

## ENHANCING STUDENTS' MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH PEER LEARNING AND A REFLECTIVE LEARNING-BASED COURSE

Jana Výškrabková, Comenius University in Bratislava

### The teaching-learning challenge

In today's globalised world, we often find ourselves in multilingual situations where we need to communicate with people speaking various languages. In these circumstances, English cannot always be used as a lingua franca. With this in mind, I introduced the course Multilingual Communication. Designing the course, I primarily worked with Blommaert's (2010, 8-9) notion of 'truncated' multilingualism: since we never know 'all' of a language, we always know only specific bits and pieces of it. The aim is not to speak many languages perfectly but to effectively communicate in a number of them, if we have to. This implies developing such skills as switching languages, language mediation, receptive skills in multiple languages, and intercomprehension. In teaching this course, helping students gain mastery of many languages was not the ambition; it was more important to help students learn to effectively use all their language skills—their entire linguistic repertoire. At the same time, I aimed to provide home students with a multicultural experience without travelling. To achieve this, I introduced students to peer learning, which was foundational for the course. In this chapter, I evaluate whether the students in this course engaged in peer learning achieved the goals of (1) understanding and using theoretical concepts related to multilingualism and (2) communicating multilingually.

### Pedagogical methods

Engaged in peer learning, students share their ideas, experiences, knowledge, and skills, thus enriching each other (Boud et al. 2013). Since the students attending Multilingual Communication came from different countries and cultures, sharing their (multi)linguistic and (multi)cultural experiences in discussions and reflections was a pre-condition for successful learning. Therefore, peer learning is particularly suitable for learning about the notions of multilingualism and multilingual communication, which have a number of definitions and understandings and are presumably influenced by cultural contexts.

Diversity and integration are both important for peer learning. Diversity relates to internationalisation and globalisation of education resulting in a multicultural student body. For teachers this implies the need to develop strategies and competencies that allow addressing diversity (Hille et al. 2016). Mutual assistance in peer learning stimulates development of intercultural competencies in such settings. On the other hand, integration leads to intellectual development, greater quality of effort, improved learning, and student success (Byl et al. 2015). Integration into the student community is particularly important for international students who typically

arrive for one or two semesters, as greater integration impacts their success by increasing their engagement.

In this context, the concept of social presence is relevant since it concerns creating a classroom climate favourable for engagement. Since the course was initially planned as face-to-face but was taught first in a hybrid form and later fully online, social presence became relevant to supporting student engagement under these circumstances. According to White (2003), the absence of physical presence in the context of distance education means the loss of these stimuli, which support the interaction of the social and affective dimensions of education. That is why I consider it important to support the feeling of community and create a friendly atmosphere even in settings of remote teaching, following the social presence theory.

Another important concept is reflective learning. Students were expected to reflect on the course content and their learning experiences in learning logs. Moon's (2004, 82) definition of reflective learning emphasises a broad range of related mental processes: 'Reflection is applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess'. To support reflection, I introduced the assignment of learning logs. I assumed that awareness of one's own learning progress will foster student motivation to learn in this course. In this course, I also focused on acquiring and developing key competencies that students can apply in their studies and especially later in their professional lives. As Moon (2004) states, such (reflective and experiential) learning exceeds the scope of formal learning and in this way plays a key role in ongoing professional development.

### **The course, the students, and the lecturer**

Multilingual Communication is an experiential, practice-based elective course. It aims to help students effectively use their own linguistic repertoire, which includes switching between languages, mediating between interlocutors who cannot understand each other, and intercomprehension skills. In order to achieve this, the course is open to students from all disciplines and from both bachelor and master's degree programmes, to home and international students. As a result of attending the course, students are expected to be able to (1) identify the factors that influence multilingual and multicultural communication; (2) recognise how one of these factors, culture, impacts interpretation of information and communication; (3) understand and use various concepts from multilingualism and multicultural communication; and (4) effectively communicate in multilingual and multicultural contexts using their own linguistic repertoire. Of these learning outcomes, this chapter investigates the third and fourth to limit the scope of this already multi-layered investigation.

Students learn through activities such as small group and plenary discussions, student presentations, persuasive speeches, creative writing assignments like multilingual poems, and games such

as the false friends game, or classpanto, during which students are encouraged to use a mix of languages. There are two main languages of instruction, English and Slovak, so that everyone can understand what to do. Students can choose the language(s) they want to use during activities and are encouraged to switch languages and not be afraid to leave their comfort zone and use the languages they speak at lower levels.

The requirements for successfully completing the course are active participation, completing home assignments, and six in-class tasks. An important assignment is keeping a learning log. After each course session, students are asked to reflect in writing on issues related to the session topic, their own contributions and their learning process. Students are also asked to rate their ability to communicate in a multilingual and multicultural environment on a scale from 1 to 10 (poor to excellent) and reflect on how the class activities helped them develop key course competencies. Students can use multiple languages in their learning logs, with one condition: they are limited to those I can understand. These include all Slavic languages (which was important as many students come from Slavic countries), German, Italian and English. This offers students an opportunity to practice their weaker languages in writing and in this way gradually gain more self-confidence in spoken communication in class.

In the winter 2021 term, 14 students enrolled in the course. Even if my initial ambition was to bring home and international students closer together, the class was almost entirely taken by foreign students: 13 out of 14 students were international. Their countries of origin supported linguistic and cultural heterogeneity as they came from Slavic countries such as Serbia, Ukraine, and Russia (10 students), but there were also students from China (2), Turkey (1) and Morocco (1). Most studied philological disciplines or social sciences. Some of them were enrolled in degree programmes at Comenius University in Bratislava, and some were exchange programme students.

### **Collected sources of data and methods**

I collected and analysed five types of data. Learning logs made up the most significant part of the data. When analysing the student self-ratings from the learning logs, I compared the score at the beginning of the semester, which indicated students' initial self-perception of their competences, with the end-of-the-course score rating for their later self-perception. I also looked at the scores after each course session, which reflected the students' views of how the course activities affected their multilingual communication skills. Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative parts of the learning logs, in which students explained the rating and reflected on their learning. Second, I drew from six assignments students completed either as homework or following in-class activities. These assignments evidenced whether students understood the studied concepts and were able to put them to use.

Third, I had an observation protocol from a colleague who observed my class. I asked the observer to focus on certain aspects of the class such as student engagement in activities (in particular

in a hybrid class), peer learning and achievement of learning outcomes. The assignments and observation protocol were analysed using content analysis.

The fourth was the teacher's diary, in which I wrote down comments and notes about how students handled the activities and whether they complied with my expectations or any unforeseen problems arose. The same method of analysis was used for the teacher's diary as for the observations protocol.

The last source of data was collected at the end of the semester. It was a student feedback form, in which students evaluated the opportunities the course provided them to develop competences, as well as their own learning progress. Descriptive statistics were used for analysing data from the form, which was completed by 13 out of 14 students.

## Findings

### *Class atmosphere encouraging peer learning*

Although not a learning outcome, it is important to establish if the classroom environment was supportive of peer learning. While teaching the Multilingual Communication course, one unpredictable yet significant challenge arose. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course, initially planned to be taught in person, had to be offered first in a hybrid format because full-time home students attended it in person while exchange students who were not yet able to arrive in Slovakia joined online. Mid-semester, due to the deteriorating pandemic, classes moved entirely to the online space.

These aspects were central for the class atmosphere. It was important that students actively participated in learning activities and thus learned from each other. This was only possible if students had enough opportunities to contribute and if the class atmosphere encouraged them to do so. Results from the feedback forms suggested that the course succeeded in creating a class atmosphere that supported peer learning. Nine students stated on the form that they strongly agreed they had felt part of a learning community, three students agreed with the statement, and one had a neutral attitude. Also, ten students strongly agreed that they found class atmosphere encouraging for their learning and three students agreed with the statement.

Peer learning in the class sessions was one aspect that the observer was asked to pay attention to. The seminar at which the observer was present contained three peer learning tasks: more than 75% of the seminar was devoted to peer learning. The observer noticed a high level of student engagement in peer learning tasks, which aligned with my own observations and with the student feedback forms, where seven students strongly agreed and three students agreed that they actively participated in class. Two students expressed a neutral opinion, but these two also rated the class atmosphere encouraging for their learning,

### *Use of theoretical concepts*

I assessed student ability to understand the meaning of concepts of multilingualism by students being able to define the concepts (using their own words) and put them to use in class activities and assignments. From the learning logs, I could see that students confronted their own definitions of concepts with those from academic literature, but also with the perceptions of other students, which they exchanged during in-class activities. The learning logs thus evidenced students' ability to compare different meanings of concepts associated with different cultures and language policies. As the semester progressed, the students' definitions became more complex. I did not notice any misunderstanding in the learning logs.

As noted in my diary, students enrolled in the course with certain notions of multilingualism and multilingual communication, which were largely influenced by their previous experiences, knowledge and the cultural environment where they come from. The first differences appeared in the very first discussions addressing questions such as 'Who is multilingual? What is multilingualism?' Here, peer learning activities led students to share their diverse experiences, contrast them, discuss the often dissimilar perceptions of concepts, and seek possible alignment. Thanks to this, they were able to identify multiple perspectives and a wide range of possibilities for applying the concepts in practice. Later in the semester, when the observer attended the class, the students demonstrated the ability to discuss various aspects of the concepts and apply them in activities, which the observer emphasised in the protocol. She also highlighted the student initiative in helping their peers to understand the task and engage in the activity. Students explained to each other problematic phenomena, discussed concepts, and confronted different approaches.

The results from the student feedback form also indicate, albeit less explicitly, that the course helped them to embrace the concepts. For example, five students agreed and eight students strongly agreed that by the end of this course they developed a better understanding of the studied matter than they had at its beginning. When asked about applying the learned concepts in practice, five students strongly agreed that the course helped them to produce new ideas and original solutions to problems based on the acquired knowledge and skills. Another seven agreed with the statement and one had a neutral attitude.

### *Multilingual communication*

At the beginning of the course, on the 1-10 scale students rated their ability to communicate in a multilingual and multicultural environment between 5 and 8 (average: 6.4). Those students who initially had more experience with the international environment, knew more languages, and had more opportunities to use them in communication, assessed their ability to communicate in a multilingual environment higher than their less experienced peers who spoke fewer languages. Students who used only one or two languages in communication or were in contact predominantly with people from nearby cultures were not so confident in using multiple languages and

communicating effectively in multilingual environment. In all cases, the end-of-semester ratings rose by at least 1.5 points (average: 8.6), which signals a meaningful improvement in the ability to communicate multilingually (as measured by student self-perception).

In some learning logs, a temporary decrease in the value was evident, for example, after the polyglot dialogue, which is an interactional regime in which people strive to understand each other by communicating in two or more languages and use strong languages productively and weak ones receptively (Lenz and Berthele 2010). In this activity, I asked students to work in small groups and use English only when needed since English was a relatively strong language for all of them. Even if students considered the activity effective for developing their communication skills, they found it very demanding: after that class session, the self-rating of each student fell by two points or more. I noted student difficulties during this activity in the teacher's diary as well. The composition of the group in which the students performed the dialogue influenced how students used their weaker and stronger languages. While for some students it was easy, because the composition of the group enabled them to find the languages they used for communication relatively quickly, others had to find a compromise and use languages productively that were not their strongest.

Students demonstrated their ability to apply acquired theoretical knowledge in various activities, most notably in class games. For example, in multilingual Chinese whispers, which is an adaptation of a well-known children's game, students not only put to use the concept of receptive multilingualism but also applied switching languages in practice. When reflecting on this activity in their learning logs, students used such terms as attractive, exciting and interesting, which appeared in various variations in all the learning logs. The average rating of students' ability to communicate in the multilingual and multicultural environment during this session was 9.3 points out of 10, with individual scores being in the range of 8-10.

In their learning logs, ten students stated that through completing the activities they gradually increased their ability to communicate multilingually. In small group work, the effectiveness of the learning methods was closely related to whether the group was culturally and/or linguistically homogenous or heterogeneous. Later in the semester, I intentionally changed the group composition in order to make them more heterogeneous and help students learn more from group work. At the end of the semester, four students said that their ability to communicate in their initially weak languages improved.

In the assignments, students reflected on various aspects of multilingual communication, for example, receptive multilingualism, false friends, and the like. They also repeatedly pointed to the effectiveness of the classroom-based experience for building upon the assignments in real multilingual communication situations. Overall, 12 students said in the feedback form that the course had helped them to develop knowledge through problem solving, independent thinking, or completing exercises, whereas only one expressed a neutral attitude. What students thought

about communicating multilingually is illustrated by an excerpt from a student learning log: ‘During the activities, we practiced our (language and communicative) competencies, and we also learnt about each other’s culture which helps us when it comes to future interaction’.

### **Replicability in a different context**

Many of the students who attended this course were studying languages as their major, and for them the skill of using different languages can be an added value. Multilingual communication can also be included among the learning outcomes of more traditional language courses. In addition to ‘basic’ communication competence, students usually also acquire intercultural communication competence in such courses, which is indispensable for successful and effective communication if communication partners are from diverse cultures. This competence allows them to understand intercultural relations in the context of existing cultural dimensions and successfully solve various communication challenges.

Moreover, embracing multilingual communication elements through peer learning activities in language courses has the potential to build students’ multilingual communication competence, such that all their language knowledge and skills are combined. What students learn when acquiring their first languages influences how they later learn other language(s). Through this knowledge, students can combine various components of this competence to achieve effective communication. These aspects could be, to a certain extent, included not only in language courses attended by international students but also in culturally homogeneous groups. This should help students to apply the acquired competencies in future multilingual and multicultural communication situations effectively.

### **Conclusions**

The course Multilingual Communication aims to develop student communication skills and competencies in an internationalised environment. The multilingual and multicultural composition of the class in winter 2021 contributed to students achieving course outcomes through peer learning activities that simulated realistic multilingual situations. Analysis of data from five sources showed that students embraced theoretical concepts related to multilingualism and were able to apply them in a range of multilingual exercises. By completing these tasks, students demonstrated they were able to communicate multilingually. Student success in class activities and assignments was influenced by the class atmosphere. A productive learning atmosphere and heterogeneous class composition appear to have facilitated development of student competencies. One aspect I would like to change when teaching this course again relates to the polyglot dialogue. I am considering adding a pre-activity that will help students feel more confident and engage in the dialogue. I may assign watching a video or listening to a recording of such dialogue and then have students identify the problems and barriers in communication and suggest how to



address them. Strengthening student engagement this way could be instrumental to increasing their success during class activities, and thus an even more peer-learning-friendly atmosphere could further improve student learning.

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## Summary

In this chapter, I present the course Multilingual Communication which is focused on the multilingual and multicultural aspects of communication and is offered to both home and international students. The concepts of peer learning and reflective learning came to the fore in the course design. The study focused on three main aspects: (1) class atmosphere encouraging peer learning, (2) use and application of theoretical concepts, and (3) multilingual communication–students' ability to communicate in simulated multilingual situations. Triangulation of data from five sources evidenced that the course was effective in supporting students to achieve the course's learning outcomes.

## Keywords

class atmosphere, multilingualism, reflective learning





**Dr. Jana Výškrabková** obtained a double degree in History and Slovak Language and Literature from the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava, where she recently completed her PhD in Studia Academica Slovaca, the Centre for Slovak as a Foreign Language. During her studies, she participated in the Erasmus+ programme studying at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Jyväskylä University, Finland. She focuses on specific features of language teaching and learning in the online environment. She teaches Slovak as a foreign language and a course in multilingual communication.  
**[jana.vyskrabkova@uniba.sk](mailto:jana.vyskrabkova@uniba.sk)**