

## PLURILINGUAL APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA FROM THE INTERDISCIPLINARY POINT OF VIEW

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**Abstract:** The article responds to the requirement of creating tertiary language didactics (L3), following teaching of English as L2. In the plurilingual context, the research focuses on partial issues of the facilitation impact of English (L2) on the third foreign language (L3). With regards to the language policy in Slovakia, research results point out the possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation in foreign language education with the focus on analysis and comparison of selected aspects in the training of future German teachers. The research also indicates potential opportunities for innovation in their pre-graduate preparation.

**Keywords:** Plurilingualism, Foreign Language, Language Policy, Didactics of Tertiary Language

### 1 Introduction and concept

The pedagogical empiricism and the research in neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics indicate a high degree of similarity in foreign language learning in the institutional school background. The advantage of the potential interdisciplinarity has not been taken into consideration up to now. The cross-linguistic way of thinking is emphasized by the plurilingual point of view in the foreign language teacher education. Therefore – and on the basis of learning and teaching German as a tertiary language L3 after English as the first foreign language L2 in the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education in Slovakia – the following questions are to be addressed: How can the first foreign language L2 help in tertiary language learning L3? What should be taught in the teacher education of German as a tertiary language (or second foreign language) L3 after English as a foreign language L2? Which aspects have the German as L3 teaching and the English as L2 teaching in common and which aspects are different in theory and practice? This approach is focused on the interdisciplinarity and cooperation in the foreign language teacher education with the following succession of language acquisition – Slovak as a native language L1, English as a first foreign language L2 and German as a second foreign language L3 in the Slovak educational system.

This paper on the plurilingualism does not consider the relevant question as to which foreign language should be taught as the first foreign language in the primary education. The executive representatives are to take into account that the first foreign language L2 within early foreign language acquisition is vitally important for the support of the plurilingual educational concept. The first foreign language L2 and its teaching quality have the potential to motivate, and as Widlok – Petravič – Org – Romcea (2010, p. 8) remark it opens the door for the learning of next foreign languages.

According to the Action Plan 2004-2006 of the European Commission, promoting the linguistic diversity by teaching and learning at least two foreign languages from a very early age is the cornerstone of the European project and belongs to the educational policy objectives of the European Union.<sup>1</sup> The formula 'mother tongue plus two other languages' requires that language learning in primary school is as much effective and motivational as possible. Therefore, the quality of the foreign language teaching at an early age is to be raised, and the

education and appropriate qualification of the first foreign language teachers may not be neglected either (cf. Danihelová, 2018, p. 43). The foreign language teachers with repertoire of two foreign languages and with awareness of the plurilingual approach in the teaching of the tertiary language L3 are needed. The term 'tertiary languages' L3 refers to foreign languages learned after the first foreign language L2 with a little chronological shift (cf. Hufeisen – Neuner, 2005; Hufeisen – Neuner, 2004). The study reflects the current legal framework of the institutional foreign language educational policy. The research is focused on the acquisition of the first language (L1) – Slovak, the learning of the first foreign language (L2) – English, the learning of the second foreign language (L3) – German and the learning of other foreign languages (Lx).

### 2 Foreign languages in education policy

For Genzor – Krupa (1996, p. 33), the national borders overlap rarely with the ethnic and linguistic borders. For this reason, the foreign languages taught at schools in Europe or in the world play a decisive role. In the past, Great Power policy exerted influence on the choice of foreign languages in the educational policy in many countries. Russian was the compulsory foreign language in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The Slovak Republic became a member of the European Union on 1st May 2004. Multilingualism is one of the EU's founding principles.<sup>2</sup> This multilingualism policy is based on communicating with its citizens in their own languages and promoting language learning within the EU. The EU has 24 official languages and protects Europe's rich linguistic diversity. The multilingual society does not imply an immediate application of plurilingual approach. Plurilingualism means the ability of an individual to speak in more than one language and to switch between multiple languages depending on the communication and related situational pragmatic framework. Another argument supporting plurilingualism is represented by the Schengen Agreement on abolishing border checks for people and goods. The border checks between the Slovak Republic and other EU countries were eliminated on 21st December 2007. This is also in accordance with the idea of learning more than one foreign language in Slovakia as well as other EU member states. The language dominance varied several times in the past. As Genzor – Krupa (1996, p. 37) point out, the language relevance in the European language area depending on the number of speakers is as follows:

Tab. 1: Overview of the European language area from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Genzor – Krupa, 1996, p. 37)

	Language	Number of speakers (million = m)
1.	Russian	120 m
2.	German	95 m
3.	English	60 m
	French	60 m
	Italian	60 m
4.	Ukrainian	40 m
5.	Spanish	35 m
	Polish	35 m

The dominance and changes in order of languages are associated with the colonial expansion of European countries in 15<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Genzor – Krupa, 1996, p. 37). Lately, the role and the rank of a language within the worldwide context have been in favor of English, due to the importance of the English language in the international business communication. The following overview of languages in the worldwide context was introduced by the authors Genzor – Krupa (1996):

<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52003DC0449>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-languages\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-languages_en)

Tab. 2

Language		Number of speakers (million = m)	There of L2 speakers (million = m)
1.	Chinese	1200 m	120 m
2.	English	610 m	250 m
3.	Hindi	438 m	80 m
4.	Spanish	325 m	32 m
5.	Russian	290 m	120 m
6.	Arabic	244 m	20 m
7.	Bengali	186 m	2.4 m
8.	Portuguese	175 m	5 m
9.	Indonesian	150 m	130 m
10.	Urdu	143 m	85 m

In 2011, the English language was established as the first and only compulsory foreign language in the Slovak Act on Education. However, the Act no 245/2008 Coll. on Education mentions that the learners should be enabled to master the English language and one other foreign language and be able to use them. The Act on Education is further amended by the National Program of Education, where curricula and standards are specified. The curricula and standards further specify the number of classes per week in individual grades of the primary and secondary education. The innovated National Program of Education, valid since 1st September 2015, the second foreign language became a facultative subject with 2 classes available per week. In addition, the innovated National Program of Education aims to encourage the education of sciences in primary and secondary education. Since 2011, the Association of German Language Teachers and Germanists in Slovakia (SUNG) has been engaged in the process of promoting the teaching of another compulsory foreign language along with English. The only change that has taken place since 2019 is represented by a free choice of the first foreign language in primary education.

Tab. 3: Amendment to the curriculum for primary schools with Slovak as the mother tongue

Field of education	Subject	Grade Primary education					Grade Secondary education					
		1	2	3	4	Σ	5	6	7	8	9	Σ
Language and communication	Slovak language and literature	9	8	7	7	31	5	5	4	5	5	24
	First foreign language L2			3	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	15
Total number of classes		20	20	23	25	88	24	25	26	27	25	127
Available classes		2	3	2	1	8	3	4	4	3	5	19
Total number of classes		22	23	25	26	96	27	29	30	30	30	146

The following foreign languages can be taught in the primary education since September 2019, assuming the interest of learners and parents and available qualified staff at schools: English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and Italian. In the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade, primary schools shall offer also a facultative foreign language with two classes per week allocated from the available classes specified by the curriculum. If the learners select other than the English language being their first foreign language, the primary school is obliged to offer English as a

compulsory second foreign language from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade (see Table 4). However, if English is selected as the first foreign language, the rule of obliging the school to provide another language being the second one taught is not applied.

Tab. 4: First foreign language and English as the second foreign language

Field of education	Subject	Grade Primary education					Grade Secondary education					
		1	2	3	4	Σ	5	6	7	8	9	Σ
First foreign language L2	First foreign language L2			3	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	15
	English as compulsory second foreign language L3								2	2	2	6

Nevertheless, English remains a compulsory foreign language. Motivation to learn another foreign language after English decreases if a school is not focused on supporting the selection and subsequent quality education of the second foreign language. Politicians responsible for education policy do not consider the fact that the need for mobility and plurilingualism is created in regions where also other languages, not only English, are used. Although, the professional associations of language teachers promote the concept of plurilingualism in the Slovak education system, the situation has been made difficult by unfavorable demographic development and ever decreasing interest of students in the teacher's profession (Zemaníková, 2017, p. 106). Regardless of the succession of foreign language learning, the pedagogical research did not pay sufficient attention to teaching the tertiary foreign language. In the current educational approach, the German language is either a second foreign language with two classes per week allocated in secondary education or an extracurricular activity, mostly of commercial character, carried out in the afternoons. Consequently, the German language has indirectly acquired the legislative status of the tertiary language at secondary schools with Slovak as mother tongue since 2011. Although the learners can opt for German as their first foreign language in the primary education, the succession of languages has not experienced major changes.

### 3 Interdisciplinarity and cooperation in educating foreign language teachers with regard to the plurilingual approach

Future language teachers specializing in tertiary languages should or could certainly be trained during their university studies already, so as to be able to point at the common features and differences between individual languages in a motivating way and thus promote the plurilingual approach in language learning.

Interdisciplinary and cooperation fostering topics in language teacher education with a motivation potential to learning also the tertiary language should be identified. The Slovak universities provide future teachers with the option to study the German language and literature usually in combination with another subject (cf. Zemaníková, 2017, p. 107). It is believed that plurilingual approach to foreign language teacher education can be best implemented via a combination comprising three languages.

Following a literature search in textbooks focused on methodology, the book titles most often included the words *teacher and teaching: The Practice of English Language Teaching, Teacher Knowledge, Learning Teaching, Teaching Children English, etc.* In addition, the following topics were discussed most often: describing the English language (language in use, language as text and discourse, grammar, lexis, sounds of the language), methods, learners, age of the learners, motivation, class management, mistakes and feedback, accuracy and fluency, planning lessons, syllabuses, evaluation, testing, assessment, learner autonomy, etc. Topics overlapping with the German methodology textbooks included: teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary, teaching pronunciation, language skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing. The issue of using mother tongue in foreign language teaching was identified as a frequent question in the preliminary literature research. The topic of

plurilingualism in contrast to monolingual and bilingual approach in foreign language teaching was mentioned by Harmer (2007, p. 132).

#### 4 Education of foreign language teachers in Slovakia

The acceptance of other languages in our society is determined by external factors, such as country-specific language policy (foreign language-friendly atmosphere), specifics of the subject (foreign languages in general) and individual predispositions of the learner. In the school environment, the teacher's personality connects the three components on the *learner – foreign language – country* axis through his/her professional competences, personal predispositions and characteristics.

Teacher education must be closely connected with the latest results of research in neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics. More than ever, the emphasis must be laid on interdisciplinarity and on methods that motivate and stimulate creativity. Likewise, the mother tongue (L1) and the first foreign language (L2) open many opportunities for students to use their own foreign language repertoire (individual multilingualism) in the process of learning the tertiary language (L3) in a meaningful way.

Not only does individual multilingualism have a positive influence on learning other languages (advantages in the cognitive, learning-psychological, metalinguistic, pragmatic area), but it also has its role in the intercultural and creative area, which has been repeatedly proven by empirical studies (Clyne, 2003; Jessner, 2006; Mißler, 1999). According to Marx (2014, p. 8), "the conscious inclusion of different languages in the classroom has [...] multiple positive effects on participating students. Thus, relying on other languages in the first, second, or foreign language classroom leads to increased language awareness, increased language(s) competence (of all languages, whether first, second, native, or foreign), preparation for learning other languages, and increased language learning motivation."

In view of the aforementioned, the teacher training programme should open up more and create topics with interdisciplinary cooperation, it should establish multilingualism concepts at a theoretical level, promote their relevance for teaching German as a foreign language more consistently and supplement them with numerous practical examples from school practice. Humanistically oriented alternative pedagogical concepts (including Gestalt pedagogy) can significantly contribute to the enhancement of competences of pre-service teachers of German as a foreign language with their wide range of methods.

In the following section, we shall focus on a particularly important aspect in the curricular integration of multilingualism, namely on the study programs for pre-service teachers of German as a foreign language at Slovak departments.

##### 4.1 Analysis and comparison of the syllabuses/curricula of teaching disciplines at the departments preparing pre-service teachers of German as a foreign language

For the purpose of the study, legislative documents from five departments were examined, namely those that were cited in the form of syllabuses as official guidelines for all didactic sub-disciplines offered by the departments at present.

The materials studied are formally comparable and analogous in structure: The name of the teaching discipline, scope, method, form (lecture, seminar), recommended number of hours (per week/semester), the number of ECTS credits, recommended semester, level (bachelor's/master's degree), conditions for completion, results of the course, brief annotation/characteristics of the discipline and recommended literature.

After an initial survey of the contents of the submitted materials, the focus was directed on brief characteristics of each subject and the bibliography, with the following objective:

1. search for links,

2. search for topics related to multilingualism or plurilinguism, and their possible application in practice,
3. comparison of the bibliographies.

Based on the analysis, it is possible to state the following:

1. Links and analogies exist in the teaching of linguistic means (vocabulary, grammar, word formation, phonetics and orthography), the promotion and development of receptive and productive skills, in the area of interaction in class (incl. social forms, correcting), motivating, as well as in dealing with media (special emphasis on new media).

It is worth noting that, in addition to the usual range of topics in foreign language teaching, courses in the field of culture and art (literature, music, visual arts, film), intercultural communication, early foreign language acquisition, segments from history, alternative pedagogical concepts (above all Gestalt pedagogy) occur in the teaching of German as a foreign language in various contexts. These areas are to be regarded as content potential for the numerous ways of how to cross borders in order to produce interdisciplinary multilingual-oriented situations.

Consequences: Using case studies, or models, teaching sequences or procedures, one can determine how to connect the principles of foreign language acquisition with the regularities in L1 and L2, and how this realization, evidenced by one's own experiences, leads to increased lesson effectiveness and a significantly more positive relationship with L3.

It is of great importance to address the awareness and transfer of existing language learning strategies in students so as to connect their experience with natural multilingual-oriented teaching. They need to explore similarities and differences between L1, L2 and German as L3 and be able to implement their insights and experience in the language learning process. Gradually, a basis for future multilingual-oriented teaching is created in their minds.

(It cannot be left to the pre-service teacher to figure out what he/she will transfer from other languages and how to mediate a connection between languages).

2. In the analysed syllabuses, the multilingualism concept was not systematically or thematically included. This observation was made on the basis of the short texts provided, which represent a framework of the course contents at the five institutes.

The data obtained do not exclude the fact that the teachers provided at least basic information about the didactics of multilingualism in foreign language acquisition on the theoretical and practical level. Taking into account the specific situation in Slovakia, it is possible to rely on the historical and regional tradition of the Habsburg monarchy (without references to the acceptance of migration-related multilingualism), according to which it was common in Slovakia to have a more or less active command of German and Hungarian, in addition to the Slovak language. The West Slavic language – Czech was one of the two official languages used for communication until the formation of the sovereign Slovak Republic in 1993. Both facts, among other factors, provide a good basis for the multilingualism approach. Slovakia, as one of the smaller states in Europe, has always been shaped by linguistic diversity.

Consequences: To integrate the latest findings of language didactics into the syllabuses, to learn from language comparisons, to be able to select and explain multilingual didactic contexts and to provide examples (students create projects in which they search for traces of German – e.g. in the former medieval mining towns and their colloquial language – *fírhang*, *biglajžňa*, *gánok*, *šibovať vlaky*, etc., Projects on Linguistic Landscape – Multilingualism in my city) to allow them to enjoy the self-discovering path to learning), online tandem projects to compare languages and facilitate online interaction (Tomášková, 2021).

3. In the bibliography, there are traces of publications in which selected chapters are devoted to the problem of multilingualism. The research has shown that German language departments use specialist books which, at least partially, deal with the question of multilingualism/plurilingualism (Barkowski – Krumm, 2010, pp. 207 – 208; Krumm et al., 2010, pp. 826 – 832; Roche, 2008, pp. 117 – 120). This led the research team to believe that the topic of multilingualism was dealt with and multilingual concepts were discussed. In other recommended authors, neither systemic information nor references to multilingualism concepts were included.

Consequences: Existing bibliography in the programs should be continuously updated and expanded in line with the latest publications.

Preliminary summary:

A. To consistently incorporate the focus on multilingual teaching issues in the study programs. In line with Vicente and Pilypaitytė (2014), it should happen on the following three levels:

1. on the level of language – comparing languages, using existing language skills,
2. on the level of learning – making students aware of learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social in relation to linguistic diversity),
3. on the social level – to consider linguistic diversity and multilingualism as a topic and mindset, i.e. to promote and develop respectful interaction with other languages and cultures among students (have language learning biographies drawn up and discussed).

B. Prepare teaching and learning materials for students of German as a foreign language. It would be desirable to prepare materials for students of teaching German as a foreign language and also materials that can be used when learning another language.

C1. Initiate interviews with experts in didactics from all departments with the aim to learn about their opinions on the topic of multilingualism and to work out common guidelines. Exchange of opinions and a discourse on multilingual orientation in teaching German as a foreign language and in other language subjects can help to intensify the search for suitable solutions.

C2. Interviews with students with the aim of surveying their attitudes and experience. Furthermore, classify and process the collected data according to certain criteria (optimization of teaching German as a foreign language).

D. Cooperate with other faculty members (especially from the English department), seeking inter- and intralingual links together. Publish joint studies, etc.

E. Provide workshops for in-service teachers of German as a foreign language. Provide in-service teachers with the basics of multilingualism concepts, offer and practice learning strategies and techniques.

## 5 Conclusion

In connection with the research question posed in the introduction (How can L2 language help in teaching a second foreign language, L3, and support its learning process?) several key areas have been identified.

Motivation and learning strategies: Motivating impulses first ought to be integrated into the teaching process, then the learners internalize them. Learning strategies already adopted from teaching and learning English (L2) should be transferred to the learning process of the second foreign language (L3). Similar strategies in both languages have a positive and supportive impact on the learner and, consequently, lead to an autonomous self-reflection of the learner and his/her learning process (cf. Andrášová, 2011, pp. 146-147). This thesis is supported by

numerous structured interviews conducted as part of the Tertiary Language Didactics framework project.

Interlingual transfer and interference errors: In productive skills, attention should be paid to interlingual interference between the mother tongue (L1) and foreign languages (L2, L3, etc.), and also between two or more foreign languages (L2 and L3, L2 and L4, etc.). That might bring up the need of expanding the existing language competences taught in foreign language classes, and other changes in study programs for foreign languages, in order to prepare the teachers of foreign languages for the aforementioned phenomena and use them for teaching L3. Interference errors should be given more attention, and systematic improvements implemented. However, correction of interference errors should be motivating, rather than negative. At the same time, correction of interference errors can contribute to better language awareness that supports a plurilingual approach in teaching multiple foreign languages implemented within a certain period of time.

Contrastive grammar textbooks also provide excellent stimuli for a comparative approach towards L1 and L2, and L2 and L3. Based on pedagogical empirical research, in the analysed educational situation (L1 is Slovak, L2 English and L3 German), we suggest implementation of a course of historical grammar and language development into the curricula for English and German teachers.

In connection with the teaching contents that should be integrated into the education of future teachers of German as a foreign language in the context of support for the plurilingual approach, we suggest to unequivocally adopt the intercultural approach to the didactics of foreign languages, which would allow students participating in teacher training programmes to gain first-hand plurilingual experience. The systematic analysis conducted as part of the presented research has shown that, in terms of the didactics of English as a foreign language and German as a foreign language, there definitely is common ground in teaching receptive and productive language skills in both languages. Finally, it can be concluded that the primary position of the interdisciplinary and inter-field approach represents a solid foundation and a good starting-point for the tertiary language didactics.

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