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Enhancing Multilingual Learning Practices in a University Context

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1. Learning L3 French

Multilingual approaches to language learning today attempt to take into account the learners' own resources, namely their multilingualism which can trigger effective strategies conducive to language development (Cenoz / Gorter 2015, Jessner, 2006). On the other hand, the use of digital resources possesses a significant potential to encourage innovative multilingual approaches in the university context (Borg et al. 2016, iii).

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the value of considering language learning, in this particular case – the French language, in close association with learners' pre-acquired knowledge in other languages and their learning strategies. In the last two decades, teachers of French, at least in Bulgaria, often regret that students choose to learn English as a first L2 after their L1. However, we shouldn't forget that teaching and learning French as an additional language (or L3) is also a frequent case that deserves to be examined in order to identify positive effects on the learning practices.

The paper will first examine the characteristics of the Integrated Language Didactics¹, which is part of the pluralistic approaches developed in the recent decades (Candelier 2008). It will also consider some research findings in the field of Third Language Acquisition (Aronin / Hufeisen 2009) and multilingual education (Cenoz / Gorter 2015). It will then present examples from empirical studies on multilingual learning practices based on the use of digital resources, which have been conducted since 2013 with learners of French in a university context.

2. Psycholinguistic foundations of L3 learning and teaching

2.1. Integrated language teaching

The foundations of the integrated language teaching originate from the work of the Council of Europe, which in the 1970s encouraged educational leaders to foster the integration of similarities between languages rather than focus on differences (Cavalli 2005, 194-195).

¹ In French, *Didactique intégrée des langues (DIL)*.

According to the principle of anticipation, each teacher of L1 or L2 prepares the consecutive or parallel teaching of other languages. The acquisition of an additional language exerts also a retroactive effect on the already acquired linguistic knowledge and its restructuring (Moore 2006, 201).

2.2. Psycholinguistic models of multilingualism

In the last two decades, the linear psycholinguistic models developed in the research on bilingualism shifted to dynamic models which reflect the complex phenomena involved in language acquisition and production. For example, Herdina and Jessner's Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM) (2002) represents the development of the multilingual system as evolving in time, non linear, reversible and complex. Multilingual competence is characterized mainly by the dynamic interactions between psycholinguistic systems, cross-linguistic interaction and multilingualism as a factor which reflects the particular qualities of the multilingual speaker/learner.

Williams and Hammarberg's model of language roles or functions distinguishes between "instrumental role" when other languages are activated to manage the communicative situation (for example to insert a comment, a question, an explanation, to translate, etc.), and "supplier role" when they are activated as material for speaking in another language (Hammarberg 2006, 2). These authors have observed that usually one language in the multilingual speaker's repertoire functions as a default external supplier language.

2.3. Partial activation of another language

Phenomena that emerge from the contact between languages are often referred to as "transfer", "cross-linguistic influence" or "interaction" as encompassing and interchangeable concepts. (De Angelis 2007, 19) The term "partial activation of another language" (Narcy-Combes 2012) seems to be more precise since it reflects the cognitive activity of the multilingual learner or speaker. According to its definition in linguistics, activation is a "process by which an entire language – or some elements of it – are stimulated and accessed during the execution of a receptive or productive task". (De Angelis 2007, 70-71)

Occurrences of activation represent traces of the presence of multiple languages in the speaker's verbal repertoire and refer to the "macrocompetence" which allows the multilingual subject to handle the available codes and to switch between them if necessary (Moore 2006). The concept of translanguaging is currently used to name the multilingual practices based on the free use of different languages as resources in the learning process (Cenoz / Gorter 2015).

The aim is to create links between the known languages as a pedagogical strategy and to introduce specific activities that promote metalinguistic awareness.

2.4. The L3 learners' characteristics

The learning process is also influenced by the L3 learners' characteristics such as their aptitude, strategies and representations, which function as a cognitive and affective filter in the learning process. In the studies on multilingualism, linguistic aptitude is closely associated to metalinguistic awareness in the acquisition of multiple languages. For this reason, in the DMM, the acronym MLA is used to designate both "multilanguage aptitude" and "metalinguistic awareness" (Herdina et Jessner 2002, 138).

Metalinguistic awareness is related also to the monitoring hypothesis (Jessner 2006, 26) integrated in most of the psycholinguistic models of multilingualism. Regarding the DMM, the psycholinguistic system of the multilingual speaker possesses an "enhanced multilingual monitor" which facilitates the mobilization of compensatory strategies based on all available linguistic resources. At the same time, it can deactivate linguistic items which do not correspond to the communicative setting.

Research has also shown that the multilingual learners' strategies are more varied and less dependent on individual factors comparing to the learners of a first L2. Production strategies used by multilingual learners are also called "multilingual compensatory strategies" (Jessner 2006). According to some empirical studies, the process of partial activation of another language occurs either as a conscious strategy or unconsciously, by leaving few or no traces in the speech. Researchers who have studied activation of other languages in L3 written production usually find that activation of L2 occurs most often at the lexical level while morpho-syntactic items are not activated frequently².

In the fields of didactics and language acquisition, representations are defined as a structuring element of the acquisition process since they trigger specific learning strategies depending on the perceived distance between the two linguistic systems involved (Castellotti / Moore 2002, 9). Representations are simultaneously static and dynamic. On the one hand, part of them are memorized and function as a reference and on the other hand, others are evolving because they are constructed in the interactions (*ibid*, 10).

² For example, Bouvy (2000) records only 8% of occurrences of morpho-syntactic errors in the written production of beginner students of L3 English. Ringbom (2001) insists that at the morpho-syntactic level activation is felt mainly from L1.

3. L2 English in support of learning L3 French

3.1. Research questions and hypotheses

Three empirical studies were conducted in the context of French language courses, taught to international university students fluent in English. The impact of their multilingual repertoires and experience as learners of other languages on the French learning process was examined. The exploratory study realized in 2013 aimed at observing the multilingual learners' behavior and, in particular, how they mobilize their plurilingual potential to perform a communicative task in French.

The two intervention studies carried out in 2014-2015 and 2017 were designed to experiment an approach to language teaching that recognizes the multilingual learners' needs and relies on digital tools and mediation to facilitate their writing activity.

The initial hypothesis of the exploratory study was that L2 English, used as the language of instruction in this educational context, plays an important facilitative role in learning French as an L3.

The intervention studies, aimed at answering the question how to optimize the pedagogical activities designed to develop the multilingual learners' written production in French. It was suggested that the plurilingual approach could lead to positive effects if it was applied through a dynamic blended learning system. The blended environment design was largely inspired by the Model of Didactic Ergonomics which Narcy-Combes and his team proposed, drawing upon emergentist and socioconstructivist theories (Narcy-Combes et al. 2014). The most important conditions for effective learning in this context were:

- the combination of reading and writing;
- basing speech production on both rules and chunks;
- providing forms of scaffolding that correspond to the recurrent nature of writing;
- the use of digital multilingual tools that could reinforce the effect of tasks.

3.2. Context and collected data

43 students from the American University in Bulgaria took part in the exploratory study. Their levels in French were from A2 to B2. Written productions were collected at two points during the semester, as well as their language biographies and introspective questionnaires. 76 students participated in the main intervention study. Their levels in French were from A1 to B2. In this study, the proposed tasks integrated collaboration with peers and French-speaking partners, as well as the use of digital tools. The indirect feedback of the teacher was

integrated as an intermediate stage in the written production. In addition to their texts, introspective data were collected by audio recording of semi-structured interviews, a research journal, and with a more innovative tool: real time dynamic screen capturing of the students' writing activity³.

The most recent study was a bilingual telecollaborative project between 12 learners of French from AUBG and 24 older learners of English from the University of Bordeaux. The collected data include writings produced after three synchronous telecollaborative sessions, which were annotated by the partners through email exchange, as well as entries in the students' reflexive journals.

3.3. Data analysis

The most important results of the three studies are summarized in this paper. The adopted mixed method combined quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis was mostly applied to the study of linguistic data in order to measure the frequency of:

- the activation of other languages and the proportion between its different forms, for example activation of L2 English versus L1 and activation of lexical items versus morpho-syntactic items;
- the traces of the various forms of scaffolding in order to determine their effect on the development of written production, such as the impact of teacher's and peers' feedback and the work with digital tools;
- instances of metalinguistic reflection and the use of different types of strategies while working with digital tools.

Qualitative analysis was applied to the study of:

- the different instances of elements activation belonging to other languages;
- the characteristics of the various forms of scaffolding;
- the students' attitudes, representations, and perceptions in regards to learning French, their multilingual practices, and the proposed learning environment.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Activation of other languages

In the exploratory study, it was found that L2 English and other known languages often play a facilitative role in the form of compensatory plurilingual and learning strategies. The

³ The professional version of *Microsoft Expression Encoder 4.0* was used to capture the student's activity on the screen and his/her voice comments were recorded with a microphone.

hypothesis about the most frequent activation of L2 English was confirmed (80 % of all cases), especially due to the combination of four factors (Fig. 1):

- the status of English as language of instruction in the given context;
- psychotypology, that is the perceived typological proximity between French and English;
- the active and most recent use comparing to other L2;
- the advanced level of competence in this language.

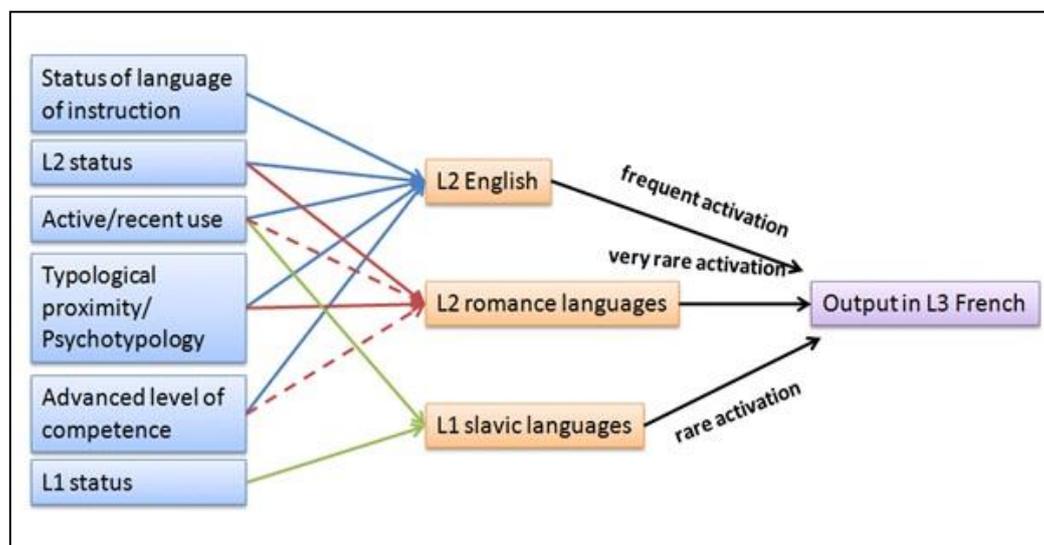


Fig. 1 Frequency of the activation of other languages in French written production.

An interesting finding, comparing to previous studies (Lindqvist 2010, 136), is that romance languages as L2 play a very weak role in comparison with other known languages. This could be explained with the fact that they correspond to a lower number of factors which usually condition the supplier role of a language (Hammarberg 2006).

The analysis based on the linguistic typology of the activated items from other languages showed that the partial activation at the lexical level was more frequent than the activation at the morpho-syntactic level. More than two thirds of the lexical occurrences are due to the perceived typological proximity between French and another language. In contrast with other studies with a focus on English learners (Bouvy 2000), the rate of the morpho-syntactic occurrences turned out to be much more significant (42 %). It is also important to note that a large amount of errors due to the application of an external rule come exclusively from English, not from the L1 as it was found in other studies (Ringbom 2001). It is possible to state that the weight of the factors related to the use of other languages plays an important role when it comes to their selection and partial activation in this learning context.

4.2. The use of digital tools and translation

The analysis of the video recorded writing activity with the help of online tools in real time allowed identifying five types of strategies learners used to produce more complex texts, closer to the norms of French language. These strategies are classified according to the mobilized cognitive resources, starting from the one that retained the least of the writer's attention:

- **Simple translation:** cases when the learners translate words or short phrases with the automatic translator or a contextual dictionary, such as *Reverso Context*⁴ or *Linguee*⁵.
- **Spelling and grammar checking:** most often learners do this by right click in *Word*, which is very fast and requires little attention. In some cases additional tools are used, such as verb conjugators, search engines, or bilingual online dictionaries.
- **Checking a hypothesis on partially known lexical items,** when students begin to write or pronounce the word or expression in French but want to make sure that their hypothesis is correct by checking the item either in a contextual or bilingual dictionary, or in the automatic translator.
- **Adaptation of a translated item to the context,** that occurs when a translated item needs to be adapted to socio-pragmatic conventions depending on the context, for example, taking into account the status of the speaker and the recipient, their relationship and the textual genre (transformation of a personal pronoun, gender, verb tense, possessives, etc.).
- **Translation using advanced tool options:** this strategy corresponds to a search for alternative translations (synonyms, reformulation, segmentation of sentences, inverse translation of the result, cross-checking with different tools, etc.).

It was found that beginners used more often tools for quick translation and correction, while higher-level learners exploited more frequently sophisticated tools or a combination of several resources (Fig. 2).

⁴ <http://context.reverso.net>

⁵ <http://www.linguee.fr>

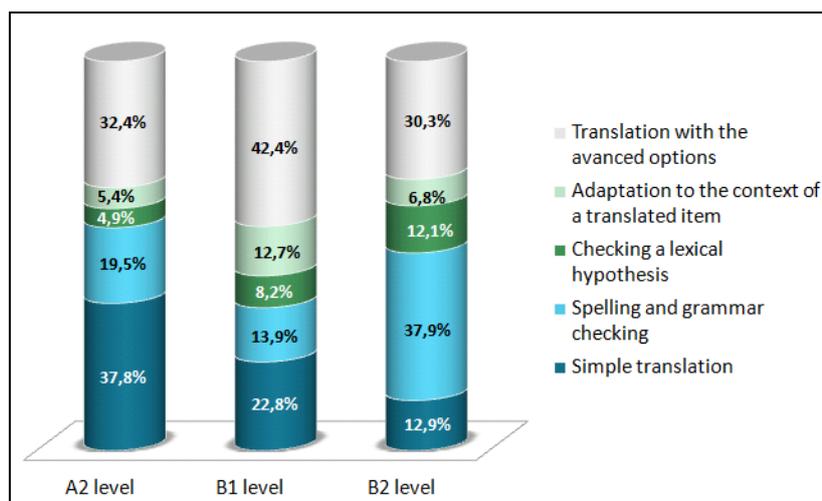


Fig 2 Frequency of written production strategies using online tools at levels A2, B1 and B2.

Working with tools, which are often based on translation, is likely to lead gradually to the development of learners' autonomy and creativity. However, the intuitive manipulation of the tools increases the time of writing. As a whole, the discourse of the L3 French learners is getting closer to the norms of French for the respective textual genres. At the lower levels, the production mode is closer to the trilingual pole, while the production mode of the B2-level students is closer to the monolingual pole.

As far as metalinguistic reflection is concerned, A2 level learners rarely produce comments of this type. On the other hand, the majority of the B1-level students seem to develop a flexible control system, while using both their own language resources and writing aids. The metalinguistic reflection episodes are most frequent in the case of B2-level students. These findings support Jessner's study (2006) on metalinguistic awareness and plurilingual compensatory strategies used by advanced multilingual learners of English.

However, the manipulation of the advanced tool options is sometimes so complex that the learners are unable to notice the errors. Although higher level learners are generally very sensitive to the correctness of their writing, they still need additional training how to check the quality of the resource they use.

4.3. The effect of telecollaboration

In the bilingual telecollaborative experience, conversations were carried out via Skype in English and French consecutively. This resulted in drafting texts in the target language, which needed to be improved through exchange of emails with the partners. It was recommended to

provide feedback mostly indirectly so that the learners could reflect on their mistakes and try to revise their texts.

Most frequently (in 65% of the interventions) the partners proposed the correct form and at the same time tried to facilitate noticing the gaps: they used highlighting, different colors, italics, or comments with the proposed corrections. This corrective move is more elaborate in 20 % of the interventions where the partners also added explanations of the error. For example, one French partner underlined the word “voyage”, replaced it with “transport”, and explained the difference between the two words in English in this way:

“*Voyage* is used for long travel. To mean the time to go to our job we use *transport*.”

Most of the explanations are related to lexical, semantic or morpho-syntactic problems (42 out of the 53 explanatory comments). When the error is not complicated, the learners manage to correct it on their own, as in the case of feminine and plural adjectives. Sometimes, the partners reword the sentences to encourage the use of more complex phrases.

Translanguaging is used often to facilitate the interaction and to draw attention to the analogies and contrasts between French and English. For example one partner explained that the conjunction “*et*” is used for “and”, while “*est*” is a form of the verb “to be”. Another one explains that the word order with “*aussi*” (also) is different in French compared to English.

4.4. Students’ attitudes and perceptions on their multilingual learning practices

The majority of the students show positive attitude towards the role of other languages in learning French. For instance, 76 % of the participants in the main study perceive the knowledge of other languages as an asset, particularly because of their similarities with French. Known languages seem to play a facilitative role for the introduction to the new code thanks to the lexical and, sometimes, morpho-syntactic proximity, and in general, in terms of learning strategies.

Students who regard some of the languages in their repertoires as an obstacle (19 % of the respondents) refer mostly to their confusion due to the parallel learning of two languages and their typological proximity. Objective linguistic proximity does not automatically lead to partial code activation as learners make a personal judgment about similarities and differences (De Angelis 2007, 23-24).

The training tasks with the contextual dictionaries *Linguee* and *Reverso Context* were highly appreciated by the learners at all levels. They found particularly useful the possibility to observe and select out of numerous parallel translations of phrases in their context.

In regards to the evaluation of the telecollaborative experience, it led to contradictory reactions. Some students appreciated the possibility to support each other in learning French and English, to understand better their cultures, as well as to create friendships. Among the difficulties and limitations of this experience were the technical problems with synchronous communication and the slow responsiveness of some partners in the asynchronous part. As far as age difference was concerned, several students perceived it as a communication barrier. Others were surprised at the beginning but either were not embarrassed or considered this experience as valuable.

5. Conclusions and perspectives

Multilingual learners' language behavior is dependent on a variety of factors. The French learners' written production may benefit from knowing other languages, provided that favorable conditions are created. Organizing the teaching and learning activities in a blended environment appears suitable for the case of L3 French studied in a university context where L2 English is used as a language of instruction. Such environments are found to be effective when they are based on a dynamic view of the learning process and incorporate digital tools and mediation in a systematic way. The development of appropriate forms of scaffolding is necessary to encourage the multilingual learners' monitoring system (Jessner 2006, 26), since it favors not only the mobilization of the available linguistic resources, but also the deactivation of inadequate linguistic elements. Multilingual digital resources and intercultural telecollaboration seem to be particularly favorable to the development of the linguistic and intercultural competence when the learners are supported in their efforts to achieve their goals.

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