

MARILLE – Promoting plurilingualism in the majority language classroom

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Als Folge zunehmender Migration, Multikulturalität und Mehrsprachigkeit befindet sich der Sprachenunterricht überall in Europa im Umbruch. Das Projekt MARILLE richtet den Blick auf den Unterricht in der schulischen Hauptsprache, welche meist der jeweiligen offiziellen Landessprache entspricht. Im Rahmen des Projekts wird dafür die Bezeichnung „Mehrheitssprachenunterricht“ verwendet. Heute bringen Schülerinnen und Schüler unterschiedliche Herkunftssprachen mit, während die Mehrheitssprachen-Lehrpersonen meist weder ausreichend dafür ausgebildet sind, ihre Sprache als Zweitsprache zu unterrichten, noch die Entwicklung des mehrsprachigen Repertoires ihrer Lernenden zu fördern. Das Ziel von MARILLE ist es, Elemente aus Zweitsprachendidaktik sowie plurilingual ausgerichteten Bildungskonzepten wie dem fächerübergreifenden Sprachenunterricht (*Language/s Across the Curriculum*) und der Förderung der Sprachbewusstheit (*Language Awareness*) in den Unterricht der Mehrheitssprache zu integrieren.

Introduction

MARILLE is the acronym for *Majority language instruction as basis for plurilingual education*. It is a project carried out within the third medium-term programme of the European Centre of Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz. The main aim of the project is to diversify so called “mother tongue” teaching in multilingual contexts.

Developing new ideas and approaches in the area of plurilingualism in the (majority) language classroom is an important issue for many teachers in Europe. Some statements taken from a short questionnaire study carried out among teachers involved in the project highlight some striking points. Teaching the majority language has to adapt to the “new” Europe speaking many languages. On the one hand, teachers reported that plurilingualism is mostly ignored, but on the other they witnessed that the linguistic knowledge and skills of plurilingual students were valued only in terms of their knowledge and skills in the majority language. Their plurilingualism was perceived as a problem. Thus, MARILLE sought to react to these needs/challenges and to foster the notion that plurilingualism is an asset for the whole of society. In this contribution, we provide an overview of

the main results of the project, which demonstrate how students’ plurilingualism can be encouraged and seen as a valuable resource both in and outside of schools.

The background and the aims of the MARILLE project

The MARILLE project puts its main focus on the teaching of the “language of instruction” (which is often the mother tongue of many of the learners) in what we call the “majority language classroom”, i.e. the class dedicated to teaching the language of instruction as a subject. This means for example German in Germany, Hungarian in Hungary, etc. Different terms exist for this specific language subject. In the project “majority language” is used, while the Council of Europe has chosen the term “language(s) of schooling”. Language(s) of schooling are one part of the complex language system present in schools, as can be seen in the following diagram:

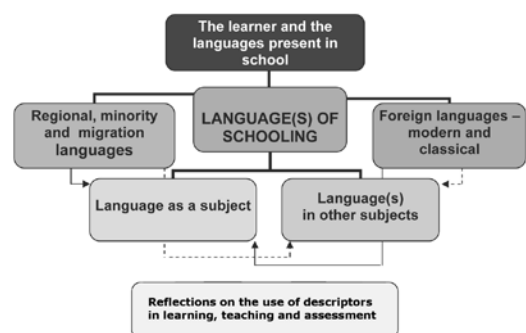


Diagram 1: Overview from the project “Languages in education, languages for education” (Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, 2011)

The central three fields indicate the field of special interest for MARILLE. The majority language fulfills two functions: Firstly, it is a school subject, dealing with the majority language as language system with a specific literature. Secondly, it is the language (predominantly) used as a language of instruction in the other school subjects. The links between these two functions are crucial for understanding the functions of the majority language in schools and in the classroom.

MARILLE as a project aims to develop the majority language classroom into a more plurilingual kind of classroom. The importance of a plurilingual majority language classroom is easy to recognise as more and more learners throughout Europe bring very different languages (of origin) to the classroom. In many classrooms, the learners do not share a common linguistic base. Therefore, it is most important that the common majority language is developed gradually. This happens mainly, although not exclusively, in the majority language classroom as a base for all the other subjects. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the development of the majority language in its different academic contexts in the other subjects is just as important.

MARILLE was, from the beginning, planned as a project that should collect the practical knowledge and school experiences of teachers from various countries and provide structure to this knowledge. This bottom-up approach is based on existing teaching ideas and can, with the help of practice examples, focus specifically on the changes that are necessary to adapt the “traditional” majority language classroom so as to reflect the multilingual reality in European classrooms. Furthermore, with knowledge about the different approaches to fostering plurilingual education, all this information was structured and resulted in the “MARILLE framework” (see next section), which shows what has to be changed and how these changes can be accomplished in order to adapt the majority language classroom.

Different workshops and meetings were held at the ECML in order to bring together practising teachers and disseminators from all over Europe and learn about their ideas and experiences. The teachers provided the project team not only with many practice examples, but engaged in intensive discussions about the plurilingual approach behind the project and how the knowledge gathered could best be structured.



Imre Reiner, *Stilleben in Schriftnähe*, 1975.

The MARILLE framework

In order to facilitate the development of a more inclusive ‘majority’ language classroom environment, with the aim of recognising, supporting and promoting plurilingualism, we have generated a framework which identifies a number of fundamental ideas. Together these will contribute to the transformation not only of the curriculum content, but also of learning and teaching approaches. The main points of the framework are illustrated in the graphical representation below.

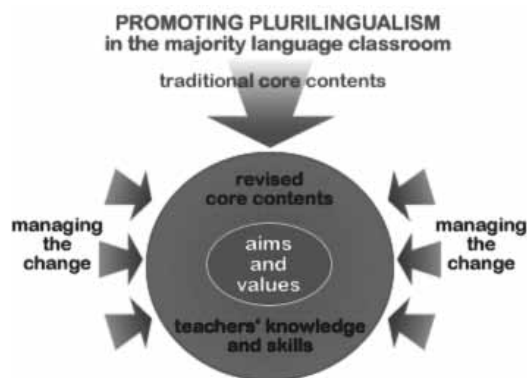


Diagram 2: The MARILLE framework

What are the fundamental values behind the framework? In order to promote plurilingualism, enabling all learners to develop their full range of languages and a strong linguistic identity, it is crucial to educate ALL learners to be part of an increasingly multilingual society. If all learners learn to enjoy the diversity of languages in their communities, to develop curiosity about them, and with this, respect and esteem for languages and those who are plurilingual, this will provide an environment in which learners can be proud of their own plurilingualism. Both a stimulus and an outcome of this is the appreciation and enjoyment of different cultures, literatures and texts, discourses, styles and genres.

An education which promotes plurilingualism concerns all learners and also all subjects. It must be inclusive and build on all language skills, no matter how basic, whilst recognising a range of proficiency profiles and cultural backgrounds. Any plurilingualism is a resource for society, and the curriculum as a whole and the learners experiencing it can benefit from all of the language capacities which learners possess.

In order to change the majority language classroom in a way that promotes plurilingualism, it is necessary to revise the core contents of the subject: What

are the knowledge and skills which ought to be taught to learners? What kind of expertise does plurilingualism require from teachers? And last but not least, what kind of support should be provided for teachers in order to ensure the change and make it sustainable? We deal with these questions in the following section.

Learners' knowledge and skills

The development of curiosity and respect for languages and language itself is fundamental to the development of a sense of esteem for our own linguistic repertoires. The curriculum needs to offer opportunities to learn about different languages and language systems as well as to acquire an understanding of language functions and language use. Learners should develop the necessary confidence to enable them to expand their linguistic repertoire throughout their lives in order to be able to adapt to any situation which might arise. Knowledge about language learning and language proficiency provides the basis for managing one's own learning by developing an awareness of, for example, effective language learning processes, one's own learning needs, strengths and weaknesses, and the strategies learners might employ in order to facilitate their learning progress.

Literature studies should include various literatures, texts, discourses and genres and reflect a range of cultural and linguistic contexts. Learners need to develop a deeper social and intercultural understanding, becoming more sensitive to ways of building on individual strengths, linguistic or otherwise, as well as ways of working collaboratively in groups. This will enable them to value the contributions of others and help to break down prejudice, as well as supporting a sense of identity.

In order to support the development of this knowledge and understanding, as well as to enable learners to continue to extend it, learners will need to develop the skills of investigation and language use, skills in self-directed learning, and skills in interacting, networking and discussion. The opportunity to work together with a wide range of groups and individuals in order to develop the skills of interacting, networking and discussing will prepare them for life in diverse communities. These skills imply a capacity to build relationships with others who come from different backgrounds, to communicate sensitively and appropriately, to empathise with different ways of communicating, to experiment with language and develop flexibility in its use, to find a voice, and to mediate between users of different languages.

Teachers' knowledge and skills

A multilingual group brings along both challenges and resources for majority language classrooms. Teachers also face new kinds of expectations and demands upon their knowledge and skills. Teachers need to be familiar with important aspects of language learning in both first and second language. They also need an understanding of linguistics and didactics that extends beyond the limits of in the traditional mainstream classrooms. Skills development enables teachers to use this knowledge in order to develop their classroom practices and engage with their colleagues across the curriculum.

Promoting plurilingualism in the classroom requires inclusive, differentiated practice and language diversity management in the classroom. Special attention is needed to create spaces for learners' languages in order to develop a mutual respect for all languages and their use in the classroom. Direct contact with a range of languages makes them a natural part of the school community and helps in creating an atmosphere where language skills are seen as aspects of people's identities and flexible tools in schoolwork and social relationships. A special effort is required to promote and enhance learners' individual plurilingual repertoires. In order to achieve this, classroom activities should build on learners' linguistic experience and skills. It is important to make all learners aware of their own plurilingualism and offer them possibilities to use their language repertoire, including both languages and dialects. By being provided with opportunities to make productive use of the repertoire learners possess, they are led to appreciate the contribution of little-known languages as well as the usefulness of even limited linguistic skills, and that these are valuable resources.

Applying the idea of life-long language learning requires from learners an ability to reflect and develop their learning processes, styles and strategies. Teachers' ability to promote autonomous learning and support ownership of learning processes is essential and has an ongoing impact on the learning paths long after the end of a specific course or school.

In a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom teachers are required to flexibly apply methods of teaching the language of instruction as a first or second language, in order to provide all learners with meaningful and learner-focused learning tasks. Close cooperation and shared projects with colleagues are of great help in reflecting on and developing one's pedagogical thinking. Optimal language learning often occurs when language is integrated with content, providing the learner with an authentic need for language use, and when teaching scaffolds learners in interaction and participation. A balanced focus on all language skills both in teaching and assessment makes learners aware of their proficiency profiles and helps them in setting realistic goals for their own learning.

In the multilingual school, it is important that language teachers working in different types of language classrooms collaborate to support their learners' various language learning needs. All language teachers need to collaborate in order to share teaching strategies and build on all children's linguistic repertoires in all language-oriented lessons. They should be able to work together via an interdisciplinary approach.

An education which promotes plurilingualism [...] must be inclusive and build on all language skills, no matter how basic, whilst recognising a range of proficiency profiles and cultural backgrounds.

Strategies for change management

The development of a learning environment conducive to the promotion of plurilingualism is a project which requires considerable commitment to the aims and underpinning values which this entails. It also involves a strategic approach to bringing about change. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to offer a broad range of support, coming from those responsible for the organisation of the school as well as from curriculum developers, teacher educators, professional networks, producers of learning materials, and researchers.

In order to bring about change, the whole school organisation needs to facilitate a developmental rather than a conservative approach to education. Schools need a certain amount of autonomy in order to develop flexibility in the school structures and organisation. The school should be an integral part of its community and reflect the nature and needs of that community.

Curriculum developers at all levels (national, regional, local) also need to be enlisted for change to take place, to provide curricula which promote plurilingualism and articulate appropriate aims and objectives, principles and content as well as learning and teaching strategies. Such a curriculum requires an integrative approach, crossing subject borders and including assessment strategies which support plurilingualism rather than negating it.

In order to achieve the above, the support of initial and in-service teacher educators is essential. There is much to be gained by the joint training of student and in-service teachers, especially as many experienced teachers are inexperienced in these issues. All languages and all types of language learning need to be valued. Therefore language teachers, rather than perceiving themselves as just teachers of one specific language, should see themselves as general language experts prepared to promote all language development, including languages which they do not speak themselves. This demands training opportunities which will raise their awareness of what it means to have different languages and

cultures in teaching situations, including how it might benefit all learners and how plurilingual learners gain from exploiting their plurilingual repertoire.

Professional networks are also an important source of support. These may be facilitated by teacher associations, national and international organisations (such as the ECML), or other types of face-to-face or virtual networking opportunities which bring teachers together and disseminate effective practice in plurilingual education. Publishers of learning resources must also accept their responsibility towards the multilingual society, providing plurilingual materials which are able to support teachers in achieving their aims. These materials should reflect the reality of multilingualism in all subjects across the curriculum, not just in language lessons.

The practice examples

As stated above, using a bottom-up approach proved crucial for the MARILLE project. A number of practice examples from European teachers were gathered and published on the project website (<http://marille.ecml.at>). These practice examples cover different aspects of teaching and of the aims and values named above. All these examples are to be used in the majority language classroom inclusively, meaning that every learner and every language in the classroom (and/or the wider society) plays a role in the activity.

The examples show that any “core content” of a “traditional” majority language curriculum can be taught in a plurilingual way. Grammar teaching can, for example, include working with grammatical forms in different languages. Thus, the learners develop insights in the different language structures and

learn new information about their majority language as well as other languages. Learners with a different first language can contribute words/ sentences in their language and act as language expert, thereby developing esteem for their language even at school, where first languages are often neglected.

Another important part of the teaching of (not only) the majority language is working with different literatures and text genres. In one example, text work with the widely used text genre of fairy tales is further developed into a plurilingual text activity. Fairy tales are a text genre known worldwide, and letting the learners use fairy tales in their first language can enrich the discussions about fairy tales, as symbols and structures differ. The majority language still plays a major part even in working with fairy tales with varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as the majority language is the language that connects all students. Results, ideas, summaries are arrived at and discussed in the majority language, which then serves an important function: bringing both the students and the teacher and the different languages and cultures together.

“Working on news” – a contextualised practice example

Description of the lesson

In this example, students are asked to work with news in different languages. This example works best in classes where several students share the same language of origin. Students are divided into groups according to their mother tongue. They are asked to bring different newspaper articles to the classroom that deal with the topic of teenagers and accidents. The groups choose two articles in their language of origin and are asked to fill in a worksheet. After working in small groups on the newspaper articles, the whole class discusses features of

newspaper articles with special regard to similarities and differences between the languages. In the end they rewrite – but do not translate – their stories in the majority language.

The connection to the framework

Students can use their language competence and benefit from the language competences that their classmates possess. The languages in their class are made visible and more “real”, as students can see newspaper articles from different parts of the world. They can become aware of features in the different languages and compare languages with one another. This raises their metalinguistic awareness and also their awareness of the relationships between culture and language as can be seen in the different ways that the text genre “newspaper article”.

This practice example shows that small changes in the majority language classroom can already have significant effects on how plurilingualism is incorporated. Making languages that are present in the classroom visible for all students – also the ones who “only” speak the majority language – can raise awareness and respect for the languages in the school and the wider community. Newspaper articles are a text genre widely used in majority language classrooms all over the world and they are an important part of media knowledge in our society. Understanding their structure and realising that text genres differ across languages and cultures is important knowledge for students to acquire.

Conclusion

Within the MARILLE project we seek to pool information and resources available to majority language teachers and, as a next step, to identify and describe change management strategies that allow implementing a “plurilingual turn” in a redefined majority language instruction. The results of the MARILLE project should show what is needed to prepare teachers and teacher trainers well for the challenges posed by the “new” multilingual classroom situations

as well as for a multilingual society. MARILLE was a starting point in developing plurilingual approaches in Europe, and it is proving to be a necessity to adapt to multilingual societies in many countries throughout Europe (and the world).

Notes

¹ This article is based on the publication written by the MARILLE project team: see Boeckmann et al. (forthcoming).

² See the project “Languages in education, languages for education” of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe.

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