

DEVELOPMENT OF PLURILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURALISM AS AN OBJECTIVE OF PROJECT-BASED L2 LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract: In 2017 the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia approved Standards of Competence for Foreign Languages in Formal Primary Education, a document that provides criteria for defining students' achievement at the end of primary education. In order to guarantee a better implementation of the Standards in primary school education, the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation created a large-scale on-line training program in 2018. In addition to specific objectives in terms of better understanding of the nature and purpose of standards of competence for foreign languages, the program aimed at raising awareness of the importance of pluri-lingual and intercultural education in primary school. The final task of the program was for the participants to design a mini-research project that would enable inclusion of students of different school languages and development of transversal competences. Here, we explore the participants' concept of plurilingual/intercultural education by analyzing their school-project proposals according to a criterion that focuses on the content and process of project proposals. The results reveal the participants' epistemologies that are relevant for the development of pluri-lingual and intercultural competence in the context of formal foreign education.

Keywords: *L2 teacher competences, standards of competence, project-based learning, plurilingualism, interculturalism.*

Introduction

The implementation of standards of competence in formal primary education of Serbia began in 2010 when standards for ten school subjects were

introduced by decision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. Standards for foreign languages were developed, however, during 2015 and 2016, so that in 2017 the Ministry of Education officially approved *Standards of Competence for Foreign Languages in Formal Primary Education* (the *Standards* in the remainder of the text). Following this act, the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation published a *Manual for Standards of Competence for Foreign Languages in Primary Education* (Durbaba et al. 2017) and implemented large-scale on-line training in 2018. The main goal of these actions was to guarantee a better understanding of the purpose of standards of competence in education as well as their role in the foreign language learning/teaching process within the constraints of formal education. Here, we set out to explore some of the effects of the on-line training by analyzing tasks completed by participants of the training. More specifically, we examine the participants' underlining teaching philosophy that can be extracted from their project proposals, which were created with the aim of developing students' plurilingual and intercultural competence. For that purpose, we briefly describe the theoretical foundations behind the standards of competence for foreign languages and we present the design of the on-line training in reference to the concept of the standards in question. A qualitative analysis of teachers' project proposals offers an overview of themes and activities they favor in the development of plurilingualism and interculturalism and creates a platform for the analysis of their teaching epistemologies.

Theoretical Background

Standards of competence for foreign languages in primary education

It is only natural that the topic of plurilingualism and interculturalism has dominated academic and professional literature in the last decades due to the fact that they represent a precondition for successful and fulfilling participation in the multicultural society. As early as 1995 the Council of Europe published a *White Paper* in which plurilingual and intercultural competence were recognized among the goals of European education. In line with this underlying educational ideology¹, the topic of plurilingual and intercultural education represents one of the central domains of activity of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe. Its main goal is to provide tools that would assist education systems "to develop learners' linguistic and intercultural competences so that they can operate effectively as citizens, acquire

¹ Here, the concept of ideology does not refer to any specific philosophical, political, or other doctrine, but to "a construct of a number of complex, hierarchically organized attitudes that are created at the interaction of personal experiences and acquired cultural models" (Jovanovic 2016: 20).

knowledge, and develop open attitudes to otherness” (Language Policy Division, n.d.). Three guides have been published for this purpose (Beacco, Byram 2007; Beacco et al. 2016a; 2016b); their main objective is to support the development of language education policies for plurilingual and intercultural education by providing a mark of reference for language learning/teaching as well as for language teacher education. Since two of the documents were published only after the *Standards* had been completed, a starting point in the elaboration of *Standards* were Beacco & Byram (2007) as well as the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001; see also the companion volume Council of Europe, 2018), followed by the analysis of other relevant documents and reports from research studies (see Durbaba et al. 2017; Jovanovic 2018).

The final version of the *Standards* proposes that global communicative competence should be observed through the prism of three specific competences: functional-pragmatic, linguistic, and intercultural. Functional-pragmatic competence refers to communicative competence in the strict sense, so that it implies a capacity for successful realization of activities of oral and written reception, production, interaction, and mediation. Linguistic competence, in turn, is related to the functional knowledge of linguistic system (e.g., phonological, orthographic, lexical, and morphosyntactic aspects) that is always understood in the function of communication. Finally, intercultural competence addresses students’ capacity to explore, interpret, and understand their own culture as well as the cultures of the foreign language(s) they are learning, so that they may participate in the multicultural and multilingual society in a successful and fulfilling way. Naturally, the expected outcomes in the three competences are adapted to the total number of learning/teaching hours of the foreign language(s) in primary education as proposed by the official curriculum.

The role of project-based learning/teaching in plurilingual and intercultural education

Streaming from the constructivist paradigm in education, contemporary theories of foreign language learning/teaching propose that knowledge creation occurs through an active engagement in meaningful and purposeful activities. Different theories in language education feed on this idea and develop it in different albeit complementary directions that emphasize the importance of meaningful communication in language learning (see Jovanovic 2016). In line with this, in task-based and project-based learning² learners complete specific

² It is argued here that task and project-based approach rely on the same set of didactic principles as exposed in the section; the main difference between the task and the project is their complexity, that is, projects generally involve a set of sub-tasks and are usually completed over a larger period of time.

tasks that require a realistic context for language use. The purpose is not to teach communication but “to engage learners in communication, the assumption being that by [so] doing learners develop communicative competence” (Ellis 2003: 333). The crucial aspect of the task is, thus, learning by doing in a vast variety of different activities that are easily linked to real-world concerns. As such, they engage the student on different levels by providing space for both cognitive and affective participation. Stoller (2002: 110) enumerates a series of characteristics intrinsic to the task: focus on content rather than on specific linguistic structure or category; student-centeredness; the importance of collaborative over competitive components; an authentic integration of communicative skills and processes; motivational potential, and the presence of the end product. Stoller emphasizes that the task involves both product and process orientation since its value “lies not just in the final product but in the process of working toward the end point” (2002: 110); hence its potential for stimulating, challenging, and empowering students because, through a more or less successful realization of the task, they receive authentic feedback on the quality of their activity. This is also crucial for the development of autonomy since, by being engaged in reflection and (self-)evaluation in different stages of the task, students develop a better understanding of their own learning process and strengthen their metacognitive capacities (Beglar, Hunt 2002: 104).

Skehan (1998) proposes three dimensions for the analysis of tasks: linguistic complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress, which takes into consideration the specific context in which the task is being completed (e.g., time limit, type of expected response, length of presentation or text etc.). Teachers then may adapt the difficulty of the task by tuning up its specific components, such as variety and complexity of linguistic components (lexical, morphosyntactic, etc.). Cognitive complexity in particular may be reduced when more guidance is provided in terms of description of the task, modeling and exemplification and, especially, clearly elaborated instructions that provide a scaffold for gradual execution of the task. Given the fact that the expected outcomes for foreign languages in our primary school education is at A2 level (according to the CEFR), we anticipate that the project proposals in our data would take into consideration these three factors.

Methodology

The context of the study

In line with our intention to investigate foreign language teachers’ understanding of plurilingual and intercultural competence, we explore our participants’ teaching epistemologies through analysis of their mini-project proposals, which represent the final task of on-line training. The elaboration of the

on-line training lasted several months and was completed by the team who participated in the creation of the *Standards*. It included two modules: 1. Standards of competence for foreign languages – the general overview; and 2. Implementation of the Standards in teaching; it was envisaged that their completion would require eight hours. The modules involved a series of activities such as presentations, descriptions and explanations with examples, mandatory and additional readings, forum discussions, tasks, tests, and a final mini-project proposal. It is precisely the final task that is the focus of our attention: the participants of the on-line training were given examples of two mini-projects and they were asked to create their own proposal that would enable involving students of different foreign languages from the school. While the participants were not given strict instructions as to the elements the mini-project should involve, it was explicitly stated that it should promote plurilingual and intercultural awareness.

The training was organized in on-line format (designed in Moodle, an on-line platform), in order to reach a wider L2 teacher population. It was completed in the period between October and December 2018 and it was directed to L2 teachers employed in primary schools of the Republic of Serbia. The on-line training was successfully completed by 3,292 participants: 2,242 teachers of English as L2, 68 teachers of Italian as L2, 265 teachers of German as L2, 307 teachers of Russian as L2, 378 teachers of French as L2, and 32 teachers of Spanish as L2. The unequal number of participating teachers of different foreign languages reflects to a large degree the presence of foreign languages in primary schools of the country.

In our analysis of the mini-project proposals we followed a qualitative approach so that we could extract the underlying teaching epistemologies of the participants. After obtaining consent for the study from the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, we described, analyzed, and interpreted the final tasks of 69 participants of different foreign languages. Following recommendations for a sound qualitative research (Dörnyei 2007), we did not impose a strict criterion prior to the task description; instead, we opted to extract all the elements from the data that might be relevant for the understanding of the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence in formal education. Together with the theoretical research, this strategy has provided a solid ground for the identification of crucial criteria of analysis that we have divided into two broad categories: content and process. Within the first category, we look at the proposed topic, objectives in terms of competences, as well as the choice of languages that the mini-project involved. As for the process, we analyzed the following aspects: instructions that introduce the task and guide the student through its realization, level of cognitive complexity required by the task, and flexibility of the task that opens space for its modification according to students' needs. In the remainder of this section, we synthesized the results

of our analysis and we attempted to identify main traits in the understanding of plurilingual and intercultural competence among our participants.

The topics of the mini-projects may be subsumed into three general groups: 1) mini-projects that propose to explore specific aspects of sociocultural reality, 2) mini-projects that focus on the development of plurilingual lexicon, and 3) miscellanea. Among the first group we identified 39 mini-project proposals, 23 proposals target lexical competence, and 7 proposals could not be included within either of these two categories.

Sociocultural mini-projects

Within the first group, undoubtedly the most common theme in our data is the topic of holidays (N = 19) that either focuses on a specific holiday such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, or Easter, or combines several and leaves space for students to choose which aspect they would like to explore. Within this general theme, students are encouraged to explore different phenomena, such as rituals, songs, food, relevant linguistic expressions (e.g., greetings, names for key concepts, etc.), festival origins and alike. Other common topics include capital cities, gastronomy, important figures of historical or contemporary times, and cultural landmarks. There is also an example of a mini-research project that explores contemporary music. A common outline of these activities implies a three-step process starting from the identification and selection of relevant information, through its organization and presentation, to a final product demonstration. In the case of sociocultural topics, students are required to complete the mini-project divided into groups that are mainly formed according to the foreign language the students learn, so that in the final stage the results of group work could be presented in a comparative way (as audio-visual presentation or mini-posters dedicated to different L2 cultures). Interestingly, in addition to the investigation of L2 cultures, only 15 mini-projects also involve an exploration of the respective phenomenon from the perspective of L1 cultures.

The main objective of these projects is the development of sociocultural competence through the identification and description of different elements of L2 cultures. In the case of the proposals that involve L1 cultures as well, there is also potential for the development of intercultural competence since a deeper understanding of one's own culture is a requisite for the development of intercultural awareness. Some participants also find a way to creatively make correlation with other school subjects such as musical education, drawing, history, IT, etc., which enables a strong correlation of the school curricula. More importantly, however, this strategy contextualizes the content, by which it becomes more realistic and relevant for the student due to the fact that this is the way real-life problems are normally approached. Some projects also require the student to take an analytical attitude when exploring a sociocultural phenomenon

in question. This is particularly evident in two proposals that involve the use of different sources such as Internet, books, magazines, but also personal and other people's experiences. In this way, the students are instructed to look for the plurality of voices and to evaluate the relevance, quality, and priority of the obtained information. Consequently, these projects would not only improve learners' communicative and sociocultural competence but would also develop their skills for research and interpretation that are at the core of intercultural competence or any sort of life-long learning, for that matter. In fact, two project-proposals specifically state descriptors for intercultural competence from the *Standards*, which is in line with the main goal of this final task of the on-line training. The fact that there are only two such examples is indicative of the need to explicitly include specific requirements of this sort in the task description if it is to be expected that they should be addressed.

On the other hand, insufficiently developed projects risk maintaining and even promoting stereotypes and ethnocentrism. This is true in the case of the proposals that end in a simple contrastive description of the observed phenomena without an attempt to interpret and evaluate students' findings. By focusing only on the typical aspects of a phenomenon, students are deprived of the possibility to observe it in all its complexity and diversity, which naturally leads to the consolidation of cultural stereotypes. Another problematic strategy could be an unbalanced exploration of different cultures. Thus, a well-elaborated and complex mini-research project focuses on the topic of Easter: students are required to explore the phenomenon in a vast array of different contexts of their L1 culture, ranging from personal experiences, to a number of religious, historic, and public manifestations (class presentations and discussions, personal testimonies, readings, video viewing, liturgy, discussion with a curator of the ethnographic museum, etc.), which provides ample terrain for a rich analysis. On the other hand, the same phenomenon of Italian and English culture is introduced through one class presentation and interactive discussion followed by viewing of two short videos and a quiz to test students' acquisition of relevant terminology. This unequal treatment of the same phenomenon in native and foreign cultures may lead to inappropriate conclusions in respect to the manifestations and values associated with this holiday. A strategy that could help overcome this risk might be an equally complex investigation of the phenomenon in L2 cultures completed by the students themselves. Since they would have already been introduced to an excellent example for exploring a religious holiday (within their own culture), they could apply this model to their own investigation of the phenomenon within L2 culture. Under the teacher's guidance, they would look for relevant sources of data and they would be required to select, organize, and evaluate the information; it is also likely that the students would come up with other creative solutions for the task (such as the use of digital sources and social networks, to mention only two). Without this

development of the project, however, there is a danger of the students creating partial understanding and misconceptions about the meaning of this religious holiday in the cultures they study, which is detrimental for their development of intercultural competence.

Lexical mini-projects

The second group of mini-project proposals focuses on the development of lexical competence through the elaboration of plurilingual lexicon. Here, students make an inventory of lexemes of a specific semantic field (e.g., school, gastronomy, sport, IT jargon) or they identify a list of words based on a specific linguistic criterion (loan words, words of same origin, cognates, false friends), so that in the next stage of the project they may prepare a plurilingual mini-dictionary that would be shared among all the participants. Some projects involve another step that proposes analysis and discussion about the identified words of different languages. In addition to the development of lexical competence, these mini-projects also target plurilingual competence and, more specifically, the development of language learning strategies. Namely, by fostering cross-linguistic analysis of words from different languages that share some linguistic features (origin, meaning, form, etc.), students may identify specific regularities in the way languages function. Consequently, they may develop better awareness of the linguistic systems in general and try to use compensation strategies in real-life communication. Furthermore, by this activity they are encouraged to make inferences about linguistic structures, which promotes their higher order cognitive processes and makes them better thinkers.

The choice of languages for lexical mini-projects is mainly influenced by the school curriculum: the languages of the projects are the foreign languages of the school with or without Serbian as L1. In other words, the bi-/plurilingual lexicons in our data involve from two to four languages from the following list: English, Italian, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Bulgarian as L2 (in order of their frequency) and Serbian as L1. It is curious, however, that there is not a single proposal that would involve languages not learned in the school. This is perhaps influenced by the example from the mini-project description in the on-line training that also focuses only on the school languages. In any event, the choice of languages in mini-projects reveals our L2 teachers' focus on the institutional norms and practices and a lack of their awareness for the plurilingual realities outside of the school walls. It is quite probable that their students are familiar with or even fluent in languages not taught in their school and that their linguistic experience would be a valuable contribution to a plurilingual project of this sort. Furthermore, this would provide an excellent platform for engaging the students according to their experiences and needs, and particularly so in the case of the children who use minority languages. On the

other hand, inclusion of different and diverse languages in plurilingual lexicons would also be beneficial for all students since it promotes development of higher order cognitive processes such as synthesis and evaluation.

Special cases

The final group of mini-project proposals covers a variety of themes and procedures. Two proposals suggest an elaboration of school presentation, which would involve identification and selection of information about the school and preparation of the bi-/plurilingual presentation. Common to the two projects is their focus on the final product that would be presented to the schools' communities and published on the schools' websites. An additional feature is the focus on mediation in the strict sense, that is, translation of contents to different foreign languages of the schools. Another project that targets activities of mediation uses a famous fairytale and explores it through the prism of different languages by focusing on the story's protagonists, key concepts, magical beings, and their symbolic meaning. An interesting proposal indicates the possibility of connecting students with schools from abroad in a trilingual context—by using two foreign languages in addition to sign language. In this setting, the school environment is no longer an artificial L2 learning environment, but a real life experience that enables students to acquire foreign languages and cultures in an authentic context (see Vuco, Zavisin 2013).

A particularly creative project entitled "The story of six words", inspired by E. Hemingway, introduces a creative challenge for students: they are asked to create a story of six words. The students are divided in groups according to the language and their personal affinities and interests and they are required to create as many six-word stories as they can. They are also encouraged to use different media in their final presentation, such as drawings, audio-visual presentations, and alike. For the project finale, the teacher proposes publication of the selected stories in the school magazine, creation of bookmarkers, organization of a literary evening, and creation of a short film. This seemingly simple task primarily develops pragmatic competence through the creation of short narratives. However, it opens possibilities for the holistic engagement of students, both in cognitive and affective domains, and insists on the creative aspect of the task through which each student is invited to find his or her way of creative expression. At the same time, this is the only proposal that included as many as six languages (Serbian, English, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian).

Concluding remarks

Our analysis of the mini-project proposals leads to a general impression that these L2 teachers are familiar with this kind of teaching practice that promotes interdisciplinary approach. They skillfully provide topics that highlight the relationship of topics across different disciplines and they successfully involve teachers of different school subjects, which is an important movement toward thematic education. The topics of the proposals are mostly chosen by teachers and conceptualized in a way that develops students' sociocultural and lexical competence. At the same time, the realization of the projects is generally flexible enough to enable adjustment to students' needs and interests.

Our data further reveal specific shared features in our participants' teaching epistemologies relevant for their understanding of intercultural and plurilingual competence. In the design of their mini-project proposals, the teachers-participants of this study primarily focus on the development of sociocultural competence. This in itself would not be problematic if the task had not required focus on plurilingual or intercultural competence, or both. More successful projects open possibilities for the development of intercultural competence, mainly by providing clearer guidance for different stages of project elaboration that promote skills of investigation and learning. Particularly important in this respect are the strategies of evaluation and self-evaluation when included in the final stages of the mini-projects. Not only do they provide a sort of closure to the exerted effort but also instigate critical thinking and student autonomy.

It is clear from our analysis that a number of proposals show competence, ingenuity, and creativity of their authors. Nevertheless, there are also proposals in which the participants fail to explicitly state the main objectives of their mini-projects, so these can only be inferred from the project description. This is also true for other aspects of project description such as clear instructions as to the number of students involved, their age and level of competence, time for project elaboration, materials used, and final product design. Consequently, some excellent and creative ideas do not reach all of their potential since they remain underdeveloped. In light of these findings, the on-line training should have certainly addressed these aspects more explicitly. It is crucial that future teacher education programs of the sort focus on different strategies for planning, execution, and evaluation of the school projects that aim at developing intercultural and plurilingual competences in primary education.

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