Pluralistic approaches – A long overdue paradigm shift in education

Maria Giselbrecht

Pluralistic approaches are educational concepts which acknowledge the value of linguistic and cultural diversity. According to these approaches the learning of all languages and cultures should be fostered in education. This applies to popular languages and cultures as well as to languages and cultures that are stigmatised or those perceived by some as being 'low-prestige'.

New demands on education

In recent years, social structures in Europe have developed towards an increasingly multicultural population. Within the last few decades, political and economic changes towards globalisation and the extension of markets have resulted in considerable social shifts. With the establishment of the EU, the intensity of the migratory movement has greatly augmented. Consequently, the need to prepare the next generations of European citizens for living and working in a Europe beyond national boundaries has emerged as a new educational challenge. Since its foundation, the European Union has encouraged migratory movements for the benefit of labour mobility and flexibility on the employment market. Fennes and Hapgood (1997: 1) argue in this connection that crossing physical borders has become fairly easy since the EU has facilitated the migratory movement with the removal of most border controls. However, crossing cultural borders requires greater effort**.**

One of the results of the wider market place is that people are confronted with increased cultural variety in their professional and social lives. According to Fennes and Hapgood, this rise in socio-cultural diversity entails a number of duties and responsibilities for European citizens. They argue that coping strategies, such as confronting social and cultural differences, understanding prejudices, recognizing stereotypes and finding ways to communicate across cultural borders have begun to play an essential role in the negotiation of daily routines in an increasingly multicultural society. It follows from these claims that the age of globalisation has posed a new set of challenges to education. To cope with the great number of socio-cultural differences and face the challenge of life in new multicultural surroundings individuals need to be prepared for cultural and social changes. It follows that future generations will increasingly require effective intercultural education in order to live successfully in this multicultural European society. A change in attitude towards cultural tolerance and openness, the establishment of pluralistic views and an intercultural understanding of a multicultural social environment have to be considered in education. Pluralistic approaches to teaching represent both an innovative and effective answer to the question of how to confront the new educational requirements of a multicultural Europe.

Pluralistic approaches: The value of diversity

Pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures are democratic concepts which acknowledge the right to diversity of all linguistic and cultural varieties. Pluralistic concepts support attitudes of openness, tolerance and understanding towards the cultures, social structures and values of other communities and thus argue in favour of linguistic and cultural diversity in society. In the context of education, pluralistic ideas can be put into practice by the development of a global view of learning and teaching of language and culture. Candelier et al (2007: 8) argue that this includes "the teaching and learning of ALL languages [and cultures], in order to profit from their potential for synergy".

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence represents a key ability in the concept of pluralistic approaches. According to the CEFR[1] (Common European Framework of Reference), this competence can be defined as follows:

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw. (Council of Europe 2001: 168)

A salient characteristic of the pluralistic concept is, according to this definition, the fact that linguistic and cultural capacities of a person can vary according to the different languages and cultures in which he/she operates. In other words, the mastering of linguistic and cultural competences is not the ultimate goal of the pluralistic idea. The acceptance of a varying level of performance according to differing fields of knowledge, which are activated in different linguistic and cultural situations, provides a new approach to the field of mainstream education. According to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001:168), the customary approach is to regard the learning of a foreign language as an addition to the competence of communicating in the mother tongue. By contrast to this traditional view, the plurilingual and pluricultural concept focuses on connections, similarities and differences between all languages and cultures available to a given individual. The ability to mediate between different languages and cultures with the aid of all linguistic and cultural information and experience available to an individual- however incomplete it may be- is important. Thus, the compartmentalised way in which language learning has formerly been perceived is no longer valid. Instead, the notion of plurilingual and pluricultural competence focuses on the entire pool of linguistic and cultural knowledge accessible to the individual. This means that a shift of paradigm is created by acknowledging the

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[1] http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp

existence of a multiple linguistic and cultural competence instead of focusing on various separate abilities.

From theory to practice: Implementing pluralistic approaches

Recognizing the value of diversity and fostering the development of plurilingual and pluricultural skills represent essential steps to meet the new educational demands of multicultural learner groups. To take these steps, concrete strategies have to be devised to implement pluralistic approaches in schools. Ideally, the implementation of pluralistic concepts should be approached in various areas. Several areas where I consider pluralistic reforms most useful are presented below:

1.1 Teacher training

Teacher training can facilitate the introduction of new trends in education and a course on pluralistic approaches could thus form an integral part of the initial teacher education syllabus. The ECML (European Centre for Modern Languages) has devised several projects which can be used to this end. Workshops and courses which are based on these projects should be an essential part of teacher training. Future teachers should participate in these courses. They would be introduced to pluralistic concepts and could apply these concepts in class. This could be done by developing lesson plans and tasks which focus on pluralistic learning. The ECML projects can serve as examples as they feature activities and materials which illustrate how pluralistic approaches can be put into practice. In my view it would be useful if student teachers could devise further materials in this area. This would consolidate their knowledge of pluralistic approaches and show them how to implement them in their teaching. In the language classroom, especially, it is easy to draw comparisons with other languages or establish relationships with other cultures. This should be practiced in teacher training so that student teachers gain confidence in pluralistic teaching and apply it later on in class.

1.2 Teaching materials

Teaching materials which support pluralistic approaches must be accessible to teachers. Such materials are included in most ECML projects which deal with pluralistic approaches. These activities can be applied regularly in addition to the textbooks which are used by the schools. Naturally it would be ideal to use textbooks which support pluralistic concepts. Since these concepts are very new they will not be included in most current textbooks. Therefore it is recommendable that teachers have access to additional materials. These materials can be found in various ECML brochures, such as LEA, ICCinTE, Gulliver, Ja-Ling, CoCoCoP, etc[2].

The internet, in general, represents a valuable source for pluralistic learning materials. Pluralistic concepts are relatively new in education which is the reason why only few teaching materials

[2] all brochures are available online under www.ecml.at

are available in printed form so far. New trends in teaching, such as pluralistic approaches, are therefore easier accessible via internet. There are several internet websites featuring information and activities which support pluralistic approaches[3].

Although most current textbooks have not yet included pluralistic concepts, there are textbooks available which focus exclusively on pluralistic learning. A good example is Huber Kriegler, Lázár and Strange's published intercultural communication textbook Mirrors and windows, which aims at training intercultural communicative competence. Activities from Mirrors and windows could be used in addition to other teaching materials and thus provide students with excellent pluralistic learning opportunities. An electronic version of Mirrors and windows can also be downloaded from the internet[4] .

To sum up, there are various sources which can be used to foster pluralistic concepts in teaching. Most of these sources are easily accessible to teachers. This means that it lies in the hands of the teachers to promote pluralistic competences in class, and make use of the above presented sources. Certainly, it would be helpful if the current textbooks used in schools featured pluralistic activities. However, the incorporation of new principles into textbooks needs time. Therefore, it would be recommendable to use additional teaching materials to train pluralistic competences until textbooks are updated in this area.

1.3 Authentic intercultural contact

Using pluralistic approaches in teaching is very important for the development of plurilingual and pluricultural skills. However, I believe that activities which foster pluralistic learning on the level of imagination are not sufficient. Activities such as simulations, role plays, or tasks which focus on intercultural aspects or draw pluralistic comparisons are important for pluralistic learning. Yet, they only represent the beginning of this learning process since pluralistic knowledge, skills and attitudes are only trained on an imaginary level. This means that students learn to establish pluralistic perspectives but cannot put their knowledge into practice in the real world.

Thus, pluralistic learning could appear to be of little use in reality, unless students have

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[3] The following websites are especially recommendable:

> http://jaling.ecml.at/
> http://www.language-investigator.co.uk/index.htm
> http://wilderdom.com/games/MulticulturalExperientialActivities.htm
> http://www.eslflow.com/interculturalcommunication.html

[4] http://www.ecml.at/documents/pub123aE2003_HuberKriegler.pdf

opportunities to put their plurilingual and pluricultural competences into practice. In my opinion students should be given these opportunities and experience authentic intercultural contacts. In this way, they can make use of their pluralistic skill and extend their plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire.

There are various ways in which students could put their pluralistic skills into practice in the real world. In an age of communication it is easy to establish contacts across cultural borders. The internet provides countless opportunities to communicate with partner institutions worldwide. ECML projects such as Gulliver[5] (Bedynska et al 2007 [online]) illustrate how such contacts can be established. Within the Gulliver project, an intercultural internet forum was established. On this forum, a network of language classes between different European countries was created. Moreover, materials and lesson plans for classes in the forum were devised by the project coordinators, and are available online**.** Thus, the Gulliver project provides an excellent opportunity for authentic intercultural contact and pluralistic learning.

There are countless other possibilities to create similar intercultural encounters. Encouraging students to correspond with pen friends, student exchange programmes and school trips to other countries represent other forms of authentic intercultural experiences. Pen friendships are easy to establish and can increase students' motivation for language learning considerably. In addition, intercultural competence is fostered in the correspondence with pen friends. Therefore, this easy way of pluralistic learning should be embraced in language and culture classes. Student exchange programmes and school trips are more complex in terms of organisation and preparation. However, they represent excellent opportunities for authentic intercultural experience. Pluralistic attitudes such as openness and curiosity towards other languages and cultures are fostered. What is more, students can see the benefits of intercultural learning in school as they get opportunities to apply the theoretical input and "fictitious" tasks in the real world. In other words**,** simulations and role plays should be set up in an authentic way, i.e. using real life situations or materials. However, real 'live' intercultural experiences can leave a far deeper impression on students' attitudes towards other languages and cultures. Therefore, students should be given the opportunity to experience such encounters.

In this connection, it is important that these intercultural encounters also feature languages outside the curriculum and cultures that some perceive as having 'low-prestige' status. In other words, intercultural contact should not be restricted to popular countries such as the UK, France or Italy, but also include countries like Poland, Bulgaria or Hungary. In this way the pluralistic principle of promoting the teaching and learning of all languages and cultures should be conveyed. This does not mean that school trips and student exchange programmes should no longer take place in countries whose language is taught within the curriculum. On the contrary, intercultural contact with countries where the target language of education is spoken is

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[5] http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/Gulliver/results/en/index.htm

necessary and important. These intercultural experiences can enhance foreign language learning considerably and increase students' motivation to language learning in general. However, intercultural encounters with target cultures of education could become even more rewarding experiences if the students who took part in these encounters were from different countries. In my view, the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence could be supported if the groups of learners were heterogeneous in terms of language and culture. School trips to the UK could be organised for instance in collaboration with partner schools from other European countries. If the learner groups are mixed, English might be used as common language of communication. In this way, students would have the opportunity to experience life in the UK together with their peers from different countries. Thus, intercultural learning about target languages and cultures in the curriculum is combined with intercultural learning about languages and cultures outside the curriculum. The shared experience of a school trip could form a basis for friendships and further intercultural contact. Furthermore, this way of organising school trips in multicultural learner groups could also prevent the students from communicating in their mother tongues, which represents a major obstacle to the learning benefit from these trips.

1.4 Educational reforms

In my view, an implementation of pluralistic approaches into teaching on a long-term basis can only take place if educational reforms create better opportunities for pluralistic learning. Many curricula of EU member states already feature pluralistic concerns such as intercultural education. However, these concerns are often only addressed in theory while neglected in practice. To promote pluralistic concepts and foster their implementation in teaching, concrete measures have to be taken. In the following section, some ideas for the implementation of pluralistic approaches are discussed. These ideas are mainly based on observations from the current Austrian education system. There are several aspects in the Austrian education system which should be reformed to support the implementation of pluralistic approaches:

1.4.1 Intercultural education as a new subject

If intercultural training and pluralistic learning are to be implemented into the Austrian education system, it has to be done on a nationwide level. This means that intercultural education has to be introduced as a new subject. This subject needs to be implemented in all **Austria** schools, and ideally in other European countries as well. As a matter of fact, intercultural education has already been introduced on a nationwide level in Greece. Damanakis (2005: 81 [online][6]) reports in this connection that a new law was passed in 1996, which "designated the aim of 'intercultural education' for repatriated and foreign pupils, and legislated for the foundation of 'Intercultural Education Schools' with a curriculum adapted to the educational

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[6] http://www.wwwords.co.uk/pdf/validate.asp?j=eerj&vol=4&issue=1&year=2005&article=7_Damanakis_EERJ_4_1_web

needs of these pupils." A secretariat for Intercultural Education was founded within the Greek Ministry of Education to develop intercultural education policies for these Intercultural Education schools and for the general curriculum.

In Austria, intercultural education was integrated into the curriculum in 1992. According to the report of COMPENDIUM (Cultural trends and policies and trends in Europe, Council of Europe 2009 [online][7]), "intercultural learning has been anchored in the curricula of the various types of schools, both as a teaching principle and as a general educational objective. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (BMUKK) is responsible for this area." However, the report states that the practical implementation of this teaching principle depends on the commitment of individual teachers. As a consequence, intercultural education is often marginalised. For this reason, the implementation of intercultural education as an independent subject represents a necessary educational reform. In this subject, intercultural competences, as well as plurilingual and pluricultural knowledge, skills and attitudes could be fostered. Thus, pluralistic approaches should become part of the everyday life of schools in Austria and create positive attitudes towards diversity among the young generations of European citizens.

1.4.2 Religious education

Religious education represents another area where reforms are necessary to make a pluralistic view of cultural diversity possible. In Austrian schools, the laws which define the policies of religious education go back to 1949. According to these laws, religious education is obligatory for all students who are members of a legally recognised church. Most Austrian schools only offer classes for Roman- Catholic, Protestant and sometimes Islamic confessions, while students of other religious communities are marginalised.

To prevent this marginalisation, religious education has to be reformed. This could be done by introducing religion classes which focus on all world religions. These classes should present various belief systems and provide a pluralistic perspective on major religious groups. All students could participate and gain an overview **over** different religious communities. These classes should introduce students to different confessions in a neutral way. In other words, no religion should be given preference over the other. Students should learn about different religious communities and develop critical viewpoints. However, they should not be influenced towards adopting particular religious views. These religion classes could be held by different teachers or representatives of the various communities. Thus, a global view of different belief systems could be conveyed, and openness, tolerance and mutual understanding would be fostered.

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[7] http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/austria.php?aid=832

Another way of reforming religious education would be the introduction of ethics classes as an alternative to the subject religion. This means that students could decide whether to attend religion or ethics classes. This system has already been introduced in several Austrian schools, but not yet found acceptance on a national level. Ethics classes should approach moral issues, value systems, worldviews etc. Students should be confronted with different moral systems, discuss various worldviews and analyse values and beliefs of different societies. Thus, a pluralistic perspective on ethics could be established which would enable students to widen their horizons towards ethical differences. As a result, pluralistic attitudes of tolerance and openness towards diversity could be fostered. In my view, this alternative of religious education should be introduced in all Austrian schools.

1.4.3 Mother tongue education

Mother tongue education refers to the education of migrant students in their respective mother tongues. According to the UNESCO [online][8] "Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language." This illustrates the importance of fostering students' mother tongues, especially in the beginning of education. Teaching migrant languages supports the pluralistic principle of promoting the learning of all languages and cultures. To put this principle into practice, mother tongue education should be introduced in Austrian schools. This idea might appear unrealistic given that migrant students often come from a number of different backgrounds and it seems difficult to provide teaching facilities for all languages spoken by the students.

However, CILT devised a practical solution to this problem in the UK. CILT is an institution which "aims to promote a greater capability in languages in the UK. (…)By 'languages' we [the members of CILT] understand all languages other than English and including the intercultural competence associated with them." (CILT 2009 [online][9]) This quotation shows that CILT supports the pluralistic concept of fostering minority language learning. CILT developed the "Our Languages" programme to provide migrant students with better opportunities to receive education in their mother tongues. "Our Languages" focuses on the promotion of community language learning and teaching through partnerships between supplementary and mainstream schools. Supplementary schools are institutions which are organised by migrant parents who want to complement the mainstream education of their children. These institutions aim at the children's education in their community language, offer religion and culture classes as well as additional services such as study support. The schools are staffed by tutors and volunteers from the communities, who teach the children on weekends or in the evenings. According to CILT,

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[8] http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=20263&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[9] http://www.cilt.org.uk/home.aspx

there are a number of such supplementary schools in England:

Supplementary schools are run by almost every ethnic community group in England including African Caribbean, Afghan, Somali, Greek, Jewish, Turkish, Russian and Iranian. They offer children support in national curriculum subjects, as well as the opportunity to learn their community's mother tongues and to understand more about their ethnic or national culture and heritage. Languages Review (DfES, 2007 cited by CILT [online]) The Our Languages project tries to incorporate supplementary institutions into mainstream education. On the basis of official contracts, supplementary schools form partnerships with mainstream schools. Thus, supplementary education is integrated into mainstream education, and relationships of mutual benefit are established. The supplementary classes are held in the school building and teachers of both institutions can collaborate and share their teaching resources. Supplementary schools remain private institutions and are integrated into the mainstream schools on the basis of partnership contracts. The Our Languages programme devised toolkits for the formation of these contracts. In this way, the partnerships can be officially established, and become more attractive to schools. CILT reports that 90 schools across England are currently participating in the programme, and have established school partnerships with each other. (Our Languages 2009, CILT [online][10])

The collaboration of mainstream schools and complementary institutions represents an excellent approach to mother tongue-education. Since supplementary schools are private institutions and independent of the general education system, questions of organisation and financing are addressed by themselves. If supplementary schools are governed by parents and volunteers, mother tongue education can become accessible to all students. Naturally, these institutions should be subsidised by the Ministry of Education as far as possible. School partnerships with mainstream schools can integrate mother tongue education into the students' school routines. This shows that it is possible to provide all students with access to mother tongue education. The supplementary schools in the UK and the Our Languages programme represent an excellent model for the implementation of mother tongue education. In my view, Austria should follow this example and foster the formation of supplementary schools. To support the foundation of supplementary schools, migrant parents should be encouraged to transmit their cultural heritage to their children. Partnerships with general schools should be established and children with migratory backgrounds should receive education in their native languages. To foster plurilingual and pluricultural competence among all students, these classes should also be accessible to students who do not belong to the respective communities. Thus, authentic intercultural experiences can be gained, and the students' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire can be widened.

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[10] http://www.ourlanguages.org.uk/

Closing remarks

In my view, the implementation of pluralistic approaches into teaching should be a matter of concern for all EU member states. Pluralistic approaches enrich the experience of teaching and learning in various respects:

First, language learning is facilitated since students are trained to see parallels and differences between languages. They can use their plurilingual competence as a resource for language learning. Second, pluralistic approaches stress the value of speaking/understanding several languages. Thus, language learning in general is promoted. This implies that also the value of low-prestige languages and cultures is recognized. As a consequence, migrant students will be strengthened in their self-perception as multilingual and multicultural individuals. Third, intercultural competence fostered as the learners get insight into different cultures. This intercultural competence enriches and facilitates life in all multicultural environments. Last, pluralistic approaches lead to more tolerance, openness and understanding towards members of different cultures. Therefore, pluralistic education represents a necessary step to achieve a better understanding among European citizens.

These are the immense benefits which can be achieved with the aid of pluralistic approaches. In my view, the implementation of pluralistic concepts means a long overdue shift of paradigm in education- to regard diversity as beneficial, to see otherness as an opportunity to learn, to discover synergetic qualities in all languages and cultures. It is much to be hoped that pluralistic ideas will gain wider recognition not only among teachers and schools in Austria, but in all Ministries of Education in the EU… and worldwide.

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