

# Why foreign language teachers need to have a multilingual outlook and what that means for their teaching practice

## *Por que os professores de língua estrangeira precisam ter uma visão multilíngue e o que isso significa para sua prática de ensino*

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**Abstract:** Foreign language teachers have traditionally been trained to think of themselves as teaching one L2 to speakers of one L1. With the advent of globalization and the increased mobility of humans, goods and capital, the multilingual and multicultural nature of national societies has become both more prevalent and more visible. Language classrooms are populated nowadays with students who don't necessarily speak a common national language and who speak a variety of second, immigrant or heritage languages. They are multilingual not only in the strict sense of being equally fluent in more than one linguistic code, but also in the sense that they have different outlooks, different upbringings, they have been socialized in different ways. They have less and less of a consensus on what is an appropriate, polite behavior, nor even what is expected in school.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism. Globalization. Language. Translingual competence. Transcultural competence.

**Resumo:** Os professores de língua estrangeira têm sido tradicionalmente formados para pensar sobre si mesmos como alguém que ensina uma L2 para falantes de uma L1. Com o advento da globalização e a crescente mobilidade dos humanos, produtos e capital, a natureza multilíngue e multicultural das sociedades nacionais tem se tornado tanto mais prevalente quanto mais visível. As salas de aula de línguas são hoje compostas de alunos que não necessariamente compartilham uma língua nacional comum e que falam uma variedade de segunda língua, língua de imigrantes ou de tradição. Eles não são apenas multilíngues no sentido restrito de ser igualmente fluentes em mais de um código linguístico, mas também no sentido de que têm visões diferentes, formações educacionais diferentes e têm se socializado de formas diferentes. Eles têm cada vez menos um consenso do que é um comportamento apropriado ou educado, nem mesmo o que se espera deles na escola.

**Palavras-chave:** Multilinguismo. Globalização. Língua. Competência translinguística. Competência transcultural.

Foreign language teachers have traditionally been trained to think of themselves as teaching a second language (L2) to speakers of a first language (L1). In schools, this L1 is usually a mother tongue that teacher and students share; the L2 is the language of a foreign other, who lives

beyond one's national borders and who has different ways of talking, eating, dwelling, working and interpreting events – in other terms, who has a different culture. With the advent of globalization and the increased mobility of humans, goods and capital, the multilingual and multicultural nature of national societies has become both more prevalent and more visible. Language classrooms are populated nowadays with students who don't necessarily speak a common national language and who speak a variety of second, immigrant or heritage languages. They were not all born in the same country, nor have they been raised by parents of the same social class; they don't all share the same ethnic background, or even the same history. They are multilingual, not only in the strict sense of being equally fluent in more than one linguistic code, but also in the sense that they have different outlooks, different upbringings, and they have been socialized in different ways. They have less and less of a consensus on what is appropriate, polite behavior, nor even what is expected in school.

### **Multilingualism and globalization**

Globalization, coupled with global media and global communication technologies, has exacerbated the multiplicity of codes, media, and ways of making meaning in everyday life. If we look at the way youngsters nowadays use language through social media such as Facebook and Twitter and in their texted messages, we notice a proliferation of semiotic activity, a healthy disrespect for academic authority (orthographic, grammatical and lexical rules and conventions), hybridities, code-switching, and multimodal bursts of creativity and innovation. However, we also notice a growing anxiety about who they are, a concern about whether they are 'popular' or not, how they are perceived by their peers and what the future holds for them. The internet and electronic forms of communication have exploded the conventional, predictable forms of communication offered by print literacy, grammars, and dictionaries, opening the way for creativity, agency and innovation, but they have also increased semiotic uncertainty and ambiguity. In short, they have changed what we mean by communication, language and culture.

Language used to be the formal elements of a linguistic system, standardized by grammars and dictionaries, and taught in rational sequences over the course of several years. With the communicative approach to language teaching, language started to include speech functions, appropriate gambits and useful verbal strategies to do things with words in situational contexts of everyday life. Communication was the expression, interpretation and negotiation of intended meanings (Breen & Candlin 1980) with interlocutors from a different language and culture. In the last thirty years, the compression of time and space

online and the computer's unlimited storage of information - its ubiquitous presence and control - have changed the nature of what we, as language teachers, are in the business of doing. Instead of relying exclusively on words and sentences to make meaning, we now have images, films, and YouTube videos to make that meaning visible, palpable and graspable as never before. Instead of the painful negotiation of divergent illocutionary intentions and of possibly conflicting interpretations of events, we now have more easy-going chat rooms, blogs and Facebook walls where a large number of 'friends' and a high volume of participation are more important than depth of dialogue and elocutionary precision. Knowing how to navigate multiple sources of information and multiple semiotic modalities has become of crucial importance in acquiring communicative competence. In today's multilingual context, culture is no longer the shared membership of one singular community of like-minded individuals who all share the same history, memories and dreams of the future. Culture has become deterritorialized; it lives in the minds and hearts of expatriates, immigrants, travelers and it is fossilized in the stereotypes of textbooks, Hollywood fantasies, publicity logos and marketing jingles. Not only has the change of scale - amplification, compression - offered by electronic media changed the nature of communication; it has changed the nature of reality itself (Kramersch 2009, Ch.6).

While language teaching used to be focused mostly on the referential, denotative meaning of words ('What does the text say? What does this word mean?'), leaving issues of contextual interpretation for the reading of literary texts, where stylistic variation is to be expected but is constrained by the conventions of genre and register, nowadays stylistic variation and multiple indexicalities are the name of the game right from the outset. Students who play with language in their blogs, tweets, instant messages and their everyday ways of talking, tend to become impatient with the grammatical and lexical rules of the L2. They insist on making themselves comprehensible despite their deficient grammar and, to a certain degree, communicative language teaching has encouraged them to do so. They rely on in-group understanding of the shared associations and allusions indexed by the words, and most of the time they are satisfied with understanding each other not exhaustively, but 'for all practical purposes' (Goffman 1959). No longer do they strive to understand every word of a text; they skim and scan the text for information and are content with getting the gist of its message.

Thus, in our fast-paced era of global 24/7 media, information glut and constant change, communication has become at once more homogenized and more context-specific than ever. On the one hand, a global neoliberal culture is taking hold around the world that prizes individual choice, risk-taking and an entrepreneurial mindset aimed at gaining visibility, popularity, and public forms of success. On the other hand, there is an

ever greater fragmentation into local contexts of cultures-of-use (Lantolf & Thorne 2006:68) where the gap is growing between the young and the elderly, the wealthy and the poor, the idealists and the materialists, the monolingual locals and the multilingual cosmopolitans, those who have access to the internet and those who don't, those who were brought up in a print culture and those who only know the virtual culture offered by the computer.

### **Multilingual practices for the monolingual L2 classroom**

How can foreign language teachers, who by definition teach one foreign language in a usually monolingual L2 immersion classroom, prepare their students to 'operate between languages' and acquire 'translingual and transcultural competence', as the report by the American Modern Language Association advocates for college level language learners in the U.S. (MLA 2007:237)? How can teachers teach both the standard forms and conventional meanings given to these forms by grammars and dictionaries, and the increasingly changing stylistic variations used by native and non-native speakers as they code-switch from one language to another, imitate foreign accents, play with hybrid forms on the internet, thrive on intertextuality and interdiscursivity, and mix genres, styles and registers?

There is no question that we have to continue teaching the standard, but if we take the living 'multilingual subject' (Kramersch 2009) as our ideal rather than the standard monolingual native speaker, then we need to devise a pedagogy that sensitizes learners to stylistic choice and translation of various kinds right from the start.

#### *Stylistic choice*

While students have to learn, of course, how to conjugate verbs and form the plural of nouns (e.g., 'Please close the door', 'She likes bananas'), they also need to learn that there are various ways of making requests and expressing likes and dislikes, depending on who is speaking, to whom, and in what circumstances. As soon as they learn the imperative form, students already have the choice of saying: "The door!" as an authoritarian superior to a subordinate, or "Please close the door" as a polite parent to a child, or "Would you be so kind as to close the door?" as a polite passenger addressing another passenger in a train. In all three cases, as communicative language teaching has long recognized, it is not only a matter of teaching grammar, but of situating the grammatical forms in their social and cultural context. The same applies to the teaching of vocabulary: The student can say she 'likes' bananas, but she can also say she enjoys 'eating' or even 'loves' bananas. Similarly, if confronted with a 'problem' such as a student not having done their homework or getting a bad grade, the

teacher can call this a ‘problem’ or a ‘challenge’. Calling this a ‘problem’ focuses on the negative; calling it a ‘challenge’ focuses on the possibility of finding a solution and changing the negative into a potentially positive outlook (see Kramersch 1993 ch.1). Similarly, politicians have the choice of calling people who demonstrate against the government ‘protesters’ or ‘rebels’, ‘reformists’ or ‘terrorists’, depending on their political affiliations. Each choice of grammatical or lexical form expresses different subjective meanings, even if the various forms are objectively named ‘synonyms’ in the dictionary.

Focusing on stylistic choice and the subjective meaning of words allows the teacher to show students that the way they choose to express themselves, apart from being correct or incorrect as measured against the standard, also makes a statement about themselves as speakers (as polite, impolite, or as holding particular ideologies) and aligns them with their interlocutors in particular ways. At the beginning levels, students are just able to produce standard forms in the conventional situations offered by the role-plays of communicative language teaching. Yet slowly, already in the first year, the teacher can vary the situation, by introducing social and cultural variables such as interlocutors of different ages, different social class, different regional provenance, and communicating through different channels and modalities (e.g., face to face, on the phone, on Skype, in a letter, email or blog).

#### *Trans-lation as multilingual practice*

In the 2007 report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages of the American Modern Language Association, the goals of foreign language education at the college level were redefined in accordance with the increasingly interconnected world within which we are preparing our students to operate.

‘The goal...would not be simply to produce graduates better prepared to meet a range of identified national or societal needs, although this alone would be of significant value. Our goal is a higher education system that embraces the distinctive educational benefits of studying foreign languages and cultures in developing the powers of the intellect and the imagination, the ability to reflect on one’s place in the world with depth and complexity, and understanding of the degree to which culture and society are created in language’. (MLA 2008:288).

‘This kind of foreign language education systematically teaches differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language. Literature, film, and other media are used to challenge students’ imagination and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things. In the course of acquiring functional language abilities students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception’. (MLA 2007:238).

Even though the report focuses on the dichotomous relation between an L1 and an L2 and seems to assume that there is a homogeneous C1 culture and an equally homogeneous C2 culture that express themselves through their respective national languages, it puts the emphasis not on the communication of information or the solving of communicative tasks, but rather on understanding ‘differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview’, in part through a process of interpretation and translation.

If we extend the notion of translation to a pedagogic principle that leads to translanguaging and transcultural competence, then ‘trans-lation’ would become central to the multilingual mindset teachers need to develop. It would mean systematically designing exercises in translation, transcription, transposition - exercises that would systematically practice the transfer of meaning across linguistic codes, discourse frames, media and modalities.

*Translation across linguistic codes.* While communicative language teaching was based on the principle of L2 immersion, multilingual language teaching seeks to bring to the fore the differences in meaning between a word, a phrase, an utterance in one language and its ‘equivalent’ in the other language. These differences are based not only on conventional semantic definitions but also on the subjective, social and cultural resonances of utterances, not only in their standard meaning but in their indexicality, i.e., their meaning relative to the context of the utterance. Marketing strategists know that indexical meaning very well. For instance, the name of an upscale Los Angeles restaurant called ‘*La Poubelle*’ can be translated into English as ‘the garbage can’, but that would not capture the French elegance associated with the sound of the word ‘*poubelle*’. What makes the word sound so French and thus so elegant? Similarly, the advertisement for German cars under the logo ‘*Fahrvergnügen*’ can be the equivalent, according to the dictionary, of ‘pleasure to drive’, but the fact that the German word is used in the U.S. to sell cars to people who don’t know German is a sign that it means more than its dictionary definition, namely ‘German-ness’ per se. What makes that word sound so German and thus German engineering sound so reliable? (Kramsch 2012). Translation as multilingual practice both from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is an exercise both in denotation and in connotation, in the construction of both objective and subjective meanings.

*Translation across discourse frames.* A multilingual mindset draws students’ attention to point of view and perspective in the way speakers frame their utterances and writers frame their sentences. In a globalized world, it is crucial to be able to recognize who is speaking, from which political perspective and according to whose agenda. Students can be asked to reframe a political speech from the point of view of a different candidate or a short story from a different narrator’s perspective, as seen through

the eyes of a different character. The same story can be told in the form of poem or a prose narrative. The same event, reported in newspapers with different political views, or in different national languages, can serve to highlight the importance of framing in global communication. Good ideas related to this can be found in Widdowson (1992), Short (1996), Simpson (1997).

*Transposition from one medium to another.* With the proliferation of multiple channels of communication (spoken, written/printed, virtual) and their text types (conversational, formal/academic oral genres, written genres, online informal emails/formal websites), each with their own appropriate grammar and vocabulary, students operating in a global context need to know which genre is appropriate to which context. Transposing an informal email into a formal letter, a spoken narrative into a written narrative, a written narrative into a dialogue, and transcribing a taped conversation according to the conventions of conversation analysis (Liddicoat 2007: Ch.2), can alert students to variations in the use of language according to the medium chosen. Good ideas related to this can be found in Johnstone (2008) and Kramersch (1993).

*Transfer across modalities.* In the multimodal world of signs that we live in, meaning is made not only through verbal language, but also through musical and visual language. Multilingual practices therefore also include trans-lating a poem or a song into a picture, a narrative into a visual, and vice-versa. (See Kramersch & Huffmaster 2008 & in press.)

Why should language teachers acquire a multilingual mindset if they teach only one language? The term ‘multilingual’ stands here for diversity of meaning, as expressed through the different codes, modes, modalities and styles that have currency in a global world that is now constantly and ubiquitously interconnected. This is the world in which students will be called upon to ‘operate between languages’ and to demonstrate ‘translingual and transcultural competence’. Foreign language teachers do not need to master several languages to design multilingual practices that will help students achieve that goal. They only need to teach language not just in its standard form, but in the individual variations that speakers and writers bring to language as living discourse.

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