachers to implement them across the curriculum”. If a change in language teaching education must be made, it

should involve the whole chain. i.e. in-service teachers and, even more importantly, pre-service teachers (Vetter & Slavkov 2022). A synchronous online survey which I carried out in 2021 among in-service GFL teachers taking part in a professional development webinar offered insightful results. 50% of the respondents (14 out of 28) declared that they had never heard of the updates of CEFR before. 73% of those who were aware of them had been informed during previous professional development courses. After an explicit 2-hour-training on plurilingual competences in the German lesson, 79% said that they were probably already involving plurilingualism in their lessons, though unconsciously. Interestingly, 57% considered professional development courses proposing concrete implementations of these competences the deciding factor for them to be put into practice in class, while only 25% indicated updated textbooks as the most impacting element. Although the number of interviewees is doubtless too small to have any statistical validity, these results offer some preliminary insights on the need of continuous education for innovations to penetrate teaching practices.

3. Sensitizing GFL student teachers to plurilingual and pluricultural competences

In the light of the survey results and of the recent Recommendations of the Council of Europe, in the A.Y. 2022-23 a pilot project was started at the University of Verona to explicitly sensitize GFL student teachers to the importance of developing plurilingual competences in language classes. At the University of Verona MA students who want to become language teachers in a Secondary School are offered a compulsory course called “Teaching Labs – Methodologies, Technologies and Practicum” (Battisti et al. 2023).² In the A.Y. 2022-23 six students attended the course module “German language teaching – *Fachdidaktik Deutsch als Fremdsprache*” (24hours). One central objective of that year course was to address the new concept of language teaching and learning developed in the Companion Volume. Specifically, the key point was promoting the idea of a holistic approach to language learning, which goes beyond the single language and takes advantage of the whole linguistic repertoire of the learner, thus favoring comparisons and connections between different languages. In the Italian school context fostering such an approach in initial education is all the more necessary if we consider that in-service teachers with a permanent position normally teach only one language. Since training courses are necessarily limited in time, we decided to focus on certain aspects of plurilingual education. We emphasized the benefits of an action-oriented approach and of a continuous exchange between the cultures and languages with which students are in contact. Especially this last point was crucial because it meant winning over the skepticism that using not only the target language in class can lead to confusion on

² The general coordinator is Prof. M.F. Bonadonna, the referent person for German language is Prof. S. Cantarini, to whom I am deeply indebted.

the side of the learner and negatively impact on GFL learning. An alleged reduced exposure to German in terms of time and uniformity of the stimulus preoccupies some teachers, who are mostly concerned with the morpho-syntactic difficulties many students of German encounter. If an action-oriented approach integrating real world tasks is by now part of many German language classes in Italy, activities consciously fostering plurilingual competences, thus introducing languages other than (Standard) German, are still rare. Also when the initial skepticism is overcome, informal discussions with in-service teachers revealed that some of them feel they lack the competences to include in their lessons languages that they do not master and fear the risk of losing full control over the lesson. Differently, pre-service teachers who are still learning another foreign language beside German feel more confident on their own linguistic preparation but are disoriented, since in most cases they did not know before about the introduction of plurilingual competence in the CEFR and have not explicitly worked on it as students. In the light of the necessity expressed by in-service teachers in the above-mentioned questionnaire to be trained and receive some concrete examples of plurilingual activities, we thought it was all the more useful for unexperienced future teachers to analyze and discuss some learning units focusing on plurilingual competences, which had already been successfully piloted at school. GFL student teachers were then asked to develop (a part of) a learning unit for GFL learners, in which one of the learning objectives was to boost plurilingual awareness. They then had to present it to their peers in the form of microteaching (Remesh 2013).

4. Concrete paths to lead GFL student teachers towards plurilingual competences

After having received a formal preparation concerning plurilingual education and having analyzed concrete teaching proposals, some resources were suggested to GFL student teachers to create their own teaching materials fostering plurilingual competences. Among the proposed resources were some German digital graphic novels which presented multilingual traits (e.g. “The Wormworld Saga” by D. Lieske, 2010-); cooperative platforms, but also social networks largely used by adolescents such as Instagram or TikTok, which in some cases give the possibility to view the same page customized for different countries and offer redundant stimuli. Additionally, online platforms which create memes or fake WhatsApp chats can be used for intralinguistic translations in different language registers. Further proposals involved the invitation to investigate German neologisms to see how loanwords, mostly from English, are integrated into the target language, thus allowing for very productive word formation mechanisms in German such as compounding. This can in turn be compared with the strategies used in other languages to convey the same meaning but can also be expanded in the direction of systematic comparisons between different languages (Hepp & Salzmann 2020). Finally, gamification and online-gaming were also put forth as possible tools to learn in the digital wilds

(Thorne & Fischer 2012). Gamification can also be intended in a much broader sense if we think of challenging tasks such as intercomprehension activities between languages belonging to the same linguistic family. Although it is explicitly mentioned among plurilingual and pluricultural competences in CEFR (2020) and has a relatively long tradition (Hufeisen & Marx, 2007; Candelier 2012, see FREPA), intercomprehension is still seen with a certain suspicion by some GFL teachers, especially if it involves languages not taught at school. Nonetheless, the benefits of intercomprehension in terms of metacognition and linguistic awareness' development are widely documented (Bonvino & Jamet 2016 a.o.) and could be fruitfully experienced in class. It has been shown that to break down potential existing resistance and to lower the affective filter (Krashen 1982), intercomprehension tasks can be proposed *via* gamification, for example by recognizing the same lexical root in unknown languages or by inferring the meaning of a word by using distributional criteria as if it were a challenge.

5. Microteaching as a test bench for the effectiveness of sensitizing GFL student teachers to plurilingual competences: some hints also for in-service teachers' professional development courses?

For GFL student teachers who had been sensitized to the importance of plurilingual and pluricultural competence and had been provided with some examples of implementation, microteaching was the perfect test bench to check whether they were in a position to develop a learning unit which fitted the proposed approach and fostered plurilingual competences. Each GFL student teacher was given clear instructions on how they had to design their activity. They could freely choose a topic and in the 15 minutes at their disposal they had to clarify for the peers what their target group was (age, context, level of competence, prerequisites) and state what learning goals they would pursue beside plurilingual competence. On their side, the peers attending the class had to fill in an observation grid they had been given in advance to trace strengths and weaknesses of their peers' lesson. All interventions were videorecorded and uploaded in the moodle-platform of the course, so that each student teacher could watch their performance and further reflect on it with the help of the peers' and the course instructor's suggestions.

The topics chosen by the students were already indicative of the different attitudes towards a holistic concept of language learning that goes beyond the grammaticism typical of previous approaches for teaching German such as the so-called *Grammatik-Übersetzungsmethode* (grammar and translation-based method), also known as GÜM. Interestingly, four out of six students³ chose a grammar topic as the core of their learning units (tenses, conjunctions and interrogatives), while only two had a strictly thematic approach. The sample of students is surely too small to draw

³ One of the two non-grammar topics was proposed by a German student who was studying at the University of Verona and had attended school in Germany.

any conclusions representative of a broader picture. Nevertheless, some considerations concerning the experience with this small group can be made. Noticeably, when it comes to teaching GFL, even in the younger generations a prominence of grammar over the other domains can be detected. A possible explanation is that previous experiences as GFL learners as well as established teaching models deeply inform the concept of teaching and learning to the extent that also explicit training can hardly trigger a real change of paradigm. This does not imply that the student teachers' attitude and the learning proposals were not high-quality. GFL student teachers were very creative: they adopted an action-oriented approach and proposed tasks which led to a final product. Those who worked on a grammar topic did it with an inductive perspective and in the form of discovery learning. This denotes that despite a certain adherence to grammaticism, the methods differed from the already mentioned GÜM. Interestingly, each student teacher tried to respect the requirement of inserting plurilingual competences among their goals, though with different degrees of success. The future teachers who decided to work on tenses, for instance, offered a useful comparison with the English equivalent. Cross-linguistic considerations in other proposals were instead not totally adequate. The units which worked on cultural differences were by far the most effective both from a content and a methodological point of view. There was only one attempt by one student to work on Dutch-German intercomprehension: despite the appreciable effort, the way in which it was realized was not really convincing with many uncertainties on the side on the pre-service teacher herself, who had instead performed well in other activities. The feedback the six students obtained from the peers and from the instructor proved to be effective for the person who had carried out the microteaching. Also having the possibility to watch a video of their own performance was a further step towards adequate self-assessment.

The case study conducted among GFL student teachers together with the questionnaire answered by in-service teachers give us some cues on the opportunity to extend the training also to experienced teachers and on how to do it. What emerges in the first place is the necessity for all categories of teachers to be sensitized to plurilingual education and overcome the prejudice that interlinguistic comparisons, in particular with the first language, are detrimental for GFL learning. Especially teachers who are not German native speakers traditionally tend to think that resorting to the mother tongue they share with the learners is a minus, as if it were a sign of not having full command of the language they teach⁴. The wish expressed by in-service teachers to receive training on plurilingualism reveals that an update of textbooks is not enough to assist to a paradigm change. Having a sample of ready-made tasks at their disposal is *per se* not sufficient to trigger a real evolution, but

⁴ The phenomenon of non-native-speaker teacher has received considerable attention especially in the context of English teaching, while the effects of non-nativism in GFL teachers' self-evaluation are still understudied. Research carried out on pre- and in-service non-native English teachers reports on an "impostor syndrome" self-perception (Barnet 2009 a.o.).

only guarantees — at the best — some episodic implementations, which do not affect the deep nature of GFL teaching and learning.

The microteaching experience with pre-service teachers who struggled to effectively insert plurilingual competences in their learning units suggests that elaborating teaching proposals which go beyond a traditional monolingual approach is not immediate. One could object that the difficulties of pre-service teachers were due to a lack of experience. However, this is only partly true if we consider that the teaching proposals performed during microteaching were in general well-construed and the uncertainties student teachers experienced in the area of plurilingual competence promotion had not arisen in more traditional fields, in which they felt more confident.

This considered, we can infer that also in case of in-service teachers, professional development courses promoting these still underexplored plurilingual competences need to adopt a very practical and active approach, which does not limit itself to the discussion of theoretical aspects and concrete examples, but rather requires the teachers to experiment in class, reflect on weaknesses and strengths of their teaching action by sharing their results with the peer-teachers community in focus groups. In this last respect, the experience with student teachers showed that the feedback given by the peers positively impacted on self-evaluation. In fact, improvement suggestions by the peers were perceived as more feasible than those proposed by the instructor.

6. *Final remarks*

To answer our four research questions, we have firstly expanded on the notion of plurilingual competence and the importance it has gained over the last years. In section 2 we have then reported on the results of a questionnaire distributed to in-service GFL teachers to test their attitudes towards plurilingual competences. The results showed that only half of the participants were aware of CEFR's innovations, and this is a new topic also for student teachers (RQ1). In section 3 we have then reflected on the role of explicit sensitization towards plurilingual approaches starting from the *Teaching Labs* project held at the University of Verona in the realm of the initial education initiatives for future GFL teachers. In the course piloted in the A.Y. 2022-23, it emerged that initially there is resistance on the side of future teachers, who tend to maintain a traditional monolingual approach, which has long been considered a good practice in GFL classes. Thus, only explicitly raising the awareness of (future) teachers regarding the benefits of plurilingual education can win over the skepticism and progressively lead to an insertion of these competences in the school curriculum (RQ2). In section 4 we proposed some concrete resources which were suggested to GFL student teachers to work on plurilingual competence. They range from multilingual graphic novels to technological platforms and gamification, which can be intended *lato sensu* as a multifaceted strategy to motivationally address plurilingualism as a challenge. These, together with the analysis of already

experimented learning units were meant to give GFL student teachers some hints and a possible model to visualize how a plurilingual approach can enter teaching practices. This was consistent with the requests by GFL in-service teachers, who in their questionnaire had judged trainings as a key factor for plurilingualism to enter their current practices (RQ3). However, the bench test for the effectiveness of explicit plurilingual teaching training was microteaching, in which GFL student teachers were requested to insert the development of plurilingual competences as one of the learning outcomes of their teaching activities. The results showed that explicit sensitization had played a role. Nonetheless, the applicative side, i.e. the embedding of these goals in the praxis was not always successful. It would be simplistic to just reconduct it to the student teachers' lack of experience and, on turn, this triggers reflections on the design development courses for in-service teachers should have. Since it has turned out that the penetration of plurilingual approaches encounters some resistance even among pre-service teachers who have not developed a robust teacher identity yet, we can presume that a change of perspective will find even stronger resistances among experienced teachers, who might not be prone to modify their attitudes. Evidently, just providing in-service teachers with ready-made materials cannot be a long-term solution. This points to the fact that further training programs both for pre- and in-service teachers should involve more extensive microteaching experiences with peer-to-peer feedback and possibly actual class experimentations by the trainees. These are needed for the innovations invoked by the Council of Europe and by the academic community to have a chance to really penetrate the current and future GFL teaching and learning practices (RQ4).

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