

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT:  
«DAY OF LANGUAGES»  
A MINI PROJECT OF THE FIRST ENCOUNTER OF  
MULTILINGUALISM IN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo trata de la creciente importancia del multilingüismo en la educación europea y muestra un ejemplo de ello en los colegios de primaria en Viena. Asimismo, se dan algunas ideas para que los niños tengan un primer contacto con las diferentes lenguas en las aulas.

El “Día Internacional de las Lenguas”, el 26 de septiembre, es un buen motivo para poner en práctica dicha idea. El autor presenta un marco organizativo, cuenta su experiencia acerca del proyecto de plurilingüismo e intenta adaptar su modelo a las escuelas de Gran Canaria.

*Palabras clave: educación, multilingüismo, Día Internacional de las Lenguas.*

## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the increasing importance of multilingualism in European education and gives an insight into this aspect at primary schools in Vienna. It also offers ways in how children can have a first encounter with a number of different languages and how this could be organised.

The “International Day of Languages” on September 26<sup>th</sup> can be seen as an example of good practice. The author gives an organisational frame, reports on his experiences dealing with this project of multilingualism and tries to adapt this model to primary schools in Gran Canaria.

*Key words: education, multilingualism, International Day of Languages.*

## **MULTILINGUALISM AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Languages play a fundamental role in bringing the world closer. One aim for European integration is therefore for European citizens to become multilingual.

Every EU citizen should have a good command of one foreign language and should be able to sufficiently communicate in a second foreign language. Language diversity represents the foundation of the European Language Politics.

The *International Day of Languages* is held annually on September 26<sup>th</sup> throughout Europe. The aim of this day is to encourage multilingualism and therefore projects and activities are carried out in order to achieve this.

In Austria the co-ordinator of this day is the Austrian Language Competence Centre of the Austrian Ministry of Education in Graz in the south-east of the country.

However, projects and activities should not be solely restricted to this day. It is preferable to encourage multilingualism throughout the whole academic year, however it is important not to neglect the language of instruction; i.e. German in Austria and Spanish in Gran Canaria.

This is particularly true for schools which have a high proportion of pupils whose first language is not German/Spanish.

## **REASONS FOR INCREASED DISCUSSION OF MULTILINGUALISM IN PRACTICE**

The European Union declared the focus point of 2007 to be multilingualism. A number of campaigns have been planned in order to boost multilingualism.

For many schools, particularly in urban areas (this seems to be similar in Spain, Austria and in western countries of the EU), multilingualism is a fact due to immigration. This reality presents a huge challenge for all those concerned. Some might see this fact as a burden, but it offers a number of chances for all pupils` social, intellectual and linguistic development as well. It is therefore important to use all available resources to develop positive attitudes and then pass them on to those linked with the school. Sometimes teachers are not aware of how simple it could be to take advantage of all linguistic resources they already have in their classroom or in their classroom`s social environment.

This project, “Day of Languages” could open their mind and lead to a new approach toward languages – not only for the teachers, but also for the pupils and their parents.

Multilingualism should not lead to a burden for the pupils but to enrichment in cultural abilities and create a tolerant and positive attitude toward other cultures and languages.

Moreover, the pupils will recognise that not only their own native tongue and/or the language of instruction in the classroom, and maybe their little command of English as a foreign language, can be used as a language of communication. They might also find out about a great variety of languages they have not thought of before. This could apply in particular to children with migrant background. These pupils, who are able to speak the language of instruction in the classroom up to different levels, have already gone through the different stages of acquiring another language —the host country's tongue— besides their mother tongue. They have already developed their personal model in learning another language and are familiar with different mechanisms of acquiring an additional language. They have learned that a foreign language follows different structures to the ones they are used to in their mother tongue. Most of them will not be aware of this fact, but it helps them to pick up other languages.

If the class teacher embeds these children's languages every now and then into his/her teaching, it will lead to more self-confidence for children with migrant backgrounds and could also lead to more acceptance for other languages by all other pupils. Besides, by using other languages than the one of instruction, these languages gain more value with all students. Another effect for children with migrant background could be that they become positively aware of their own language identity. Furthermore, the “circle of language hierarchy” which sometimes exists (number one: language of instruction, e.g. Spanish; number two: English; number three: migrant languages) can be broken and pupils will learn that all languages are equal and valuable. By the way, storytelling in the children's different languages can also be seen as a key to more understanding and acceptance and fosters cultural understanding as well.

## **MULTILINGUALISM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN VIENNA**

In 2006, 45,60 %<sup>1</sup> of all primary pupils in Vienna were not speakers of German (Austria on average: 18,80 %). Many of them were born in Vienna and belong to the third or even fourth generation of former migrants. Nevertheless, many of them are not able to speak German. This applies particularly to many children of Turkish communities. Very often they grow up in a kind of isolated Turkish environment and do not go to kindergarten where they could acquire some German.

Due to satellite dishes, they mainly watch Turkish programmes and listen to Turkish songs.

The Austrian government has set up a programme recently to increase the children's language abilities in German before they start school. Those children who cannot speak enough German to be able to follow classes in year one of primary education, have the chance to take courses at kindergarten.

In initial teacher training at the University of Education in Vienna and its former institution, the State College of Education, there has been an increasing number of trainees with migrant background, mainly of Turkish and former Yugoslavian origin. By employing these bilingual students after their graduation in Viennese primary schools with a high percentage of children with other first languages than German, all children in the classroom could benefit – the German native speaking ones and the ones with migrant background, as the teachers are equally familiar with both languages and cultures.

A small number of primary schools in Vienna focus on languages. These schools are called Vienna Bilingual Primary Schools (VBS; German and English), Global Education Primary (GEP; focus on English) and European Primary (focus on English and Austria's neighbouring languages in the east). Additionally, there are some smaller language projects going on, like teaching other foreign languages than English (French, Hungarian, and Spanish). A new project (DLP – Dual Language Programme) focuses on more English in primary schools by using native English speaking primary teachers who teach different groups of pupils in different schools together with the class teachers in order to intensify the input of a foreign language to pupils and teachers alike.

For migrant children whose command of German is not good enough, schools provide extra language classes in small groups. If there are a lot of children in the classroom with another native tongue than German, an additional teacher (usually one with the children's mother tongue) acts as a support teacher and teaches together with the class teacher.

Of course, there has to be a certain number of children with no or very little command of German. Children with a different mother tongue than German get classes by native speakers of their mother tongue, mainly in Turkish, Serbian and Croatian. These classes are usually held outside the classroom at school in addition to the class teacher's lessons. Seen in the light of multilingualism, these courses do not contribute to all children's understanding of speaking more than one language, as the remaining children in the classroom have no chance to listen or participate in their classmates' language.

## CONCLUSION. PRO MULTILINGUALISM IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

To avoid misunderstanding: Of course, the language of instruction in the classroom, the first language of the region in which a migrant child goes to school, should be spoken most of the time in the classroom. Some of the many reasons for using mainly Spanish in classrooms in Gran Canaria or using German in Vienna's schools are to equip migrant children with enough language input from their host country to be able to succeed in the job market and to open the doors to higher education.. Furthermore, it helps migrant pupils to integrate into the language environment they live in now. It should be obvious for the class teacher that one should value all languages in the classroom equally. It also helps to educate the children to enter into an open minded society and to value different cultures – this applies to all children, no matter which language background they have. Apart from taking advantage of all children's languages in the classroom —maybe just by saying “good morning” or using simple phrases in different languages on a regular basis— small language projects now and then could improve the pupils' understanding of each other in class and in school.

## “DAY OF LANGUAGES”. GENERAL CONSIDERATION FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In order to organise a project for learning and “deepening” a foreign language, the following points must be addressed:

- Coordination of the project.
- Timed activities, spacious classroom conditions.
- Finding available resources for language learning at the school.
- General organised framework.
- Possible commitments from sponsors.
- The integration of school partners (e.g. parents).
- Project documentation.
- Finding ways to go public (e. g. local papers; local radio station and/or TV-channel).
- Invitation of school inspectors, local politicians, etc.

Particular emphasis has to be put on the languages which are spoken by children with migrant backgrounds in the school. Teachers might also be able to speak more languages than their mother tongue. These teachers —like parents of children with migrant backgrounds— can be used as resources when it comes to introducing different languages to the children in the project.

## **“DAY OF LANGUAGES”. SOME EXPERIENCES FROM PRACTICE IN VIENNESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

I (a teacher trainer specialised in TEFL – didactics to young learners) have successfully organised a multi-lingual project four times in three different schools in the past five years. The main goal was to offer children a chance to get a first encounter with a number of different languages, which most children might not have heard before. All language contributions were not made by teachers or parents in this case but by student teachers from the State College of Education in Vienna (now University of Education) who were in the process of initial teacher training. Of particular interest were the contributions given by ERASMUS-students who spent a semester at the institution mentioned above. Through these students, it was possible to introduce a number of not so well-known languages such as Lithuanian, Estonian, and Romanian.

The students involved—all of them participated voluntarily in the project—were very keen on taking on the challenge of teaching a short sequence in a language. Many students introduced a language which is their first or second language. So the children were introduced to most of the languages by bilingual or native speakers of this particular language.

All students found it a relief that they were not graded or marked while doing their sequences, enjoyed their contributions and gained self-confidence in their teaching as well.

### **PHASE OF PREPARATION AND PLANNING**

As the “kick-off phase” of the project, the teachers involved had a meeting in which they assured full support for the project. They also expressed their willingness to help in the preparation.

The next step was to find suitable and gifted teacher trainees who wanted to participate in the Day of Languages. Particularly welcome were those who spoke more than one language up to a native like level. It was amazing to find out how many languages were available, even Farsi (the language in Iran) and German Sign Language. Of course, ERASMUS-students from different countries also participated with their native languages.

The English native language assistants who work alongside with the trainers for English at the University of Education every year, also took part in the project and taught English in the primary classroom.

In a meeting with the staff of the schools involved I set up the organisational framework for the project day. It was of significant importance to find a way in

which the children in small groups, accompanied by their teachers, could pick up the language activities provided for them.

It was of great importance in the first place to find out how many different activities given by trainees are offered and how this number goes together with the rooms available in the school and the number of children and teachers involved. Besides, the teachers had to keep an eye on the content of the activities to avoid similar sequences in a row with the same group of children. As there was an option of more than one activity in English, it was also important to distribute the children in a way that they did not have most of their sequences in English.

From experience I can say it is best if groups do not exceed 12 - 15 pupils. Usually, each year was split up in smaller groups. As a side effect of this procedure, the content of the language sequences could be adapted to the age groups. For instance, a language game could be appropriate to Year One (which means 6 year-olds in Austria) but not always for Year Four (10 year-olds), as these older children might find the game childish.

On the whole, 12 to 18 different language activities were offered; each activity presented in a different room usually by two student teachers, sometimes even three. The trainees spent the whole morning in the same room, and the children flocked around the schoolhouse from activity to activity. As one group of children could only participate in about 5 - 7 activities, the teachers of the school had set up a plan for which group should go to which language sequence.

All language sequences lasted about twenty minutes, interrupted by short breaks of ten minutes to be able to switch rooms. Of course, there was a longer break in the morning as well in which typical snacks and/or drinks parents had prepared from some of the different involved countries.

Although the teachers did not actually teach that morning, they had lots of work in the preparation of the project, like designing and contributing invitation cards (to parents as well), making decorations in the schoolhouse dealing with this particular day, working together with parents involved in the buffet, preparing the children beforehand with what to do and to expect and —last but not least— to evaluate and to take advantage of the Day of Languages on the following days in class.

After all details had been fixed, I had several meetings with the student teachers involved to help them in their planning. As the students did their activities 5 to 7 times with different groups, they had the chance, due to their experience, to adapt their planning on the spot if necessary.

**PROGRAMME OF SEPTEMBER 25<sup>TH</sup> 2006 (EXAMPLE FROM THE ATTACHED PRIMARY SCHOOL TO THE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION; VIENNA) – “LOTS OF LANGUAGES –LOTS OF FRIENDS”**

Languages/activities:

1. *English* – “Movement Chant”.
2. *Turkish* – Introducing each other; introducing to getting to know each other.
3. *English* – A song/a dance.
4. *Serbian/Croatian* – Numbers, colours, greeting each other.
5. *French* – A very simple ghost story.
6. *French* – “Une chanson”.
7. *English* – “Storytelling” – The Very Hungry Caterpillar.
8. *Book Corner* – The children had the chance to browse through books in different languages and play simple board games/card games with some trainees.
9. *Romanian* – “Getting in touch with Romanian”.
10. *Spanish* – “Los Colores” (including a very simple song).
11. *Estonian* – Greeting each other; Introducing yourself.
12. *English* – “Storytelling” – “Mimi, the Goose” (a story some students had written themselves).
13. *Dutch* – some simple language games.
14. *Polish* – A simple song focusing on RED.
15. *Czech* – A simple song with movements about a dog.
16. *Finnish* – A dance/song.
17. *Lithuanian* – A dance (one student played the piano).
18. *Swedish* – A simple song with movements.

Schedule:

8.10: Assembly: Greeting by the head teacher; all children sang two songs together. They had prepared these songs with their class teacher days before.

8.40 – 9.00: 1<sup>st</sup> sequence.

9.10 – 9.30: 2<sup>nd</sup> sequence.

9.30 – 10.10: Break with buffet, organised by parents.

10.10 – 10.30: 3<sup>rd</sup> sequence.

10.40 – 11.00: 4<sup>th</sup> sequence.

11.10 – 11.30: 5<sup>th</sup> sequence.

11.45 – 12.15: Assembly; short presentation of outstanding and/or very popular contributions by the student teachers, so more children could get involved (e.g. a simple dance everybody could move and speak/sing to).

The trainees involved got a certificate of attendance and a thank you letter from the school/from the children.

## FEEDBACK AND SUMMARY

The general feedback by pupils, trainees, teachers and parents alike was very positive, sometimes even overwhelmingly so.

The trainees found their experiences of particular value as they opened their eyes and led to new perspectives and insights. In addition, they gained self-confidence in their teaching.

They found it of particular importance that they could present one activity several times to different groups. This procedure helped them to adapt their sequences to the needs of the pupils involved and raised their standard in methodology.

Furthermore, the trainees were not under pressure by mentor teachers, as there was no marking or grading of their teaching in class. Because of this, they could work without the stress they are usually under in their teaching practice.

A number of students approached me right after the Days of Languages and applied to participate in the next one. On the whole about 40 student teacher students were actively involved on each project day.

The teachers from the schools engaged in the project were very pleased with the trainees' work in the classroom, but also with the children's participation and enthusiasm for languages.

Almost all children asked for an additional Day of Languages at their school in the near future.

By including parents in the project, the positive link between the school and the parents became stronger.

Reports on the project in the local papers drew a very positive image of the schools involved.

The press and everything dealing with public relations need one person at school who is responsible to set up contacts and to keep in touch with the media.

The implementation of sponsors consolidates already established links or creates new ones.

## **ADAPTATION**

It is obvious that the project mentioned above —due to particular resources, e.g. student teachers— cannot be copied one to one in average primary schools. Nevertheless, the frame work and the phases of the planning of the project can be adapted to the needs of primary schools if there is enough potential in multilingualism. Teachers and parents who are able to speak foreign languages and pupils (and their parents) with migrant background could act as resources for the first encounter with other languages.

Why should not children with other first languages than the language of instruction in the classroom prepare an activity in their mother tongue, helped by the class teacher and act as a language teacher to all the children in his/her class?

As all Canary Islands are tourist destinations, the children in the islands will be confronted with a lot of different languages. It might be particularly interesting to check language resources one can find on Gran Canaria. Apart from English as the lingua franca and the first foreign language on the island, there are other languages like German, Dutch, French and a number of Scandinavian languages. By introducing these languages to the children, schools could provide some basic knowledge in different languages which the pupils might take advantage of when they have grown up.

The main goal of the first encounter with other languages should not be put on language acquisition in the first place, but preliminary foster the development of tolerance for and understanding of other languages and cultures. To achieve this objective, one has to start within a natural way in primary education. Through projects of multilingualism schools in general can contribute to the European integration and to the understanding of people and nations worldwide.

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## NOTES

- 1 Statistics Austria, 2006.