

EDUCAÇÃO E FORMAÇÃO

Developing Multilingual Competence in
Academia: Teaching German as L3 to
Polish Students of English Department

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of developing multilingual competence in academia on the example of teaching German as L3 to students of English Philology in Poland. A thesis is put forward that despite a serious risk of negative transfer from L2 (English), instructors of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) in tertiary educational settings can largely benefit from resorting to students' linguistic competence and learning strategies developed during L2 instruction. Pedagogical implications and teaching suggestions presented in the paper result from the author's experience of teaching GFL to undergraduate students of English Department at one of the Polish universities.

1. Introduction

The nature of English as a contemporary 'lingua franca' and the most frequently taught Second Language (L2) worldwide (cf. inter alia: Beneke 1991; Crystal 1997; Gnutzmann 2000;; Jenkins 2002; Seidlhofer 2004; Grucza & Wiśniewski 2005; Benesch 2008) may provide some interesting insights into the methodology of teaching other foreign languages (L3s). Growing importance of English also in the tertiary educational settings in the countries classified by Kachru (1992) as the members of the 'expanding circle', whose educational systems have traditionally been based on their mother tongue (cf. Swales 2004; Graddol 2006; Hyland 2006), causes that English is mostly taught as L2, whereas other internationally recognized foreign languages, like Spanish, French or German, are only taught as L3. As a consequence, L3 learning usually begins later and is seemingly bound to be less intensive and often fails to produce as advanced command of L3 as in the case of L2. For instance, in Poland obligatory English as L2 teaching commences already in the first year of primary schooling, whereas L3 teaching is introduced in junior high school, i.e. only in the seventh year of compulsory education. Also at the tertiary level of education Polish students usually choose to study other foreign languages after achieving a minimum level of B-2 or C-1²⁹ in English. Nevertheless, the domination of ESL teaching should be treated as a challenge rather than a threat to L3 teaching.

The paper is an attempt at providing some evidence for the assumption that simultaneous teaching of several foreign languages is a desirable phenomenon and thus L3 teaching should refer to earlier-utilized linguistic competence of L2, as well as to learning strategies developed during L2 instruction. Pedagogical implications and teaching suggestions presented in this paper result from my observations made in the group of 15 Polish second-year students of English Philology undergraduate studies at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, who were learning German as their L3. On commencing the German course, the students had already reached the level between Advanced and Proficiency in English as a Second Language (i.e. minimum C-1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR), whereas they represented approximately the Intermediate level (i.e. B-1 in CEFR) in German language. The 30-hour German course, which I conducted, embraced not only language development but also selected elements of German history and culture. The course lasted one semester and the 90-minute classes took place once a week. The students were young adults (approx. 20 years of age) and they were experienced language learners with well-developed learning strategies, competent both in L1 (Polish) and L2 (English), and open to cultures of other nations.

The discussed group seemed to generate optimal conditions for teaching and learning L3. However, the fact that students committed numerous errors in L3 and outwardly pointed out to some

²⁹ According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) - cf. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. (2001). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

difficulties in L3 learning called for further investigation of whether L3 teaching should possibly require a completely different, or at least an alternative approach to that of a second language teaching.

2. Research on multilingualism

Multilingualism, broadly understood as the ability to communicate in several languages effectively, possesses its irrefutable advantages. Paradowski (2010) argues that polyglots, as opposed to monolinguals, generally have been demonstrated to:

- have a keener awareness and sharper perception of language (...);
- be more capable of separating meaning from form;
- learn more rapidly in their native language (L1), e.g. to read, as well as display improved performance in other basic L1 skills, regardless of race, gender, or academic level;
- be more efficient communicators in L1;
- be consistently better able to deal with distractions, which may help offset age-related declines in mental dexterity;
- develop a markedly better language proficiency in, sensitivity to, and understanding of their mother tongue;
- develop a greater vocabulary size over age, including that in their L1;
- have a better ear for listening and sharper memories;
- be better language learners in institutionalized learning contexts because of more developed language-learning capacities owing to the more complex linguistic knowledge and higher language awareness;
- have increased ability to apply more reading strategies effectively due to their greater experience in language learning and reading in two – or more – different languages;
- develop not only better verbal, but also spatial abilities;
- parcel up and categorize meanings in different ways;
- display generally greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher-order thinking skills;
- have a stereoscopic vision of the world from two or more perspectives, enabling them to be more flexible in their thinking (...);
- be able to expand their personal horizons and – being simultaneously insiders and outsiders – to see their own culture from a new perspective not available to monoglots, enabling the comparison, contrast, and understanding of cultural concepts;
- be better problem-solvers gaining multiple perspectives on issues at hand;
- have improved critical thinking abilities;
- understand and appreciate people of other countries better, thereby lessening racism, xenophobia, and intolerance, as the learning of a new language usually brings with it a revelation of a new culture;

- learn further languages more quickly and efficiently than their hitherto monolingual peers;
- possess more social and employment advantages (...) offering the student the ability to communicate with people that they would otherwise not have the chance to interact with, and increasing job opportunities in many careers (Paradowski 2010).

Learning and use of several foreign languages differs from bilingualism (cf. Cenoz & Genesee 1998). As Lado points out, in the case of the latter, similarities and differences between mother tongue and second / foreign language are of crucial importance:

"The most important factor determining ease and difficulty learning the patterns of foreign language is their similarity to or difference from the patterns of native language." (Lado 1964:91)

In the analysis of multilingualism, another stance should be adopted as it has been proven by numerous studies in psycholinguistics (e.g Swain 1996; Cenoz & Genesee 1998; Cenoz et al. 2001; Cenoz & Jessner 2000). The specificity of multilingual teaching, so significantly different from the processes characteristic for bilingualism, calls for the application of the so-called Interlanguage Hypothesis which relates to psycholinguistic processes and assumes not only the importance of the mother tongue but also the role of other languages (cf. Kasper 1995; Vogel 1990).

Learning foreign languages requires some effort in developing and sustaining multilingual competence (Herdina & Jessner 2000), and also in controlling the use of those languages, i.e. the selection of a proper system depending on the communicative situation that language user finds himself/herself in (Kujalowicz 2005:94). In the case of the analyzed group, for instance, speaking German after several hours of exposure and intensive use of English in preceding lectures and classes caused serious problems with 'switching languages', especially at the initial stages of each German class. Despite the fact that the analyzed group consisted of highly motivated students with excellent language aptitude, the participants of the experiment frequently signaled that learning two foreign languages simultaneously seemed to be an arduous task and the character of their studies (i.e. a major in English philology and a minor in Germanic philology) demanded a considerable effort.

Multilingual learners are often affected by cross-linguistic interactions. The phenomenon of language transfer can be particularly observable among learners with advanced or proficient command of L2 (cf. Ringbom 2001) and it manifests itself essentially in the case of languages belonging to the same language group, like, for instance, English and German. In the case of the observed group, a positive or negative transfer (interference) from English to German occurred more frequently than a positive transfer or interference from students' native language (Polish), which seems to prove the postulate of Hammarberg (2001) that a transfer usually occurs between foreign language systems.

3. Pedagogical implications of multilingualism

Some pedagogical implications stem from the phenomenon of multilingualism as it may be assumed that L2 seriously affects the acquisition and L3 learning. Therefore, L3 instructors should take advantage of the fact that their students are multilingual, since such learners apparently possess higher language awareness. Therefore, referring to their mother tongue as well as to L2 is a purely natural process for them. Furthermore, multilingual learners are more interested in comparing different languages. Hence, the L3 teacher may additionally resort to a contrastive analysis in the teaching / learning process.

As early as during even the first meeting of L3 course, the instructor can use the so-called 'hidden resources' and take advantage of what the learners already know. In the domain of lexis, the teacher may try to elicit the meaning of such lexical items as internationalisms, loan words and 'true friends' (cognates), i.e. lexical items which have a similar meaning, spelling and pronunciation in two language systems. Already in this stage it may be assumed that the students' knowledge, especially in the case of students learning languages from similar language groups, may occur to be substantial.

The following lexical examples illustrate (and seem to prove) the above assumption:

- Internationalisms: e.g. radio, information, internet, philosophy, objective etc.
- Loan words, for instance:

German loan words in English, e.g. kindergarten, kitschy, leitmotiv, poltergeist, rucksack, sauerkraut, waltz, wunderkind

English words in German, e.g.: das Baby, das Business, der Drink, der Job, die Lobby, das Meeting, das Hobby, die Jeans, der Workshop

- Cognates, e.g. eng. active/ ger. aktiv, eng. arm/ ger. der Arm, eng. bitter/ ger. bitter, eng. blind/ ger. blind, eng. finger/ ger. der Finger, eng. frost/ ger. der Frost, eng. gold/ ger. das Gold, eng. hammer/ ger. der Hammer

Not only vocabulary but also a priori knowledge of grammatical system of second language / other foreign languages can be beneficial for learning L3. The students eagerly compare and contrast various grammatical phenomena occurring in two foreign languages, thus trying to find parallels between both systems. The following examples illustrate selected parallels between English and German grammar:

- Basic verb forms / irregular verbs, e.g.:
begin – began – begun / beginnen – begann – begonnen
fall – fell - fallen / fallen – fiel – gefallen
- The structure of Present Perfect Tense and German Perfekt (auxiliary verb + Past Participle), e.g.:
She has bought a computer. – Sie hat einen Computer gekauft.
- The structure of Future and Future Perfect tenses, e.g.:
I will go. – Ich werde gehen.
I will have gone. - Ich werde gegangen sein.
- Infinitive with "to", e.g.:
I am able to answer. – Ich bin im Stande zu antworten.
- Modal verbs, e.g.:
I can – Ich kann; I should – Ich soll; I must – Ich muss
- Present Participle – Das Partizip Präsens, e.g.:
sleeping – schlafend; working – arbeitend
- Pronoun "it" – "es", e.g.:

It is warm. – Es ist warm.

- Gradation of adjectives, e.g.:
old – older – (the) oldest; alt – alter – der/die/das älteste
good – better - (the) best; gut – besser – der/die/das beste

The bonds between L2 and L3, often nonexistent between L1 and L3, may considerably strengthen students' language awareness. Not only parallels, but also contrasts between L2 and L3 may help to develop the command of L3. What seems to be a frequent and undesired phenomenon during L3 instruction is the occurrence of the so-called 'false friends' in the learners' utterances as a result of negative transfer between the languages. In order to avoid such errors in students' L3 repertoire, it is worthwhile to draw their attention to the most common 'false friends', like the following examples related to English and German:

- gift – das Gift (poison)
- actual - aktuell (current)
- also - also (so, thus, therefore)
- to blame - sich blamieren (to embarrass)
- brief - der Brief (letter)
- fast - fast (almost)
- handy – das Handy (cell phone)
- bald – bald (soon)
- brave – brav (well-behaved)
- eagle – der Igel (hedgehog)
- high-school – die Hochschule (college, university)
- ordinary – ordinär (vulgar)

The possibility to compare and contrast foreign languages in various perspectives of their linguistic systems may considerably increase the effectiveness of teaching / learning those languages. In the case of L3 instruction, not only the lexical and grammatical competence of L2, but also well-developed learning strategies and the ability to cope with foreign language contexts may be beneficial. The opportunity to use analogies between languages allows L3 students to develop reading comprehension skills better. Multilingual students also find it easier to develop listening comprehension skills as they possess well-trained strategies of focusing on key information, which they must have acquired well in the process of L2 learning. What is more, students of L3 are more skillful in resorting to their language resources (e.g. description or synonyms) and thus they can handle verbal communication related to various subjects, not only everyday situation contexts. For instance, in the case of the analyzed group, the students were able to express their thoughts and opinions on the subjects like the life in medieval times, Reformation in Germany, absolutism in Europe, multicultural aspects etc. Participation in such discussions requires not only the specialist knowledge on the subject matter but also advanced linguistic competence.

Another serious problem, which seems to be very difficult to solve, is a strong impact (interference) of L2 on the pronunciation, rhythm and intonation in L3. In order to avoid the appearance of fossilized

errors in pronunciation, a particular attention must be paid to negative transfer from L2 to L3 already from the first lessons. What is more, intensifying phonetic practice seems to be absolutely necessary, for instance, by means of introducing contrastive analysis exercises illustrating the differences between L2 and L3. It is important to point out here again that it is not the students' mother tongue but rather L2 that constitutes the main source of errors induced by negative transfer, especially if L2 and L3 belong to the same language group. Typical pronunciation errors in German as L3 caused by the negative transfer from English as L2 include the following typical (and frequently occurring) examples:

1. Intonation

- rising instead of falling intonation in German affirmative sentences, e.g. Global rise (*Das weiss ich nicht. ↗) instead of global fall. (Das weiss ich nicht. ↘)

2. Pronunciation

Vowels:

- A: an open /a/, a German short /a/, e.g. 'der Kamm' instead of [kʰam] realized as: /æ/, an open, slightly 'dark' /a/ between a and ä /ɛ/ *[kʰæm] or a 'dark' /a/, e.g. *[kʰɑ:m]
- E: a German closed /e/, e.g. 'das Beet' instead of [be:t] realized as a (closed) /i/ *[bi:t]
- I: a (closed) /i/ (e.g. 'die Miete' ['mi:tə]) realized as an open /i/ *['mitə])
- O: a German /o/ (a „closed“ /o/), e.g. 'das Boot' [bo:t] realized as an open /u/ *[but]
- U: an open /u/, e.g. *und* [ʔunt] realized as *[ænt]) and a German long /u/, e.g. 'das Buch' [bu:x] realized as a German short /u/ *[bux]

Consonants:

- B: when a German consonant /b/ appears at the end of a word it is pronounced as a voiced /b/ instead of a voiceless /p/ (e.g. 'das Lob' [lo:p] realized as *[lo:b])
- D: when a German consonant /d/ appears at the end of a word it is pronounced instead of a voiceless /t/ as a voiced /d/ (e.g. 'das Lied' instead of ['li:t] realized as *['li:d])
- L: using 'dark' /l/ instead of regular /l/, e.g. German /l/ in a word 'die Latte' ['latə] realized as an English 'dark' /l/ in *['latə]
- R: a German /r/ (e.g. 'die Ratte' ['ratə] realized as a 'dark' /r/ in English *['ratə]
- W: a German /w/ (e.g. 'der Wind' [vɪnt]) realized as an English /w/; *[wɪnd])
- CH: not pronouncing a soft /ch/, i.e. substituting the realization of [ç] with [x] or [k] (e.g. instead of 'ich' [ɪç] realized as *[ɪx] or *[ɪk] or suffix -ig [richtig]). A German /ch/ is pronounced in the back of a throat (e.g. 'der Bach' [bax] realized as *[bak]). Many speakers of English mistakenly articulate the sound as a /k/ phoneme, and thus mispronounce the German word 'doch' as if it were *'dock', and 'ich' as if it were *'ick'.

What seems to be equally problematic, also at the Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate level of teaching L3, is the spelling. Despite the fact that the reform of German orthography in 1998 slightly simplified some rules, the learners of German as L3 find it difficult to fully adjust to a proper spelling in this language. For instance, such students tend to omit or substitute the mute 'h' (the so-called 'Dehnungs h', which prolongs the subsequent vowel), e.g. 'die Wahl' frequently spelt as *'Wachl'.

The sources of such errors are twofold: firstly, lower exposure to the written word in L3 and, secondly, ignoring relationships between spelling and pronunciation in German (as it was mentioned earlier in this paper). German pronunciation is probably the biggest weakness of (not only Polish) learners who already know English as L2.

4. Conclusions

The fact that multilingualism has recently become a popular phenomenon worldwide should be definitely reflected both in pedagogical models, methods and materials related to foreign language teaching. It would certainly be beneficial for L3 learners to be instructed also in relation to their knowledge of L2, usually English in the era referred to by Phillipson (1992) as a 'linguistic imperialism' of the English language.

Lamentably, the authors of foreign language teaching course-books who seem to notice the opportunities resulting from taking advantage of parallels between L2 and L3 are still in minority (cf. Wille & Wawrzyniak 2001). Although foreign language teaching materials (for instance, related to teaching German as a Foreign Language) published recently try to use internationalisms in the initial stages of vocabulary instruction, they still fail to resort to other ways of exploiting similarities and differences between English (or any other L2, not to mention L1) and languages usually taught as L3.

Multilingualism is also a difficult challenge for L3 teachers. It might be beneficial for L3 learners if their teachers possessed suitable linguistic competences allowing them to take advantage of comparing and contrasting L2 and L3, and thus also pointing out to the pitfalls of negative transfer (language interference) (cf. also: Kleparski & Pietrzykowska 2001).

Multilingualism of learners, which seems to be an absolutely desirable phenomenon in the light of dynamic globalization processes, also calls for the reformulation of principles of foreign language teacher training (cf. also: Wilczyńska & Michońska-Stadnik 2010:20ff). Promoting multilingualism among students of philology will definitely help in broadening their linguistic sensitivity and cross-cultural awareness.

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