

Implementing plurilingualism in the foreign language classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a plurilingual methodology in the teaching of foreign languages with young and adult learners. The Council of Europe promotes pluralistic approaches for the benefit of all learners, many of whom, nowadays, would already be bi- / plurilingual when they join a foreign language course. Pluralistic methodologies respect and enhance the knowledge, attitudes and skills of learners who have experienced more than one language and culture, and have a heightened metalinguistic awareness, often as a result of having a migratory background. The aim of this paper is to describe a number of pluralistic activities that took place in Malta with three different age groups, and to highlight the objectives stated in the Council of Europe's *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (Candelier *et al.* 2012b).

1. DEFINING THE DOMAIN

The context in which foreign language education takes place nowadays is somewhat different from that of a few decades ago. Huge migration flows around the world, and in Europe in particular, have meant that language learners are no longer monolingual speakers when they first join the foreign language class, but are more likely to be multiple language users (Dooly 2018; Moore 2018). According to statistics published by the European Commission (2017), in the last few years 35.1 million people living in the EU were born outside the EU; 20.7 million

EU citizens live in a Member State different from their country of birth; more than 1 in 10 fifteen year old learners in the EU are second generation migrants; and in 2016 more than 2.5 million people applied for asylum in the EU.

Language teachers are aware that the needs of modern day language learners have changed, and that they will no longer be leading learners to proceed from monolingualism to bilingualism. Most learners would now already be users of more than one language, and they would possibly be familiar with different alphabets and have higher levels of phonological awareness and visual lexical representation than the traditionally monolingual learners of a foreign language (Jessner 2008). In fact, in addition to those students with experience of different languages and cultures due to migration, it is likely that local learners would also have benefitted from the teaching of an L2, and possibly an L3, in their own context (Nikolov – Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2011). This is the case of all Maltese children who grow up bilingual in Maltese and English through a fully bilingual education system in the country (Camilleri Grima 2013).

The Council of Europe (2001), and experts like Beacco et al. (2016) promote plurilingualism in language teaching and learning. The term plurilingualism refers to the knowledge and / or use of more than one language by an individual (Council of Europe 2001). Plurilingual teaching in the classroom refers to the use of more than one language by a learner, and it is more specifically related to pluralistic approaches, i.e. ‘didactic approaches that use teaching and learning activities involving several varieties of languages and / or cultures in any one teaching / learning event’ (Candelier *et al.* 2012b: 6).

Pluralistic approaches are not meant to replace any of the existing teaching methodologies, but rather they are designed to enhance language education. What matters is how languages are treated, that is, not in isolation, but simultaneously, whereby learners work with multiple languages at any point during the lesson (Candelier – Castellotti 2013). Pluralistic approaches involve a paradigm shift away from the view of languages as compartmentalised in an individual’s brain, as well as in

physical spaces like classrooms and schools. The new philosophy of plurilingual and pluricultural competence is a much more realistic representation of how languages work, and it is in line with epistemological developments in psycholinguistics and second language acquisition theory, sociolinguistics and sociocultural theory, and language pedagogy (Paquet-Gauthier – Beaulieu 2016; Franceschini 2011).

A pluralistic pedagogical approach necessarily involves trans-languaging, that is, the «dynamic, creative process of ‘languaging’ across the boundaries of language varieties» (Council of Europe 2018: 28). According to Garcia – Otheguy (2019) this is a weak version of trans-languaging and refers to ‘fluid language practices’, while the strong version considers the speaker as having «a single inventory of lexical and structural resources» (p. 25). In my view, learners’ knowledge of multiple languages can be placed on a continuum, with varying abilities of ‘languaging’. The aim of a pluralistic pedagogy is to provide a platform for the learners to use their full linguistic potential. I concur with the point made by Nagy (2018) that the strong version mentioned by Garcia – Otheguy (2019) refers to the underlying linguistic processes of plurilingual speakers, rather than a pedagogy. Through pluralistic approaches the learners are motivated to engage more fully in class activities, and foreign language learning becomes more linguistically creative. Once the learners’ confidence to make full use of their linguistic repertoire (however limited or vast it is) is stimulated, their inventory of linguistic resources will increase.

2. TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE PLURILINGUALLY

Pluralistic approaches take a holistic view of languages and they respect everyone’s plurilingualism, culture and identity. They intrinsically raise awareness about language learning (Council of Europe 2006). Furthermore, they can (i) provide an opportunity for the practice of authentic target language, (ii) motivate intercultural interest, and (iii) reduce stress in the acquisition of interactive skills. The international literature confirms that there are other advantages in using pluralistic approaches

which are cognitive and motivational (Dmitrenko 2017; Festman 2018; Little – Kirwan 2018; Piccardo 2017).

A very important pedagogical resource emanating from this philosophy is the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures*, known as the FREPA (Candelier *et al.* 2012b), which is available online in several languages at <https://carap.ecml.at/>. This document lists competences and intellectual resources that are easy to use and adapt according to the learners' needs, age and context. The FREPA website provides several examples of how the descriptors can be realized in the classroom. The descriptors are divided into three categories: Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills. For each category there are a number of sections consisting of hierarchies of descriptors and sub-descriptors, that can be transformed into attainment targets or lesson objectives. Each descriptor is assigned a letter, i.e. K for Knowledge, A for Attitudes and S for Skills, and it is followed by a number that indicates its hierarchical status, e.g. K 1 is the overarching descriptor for sub-descriptors like K 1.2 and K 1.2.1.

In the projects described below, the descriptors were implemented for maximum educational benefit using a multimodal approach. The activities were enhanced with the creation and use of original resources, in particular with the aim of stimulating multiple language use. The Maltese educational context has been bilingual for decades, and Maltese and English are used simultaneously throughout the schooling years as languages of instruction (Camilleri Grima 2013). For this reason, translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy is common practice in all Maltese state schools and in post-secondary education, including the ones where the projects took place.

The following sections provide examples of activities based on the FREPA, and implemented with learners of different age groups. These activities were carried out as part of the teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language in Malta (MFL). The non-Maltese learner population in Maltese schools is 12 % of the total school population, but unequally distributed among schools (Camilleri Grima 2020). The teaching of Maltese as a subject is obligatory, and the majority of schools specifically

offer MFL rather than Maltese to non-Maltese learners until they are able to join the Maltese class. The decision to move from MFL to Maltese is taken on an individual basis, and upon agreement between the school and the parents / carers of the learner. At the end of obligatory schooling, at age 16, students can choose to sit for either Maltese or for MFL as part of the matriculation examination certificate, which is required for all post-secondary studies and for most jobs. The teaching of MFL like all other language subjects is mainly presented in a traditional manner, with emphasis on grammar and some practise of the skills. However, translanguaging involving Maltese and English, and occasionally other languages, is a common feature in all lessons.

A number of schools are very open to plurilingualism. Many teachers and school administrators are familiar with the pluralistic pedagogy that I propose as part of teacher education courses at the University of Malta, and for this reason I become involved in projects like the ones described in this paper. In preparation for the projects described below I attended all the meetings during which the details of the projects were discussed. I provided information on pluralistic approaches, and answered teachers' and administrators' questions, as well as suggested creative ways of implementing the FREPA descriptors. I did not personally deliver the lessons, but I observed the sessions, and later I participated in the projects' evaluations.

2.1. Curiosity about languages around the world

The first project I describe here took place with children aged 7-8 years. The learning objectives based on the FREPA were taken from the sections on Knowledge and Attitudes. The group of 35 children involved in this project were bilingual in Maltese and English to a varying extent, including a child from Lithuania, a child who had a Spanish father and another child whose family came from France. The aims were for the children to: (i) know that there are very many languages in the world (K 5.1); (ii) know that there are many different kinds of script (K 5.3); and (iii) know that there is a great plurality of cultures all over the world

(K 12.1). In relation to Attitudes, the aims were to: (i) instil sensitivity to linguistic / cultural differences (A 2.2); (ii) raise curiosity about the similarities and differences between one's own language / culture and target language / culture (A 3.2.1); and (iii) create a desire to learn other languages (A 18.1.3).

Upon the initiative of the parent-teacher association in this primary school a story bag project was implemented with 7-8 year old children. This was an extra-curricular plurilingual project, and it had a clearly stated focus based on the objectives stated above, and implemented using story bags. Story bags (Hyland 2005) are ideal for their motivational value because they offer an element of surprise for the children who are always eager to find out what the contents of the bag are. Children get very curious and excited as they take out the contents of a story bag, and as they touch the objects, play with them, and read the books or simply enjoy the pictures. Once they finish a bag they become eager to exchange it for another one. Story bags can be used by the teacher in class or distributed to children for home use. They are also a very flexible teaching resource, and can be adapted in various ways according to curricular programmes and objectives.

Forty story bags were sewn by the parents who also contributed books, toys and other educational material to fill the bags with. Each story bag had a theme, such as, 'transport' or 'the human body' (see example in Photo 1), and contained several items: a Big Book (see Venn – Jahn 2004 about Big Books) made by the children together with their parents in Maltese or English; several small books each in a different language most of which were totally unknown to most children, such as Arabic, French, Swedish and Lithuanian; soft toys or plastic toys; a game or a puppet; a CD or DVD with a song or a story in different languages; and an activity card (see Appendix 1). These various resources appealed to the senses, including the visual, auditory and the sense of touch. The activity card included instructions for the parents and the teachers about how to interact with the children using the contents of the bag. The teachers used the bags in class and the parents borrowed the bags on a weekly basis for home use.



Photo 1: Books in different languages in one story bag

The reactions of the children who took part in this project were very encouraging. They wanted to know the names of languages new to them, or tried to guess which language it was. Some children wanted to know when they could start learning a foreign language in school, and one Maltese boy complained that he had to wait too long (until he was 11 years old) to start learning French in school! Some children noticed differences in the cultural depictions of actions and people in the different books and often compared what they saw – that was new to them – with what was familiar. Above all, the parents and the teachers admitted that they themselves learned a lot about languages and cultures around the world, alongside the children.

2.2. Borrowing across languages

Some of the FREPA objectives are linguistic or sociolinguistic, and others are cultural or related to knowing how to learn (e.g. the FREPA section on Skills, section VII). With secondary school students learning Maltese as a foreign language (MFL) at level A1 of the CEFR, the focus was linguistic. In this case, the FREPA objectives were for the students to: (i) Know about the phenomenon of “borrowing” from one language

to another (K 4.2); and (ii) Know that certain ‘loans’ have spread across a number of languages (K 4.2.3).

One of the topics on the syllabus of MFL is ‘shopping’. This teacher focused on shopping for groceries, and planned the module of lessons with the ultimate aim of getting the learners to role-play a grocery shopping activity. Two classes of twelve year old students took part in this module. In total there were thirty students who spoke fifteen different languages. In order to make the module intercultural and plurilingual the learners were asked to name food items from their country of origin that could be bought locally. Thus, the list contained items like spaghetti, pasta and pizza (mentioned by an Italian boy), noodles and spring rolls (mentioned by a Chinese girl), garam masala and chillies (mentioned by a girl from Pakistan), and couscous and dates (mentioned by a Libyan boy). In this way the grocery list consisted not only of commonly bought items like sugar, biscuits, and milk, but also the items mentioned by the children from the different cultures alongside typical Maltese food items like olives, tomato paste, and bread. This stimulated the learners to participate eagerly in the preparation for the role play. They worked in pairs to script a dialogue between a shopkeeper and a client, and then they acted it out in a make-belief shop set up in class.

As part of this module, the teacher used a slide showing some words which are similar in English, Maltese, Italian and other languages such as, spaghetti, pizza, hamburger, babel. This helped to initiate a reflection on language borrowing, and the teacher asked questions like: Do you know other words that are common in more than one language? She also gave the opportunity to the learners to teach their classmates how to say a few words in their own language and how to write them down. This activity brought home the realisation that some words in Maltese, although written in Maltese orthography like ‘hamburger’, ‘spagetti’ and ‘kuskus’, originated from other languages, some of which were spoken by the students in class (FREPA descriptor K 4.2). Furthermore, some other words were not only borrowed by the Maltese language, but were also used in English and several other languages as

well, like ‘anorak’, ‘algebra’ and ‘pyjamas’ (FREPA descriptor K 4.2.3).

At the end of the module the students filled an evaluation sheet and all their responses were very positive. Their comments referred to the fact that they had learned a lot about other countries and also got the chance to talk about their own country. Some students specified that this was the only time they had the opportunity to say something in their home language at school, and that they would like to learn other languages. One student pointed out that he understood the lesson better than usual. However, it must be noted that one student mentioned that he felt very shy saying words which no one understood, and another student said he felt embarrassed because although he spoke Turkish he did not know how to write it. He also mentioned that although one can buy Turkish kebabs in Malta they are not available in a grocery store or supermarket. As discussed below (section 3), when organising pluralistic and intercultural activities attention must be paid to issues that could be embarrassing for the learners, and the teacher needs to have a plan on how to deal with them in a positive way, or else how to avoid them.

2.3. Listening and a hands-on task

The third example is taken from a course followed by six adult learners in their second year of learning MFL (level A2 of the CEFR) at the University of Malta on a voluntary basis. The learners were international students from Poland, France, Russia, Kenya, Germany and Finland. In this case, a listening exercise was transformed into a hands-on intercultural task. As course advisor, I worked with the teacher to choose the descriptors from the FREPA and to plan and deliver a set of lessons as described below. The FREPA descriptors were related to Attitudes and Skills: (i) Sensitivity to linguistic / cultural differences (A 2.2); Positive acceptance of linguistic / cultural diversity of others / of what is different (A 4); Can talk about / explain certain aspects

of one's own language / one's own culture / other languages / other cultures (S 4).

In the first lesson the teacher asked the learners about their culture related to bread, and asked questions like: Do you eat bread in your culture? Do you eat it with a meal or as a snack? What do you eat it with, such as, jam, meat, chocolate, etc. Each student had their own story to tell about bread, and how it is consumed in their culture (FREPA descriptor S 4). While each student talked about this, the other students asked questions and passed remarks about what seemed strange to them and why, but tried to be understanding and sensitive to each other's culture and habits (FREPA descriptor A 2.2). A worksheet based on this discussion was prepared by the teacher (shown in Appendix 2), and in the following lesson it was used as part of a writing exercise. Next, they were introduced to a Maltese sandwich, which can be served as a substantial snack. The pertinent vocabulary was introduced, consisting mainly of nouns referring to the different ingredients, together with a few verbs in the imperative.

In the final lesson of this topic, the target activity was a listening exercise. The learners surrounded a table that was layed in preparation for the hands-on task. They were asked to listen to the teacher's instructions, such as, 'put some pieces of tomato on your bread, then place some capers and olives, etc...' while they actually made the sandwich using Maltese bread, spread it with tomato sauce, and filled it with a choice of onion, cheese, capers, olives, tomatoes, and so on.

The students enjoyed the sandwich preparation and verbally expressed their enthusiasm. When they finished the listening exercise, they spontaneously expressed personal opinions (in Maltese and English) about vegetarianism and veganism. They spontaneously thanked the teacher for the opportunity to 'cook', and asked if they could eat the sandwich they had prepared (FREPA descriptor A 4). Some of them asked where they could buy similar Maltese bread and ingredients, and this shows the extent to which they were not only learning the Maltese language in context, but were actually opening up to a new culture and embracing elements of it.

3. DISCUSSION

The activities described above are examples of how language practice can provide metalinguistic and language awareness. Hélot (2008: 4) rightly points out that language awareness is a bridging subject which holds three main dimensions: a cognitive dimension dealing with reflection; an affective dimension addressing attitudes; and a sociocultural dimension aimed at developing a form of plurilingual socialisation. Indeed, in all three examples (sections 2.1., 2.2. and 2.3.), there were significant moments of reflection about the multiplicity of languages spoken by the learners in class and around the world, a space for the development of positive attitudes toward diversity and an opening to others, and an experience of plurilingual and pluricultural socialisation. In addition to propagating a holistic view of languages in education where all languages are equally appreciated, learners' existing linguistic repertoires are cherished and sustained. Naturally, this has to be understood in the context of pluralistic approaches to language education, over and above the traditional view of second and foreign language acquisition. This paradigm shift needs to be carefully explained to adult learners. We met the occasional learner who thought that during the Maltese lesson one should only talk about Maltese, and in Maltese. Furthermore, one adult learner said that she prefers to have grammar and reading exercises all the time.

Thus, there are lessons to be teased out from our experience of pluralistic approaches. First of all, every pluralistic activity requires serious preparation, not only on the part of the teacher but also of the learners, and in the case of younger learners also on the part of the parents or carers of the children. Everyone needs to be informed about the purpose and advantage of including a pluralistic approach as an added value to learning the four language skills, grammar, and so on. Furthermore, teachers who experienced the implementation of pluralistic approaches commented that, (i) they needed to produce resources that are specifically aimed at the achievement of the FREPA descriptors, and this requires a lot of time and effort; and (ii) it is very important to involve the parents of children in order to make sure that this teaching

'culture' is understood and no one feels embarrassed as a result of being suddenly asked to talk about their home language and culture.

When evaluating the projects, teachers pointed out that in a few cases they encountered children who originated from the same country but from a different religion or culture and it was not opportune to open up the discussion about their home country, as there were signs of conflict that could impair the programme. Furthermore, some learners had travelled from one country to another and were only familiar with English, even though their families hailed from non-English speaking contexts. These learners had difficulty identifying themselves as speakers of a language other than English, and as belonging to a specific culture. A few learners claimed to have a home culture and language, but were unable to say anything about it. Such difficulties can be overcome by adopting the awakening to languages approach which promotes all languages, including those not known at school or by the learners (Candelier 2003), thus widening the scope of plurilingualism and watering down any potential conflict.

4. CONCLUSION

Several experts elaborate on the educational and social benefits of pluralistic approaches. For example, Hélot – Young (2006) illustrate how the inclusion of multiple languages and cultures in the primary curriculum lead to better social integration among immigrant children. Pinho – Moreira (2012) claim that plurilingualism in the classroom not only sustains linguistic and cultural diversity in the world, but it is a cornerstone of humanity, and it enables individuals to become more active citizens in an increasingly dynamic society. Another positive factor identified by the Council of Europe (2001) is that plurilingualism in the classroom is empowering for all learners because it respects their varied repertoires and encourages full participation in learning. Yet, from another perspective, pluralistic approaches to learning languages are a Human Rights-based response to the challenges of diversity (Candelier *et al.* 2012a; Skutnabb-Kangas 2009). Plurilingualism reduces fear of

‘otherness’ (Glaser 2005), and it underlines the interdependence between individuals and the social context (Piccardo 2017).

The cognitive benefits of plurilingualism have been appraised by scholars like Piccardo (2017), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2009), who refer to the affordances of plurilingualism for increased creativity and problem-solving skills. In the end, however, as Piccardo (2017: 11) maintains, plurilingualism, like creativity, requires nurturing in education. Without a doubt, pluralistic approaches and resources like the FREPA, are essential means to nurturing plurilingualism in education, and they provide an added value which motivates a plurilingual and pluricultural socialisation in line with the social realities of the world we live in.

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Appendix 1: Activity card in the Story Bag ‘Transport’







<p><u>Transport</u></p> <p><u>Instructions</u></p> <p><i>Any language can be used by the children and the teacher or carer. It is normal for teachers to use a bilingual Maltese and English medium of instruction, while the children can shift from one language to another as stimulated by the contents of the bag and the related activities.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Let the children feel the contents of the bag from the outside and try to guess what they are. 2. The children can look inside the bag and find out whether they had guessed correctly. 3. The children can take out the objects from the bag one by one, and decide what to play with, or which book to read individually. 4. The teacher or the parent / carer reads the Big Book aloud to a group, and lets the children talk about the pictures and react to the story. 5. Individual children can read any of the books in the story bag, either alone or with other children, or with an adult. Each child is allowed to read as many books in the bag as they like. 6. The children can play with the toys (bicycle, aeroplane, train, car, bus, motorcycle, etc.), while the adult can ask questions, such as: Have you ever been on a bicycle, aeroplane...etc? Which is the fastest? Which is the slowest? Which

is best for long distances, for short distances? Which one is best for safeguarding the environment? etc.

7. The children can watch from the school door or window onto the street for 10-15 minutes, and count how many bicycles, cars, etc pass by. They can then draw a bar graph on a big board to represent their findings.
8. The children can draw their favourite means of transport.
9. The children are invited to look for other books about transport in the school or town library, and to share them in class under adult supervision.



Appendix 2: Worksheet – ‘Hobż minn pajjizi differenti’
(Bread from different countries)

<p>Il-Finlandja <i>ruisleipa</i></p> 	<p>Il-Ġermanja <i>gassenhauer</i></p> 	<p>Il-Kenya <i>chapati</i></p> 
<p>Franza <i>baguette</i></p> 	<p>Il-Polonja <i>chleb</i></p> 	<p>Ir-Russja <i>vareniki</i></p> 

Kif tieklu?

bil-ġamm



bil-bajd



bil-ġobon



bil-perżut



mal-laħam



mal-insalata



mal-frott



mal-ġħagin

Fil-Finlandja nieklu / jieklu _____

Fi Franza _____

Fil-Ġermanja _____

Fil-Kenya _____

Fir-Russja _____

Fil-Polonja _____