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Multilingualism as a resource for basic education with young migrants

Abstract: In the MEVIEL[1] project partnership, linguistic insights into multilingualism were adapted for educational and counselling practice, with the aim of improving educational opportunities for young migrants in Austria. The project employed a dynamic concept of multilingualism and regarded the use of more than one language as a process in which experience with language (learning) and competence constitutes a two-way relationship. The inclusion of multilingualism mainly meant acknowledging, making visible and using the learners' own linguistic repertoires.

Résumé : Dans le cadre du partenariat de projet MEVIEL, les connaissances linguistiques sur le multilinguisme ont été adaptées à la pratique pédagogique et au conseil, en vue d'améliorer l'accès des jeunes migrants à l'éducation en Autriche. Le projet a appliqué un concept dynamique du multilinguisme et considéré l'utilisation de plusieurs langues comme un processus où l'expérience de la langue (et de son apprentissage) et les compétences entretiennent une relation bilatérale. L'intégration du multilinguisme a surtout impliqué la reconnaissance, la visibilité et l'utilisation des répertoires langagiers propres aux apprenants.

1 Introduction

For years we have been observing in basic education courses[2] that participants want to use their many languages in class. That is why we take a critical view of

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1 ESF/BMBF: E-1.2–190, http://www.integrationshaus.at/meviel
2 Basic education with young migrants in our institutions means working with people aged between 15 and 25 who had no or only infrequent opportunities to attend school. The aim of these courses is to allow young migrants to catch up on the education they may have missed so they can get an Austrian secondary school leaving certificate. For that reason, in the courses the focus

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Austria's "German above all" language policy. Learning languages should be perceived as something positive and not experienced as something compulsory. For this reason, we decided to consider how multilingualism could be integrated into our courses.

In 2012 we responded to a European Social Fund (ESF) call to tackle this very important social and educational policy issue and set up a special team of cooperation partners: a development partnership consisting of a large adult education institution, the Wiener Volkshochschulen (VHS Wien), two smaller NGOs, the Verein Projekt Integrationshaus and Piramidops, and a research institution, the University of Vienna, represented by the Unit for Language Learning and Teaching Research, which had provided input that formed the basis for further deliberation. This form of cooperation facilitated critical reflection on developments from different perspectives. In this way we managed to make ourselves and our fields of work more aware of the issues of multilingualism, to reflect on our own teaching practice, and to develop appropriate ideas and materials for basic education courses.

Statements by participating teachers, such as "Integrating multilingualism into my classes is like switching on an extra light. We're actually dealing with the same topics as ever, but the room we're doing that in is brighter" and "The learners are the experts!" reveal a new dimension of multilingualism that is becoming the framework for classroom learning. Recognising that course participants are the experts alters the teacher's attitude in that the roles of teacher and learner become interchangeable: Every learner is a teacher, and every teacher is a learner, too.

Multilingualism in basic education can increase interest in language(s) and create a positive attitude towards your own language repertoire. When we integrate multilingualism, the languages of the participants are appreciated and recognised and used as resources (e.g. seeing connections between languages by comparing words and structures), and by doing that further resources for learning can also be generated.

Within the MEVIEL project we created several products:
- a low-threshold multilingual learning space (the so-called Market Learning Café);
- materials and activities to make multilingualism visible and to make use of it in basic education classes;

is placed not only on developing linguistic competence in German but also on learning subjects such as mathematics, biology, geography, etc.

- a model of multilingual learning support where young learners worked together in tandem with adult learning partners;
- guidelines with approaches for the practical use of multilingualism in counselling practice;
- and further training for teachers on the topics of diversity and multilingualism.

2 Theoretical background

The MEVIEL project embraced a dynamic concept of multilingualism. A wide range of different terms are used in the scientific literature for this state; indeed there seems to be some terminological disagreement. However, they all describe the same phenomenon: that language is in a state of permanent change, that speakers use words and structures from other languages and mobilise all of their linguistic resources when communicating (e.g. Busch 2014; García and Wei 2014; Herdina and Jessner 2002; Shohamy 2006). All of these developments reveal a radical change in our perception of language.

> Language is open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving and personal. It has no fixed boundaries, but is rather made of hybrids and endless varieties resulting from language being creative, expressive, interactive, contact-and-dialogue-based, debated, mediated and negotiated. (Shohamy 2006: 5)

This key concept of language formed a starting point in our project for a dynamic concept of multilingualism. It refers to the use of more than one language in everyday life – and in educational contexts – as a process in which experiences of language learning and language competence are mutually interrelated. According to this view, a language is not to be seen as a discrete entity but as a network of means of communication. If this is the case, then our educational context has to adapt to this linguistic reality.

These concepts and approaches show that, although available language resources, or those the learners already have, are not always useful in the same way, they contribute to raising people's awareness of their own multilingualism. Dealing with the diversity of ways people use language can actually help them make use of learning and educational opportunities and develop metalinguistic skills in particular. The integration of multilingualism into the classroom mainly means acknowledging, making visible and using the learners' own repertoires of languages. Our project mainly aimed to answer the question which materials and activities are instrumental for this purpose in the context of basic education.

3 Development of materials and activities for basic education courses

The project was divided into four phases. Phase I consisted of research and the adaptation and development of materials. In Phase II materials were piloted in courses for basic education and reflective workshops were held with teachers. Phase III focused on the adaptation and re-piloting of materials, followed by reflection on these. Finally, in Phase IV we edited, collected and published materials and activities.

There may have been many events and projects on the subject of multilingualism over the past few years but, when you observe what actually happens in the classroom, the multilingualism that is going on there is often simply due to the fact that there are multilingual individuals sitting in these classes. Similarly, there is also a large amount of multilingual teaching material available, but this has either only been designed for very specific contexts or has not yet found its way into many institutions.

At the beginning, it was our aim to find out more about existing ideas of language education in diverse cultural and linguistic circumstances, enabling learners to acquire knowledge and use different languages and language styles for different life contexts. We intended to adapt these ideas for use with our own target group in our basic education courses or to develop our own new activities. We started by looking through the material available – be it from our own resources (many things had already been developed but this was not known among the teams) or from others (there are plenty of excellent materials available) – and adapted it for use in our courses. However, it turned out to be surprisingly difficult to recruit course teachers to try out the adapted materials in their classes, to reflect on them with us and develop them further. When approached on the issue of multilingualism, many reacted defensively or sceptically at first. It proved to be a challenge to convince the teachers to participate and to make them important partners in our project.

In the ensuing reflection workshops, the trainers' responses showed that by incorporating the languages the learners bring with them their motivation and interest in the lessons could be increased. This opened up opportunities for the course participants, enabling them to bring into the lesson the competences they already had. For example, it was only possible for some young people to bring their basic knowledge of mathematics into the lessons when they were given the opportunity to do that in their first language. However, not all of the languages the young people brought with them enjoy a similar status in society. Conversations with participants have shown that some of them have had nega-

tive experiences with their multilingualism and therefore hide their languages or are even ashamed of them. For this reason, it can often feel uncomfortable or strange when their first language is integrated into the lessons. The next step was to add important teaching tips to descriptions of classroom tasks and to make it clear that it is the job of the teacher to create a positive atmosphere for the use of first languages, using great care and their skill as a teacher. In further reflection workshops the group discussion among the trainers became more productive, and their responses became more positive.

Finally, we put together a handout of activities (Laimer and Wurzenrainer 2014) that make multilingualism visible, to be used in lessons as a motivational tool for learning and to increase the status of the first languages of the participants.

4 Results and perspectives

The project has shown that exploiting multilingualism on a broader basis is seen for the most part as something positive and that a respectful atmosphere can be created in the way people behave towards each other. It has demonstrated that the emotional aspect of your own ability to express yourself in different contexts can come to the fore, and that using your first language, and your experience of being competent in it, is relevant and significant.

In conclusion, we can say that our experiences in the project have shown that multilingualism can be a resource if it is taken into account in lessons. But ideas and materials can only be a first step. Above all, it is the teachers' attitudes and their approaches towards teaching – which have to be constantly adapted to the target group – that create opportunities to exploit multilingualism for learning purposes and to experience it as a valuable part of how we deal with each other.

Linguistic diversity is a fixed part of our social reality, and it is the task of adult education in a migration society to tackle the challenges of linguistic heterogeneity in education and educational processes caused by migration and to deal constructively with multilingualism. In particular, the current refugee situation shows that multilingualism is continuing to develop and that different languages are used and needed, opening up different perspectives on migrants and their multilingual socialisation, which we still have to find ways of exploiting.

Based on what we have achieved so far, we will continue to follow these principles in our work in the form of a new project, where we go on to react to the challenges of superdiversity (e.g. Blommaert 2013; Vertovec 2007) to

focus on a subject-oriented approach, primarily to utilise existing multilingual resources and to be able to create new ones.

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