

A Multilingual and Multicultural Approach

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The ideas of multilingualism and multiculturalism gain much importance now when the processes of globalization of different spheres of life seem irreversible. To acquire global citizenship, it is necessary to find ways of bridging the gaps between different cultures. The presenter reports on starting a double immersion project—a simultaneous study of Chinese and English—and argues for the necessity of research on comparative studies of social and linguistic behavior to reveal ethnic constants.

色々な国の言葉と文化を理解していく必要性は、さまざまな異なる生活環境がグローバル化されていく中で、大変重要な事となってきました。グローバルな市民権を獲得するには、異なる文化との間にあるギャップに橋をかける努力をしなければなりません。発表者は同時進行プロジェクトについて発表します。発表内容は、中国語と英語を同時に研究し、異なる人種の社会、言語の違いや類似点をその人種をよりよく知るためにリサーチする事が大切だと呼びかけます。

Acquiring one foreign language is a step to better understanding between people; acquiring two or more is a further step forward to forming a global community while still preserving diversity in language and culture.

Choosing foreign languages may depend on the

geographical position of a country. Russia, with its dual European and Asiatic nature, tends to promote both European and Asian languages. Hence, many Far-Eastern universities offer programs in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

The simultaneous study of English and one of the Asian languages might help to achieve some balance between teaching English and other foreign languages and enhance the knowledge of both target languages and cultures involved through the constant comparative study of the languages, the mentalities behind them, and the communicative styles of their native speakers.

Starting research on social and linguistic behaviour, finding and comparing national models, would enlarge mutual understanding and prepare us for *Global Citizenship*.

With a growing number of countries using English, it becomes more important to take into consideration not only matters of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and tolerance of error-making to avoid breakdowns in not only communication, but cultural differences as well.

One of the ways to get a better understanding is to educate our students bilingually, multilingually, and multiculturally, and one of the proofs that the English language can successfully manifest its status as a global language is to use it as a medium of instruction for teaching other languages.

The two most evident tendencies in the development

of the world community at the dawn of the 21st century are the globalization of the English language and the globalization of culture. The messages of computers and airlines are in English; more than 60 percent of scientific communication is in English, while more than two-thirds of all publications are published in only five languages: English, Russian, Spanish, German, and French (Quina, 1989: p. 193). In this context, the ideas of multiculturalism and multilingualism should be promoted to achieve some balance in this process.

The concept of multiculturalism and multilingualism may be seen as twofold. In a society comprised of immigrants, multiculturalism and multilingualism present diverse identities based on the immigrants' ethnicity—a natural phenomenon where each ethnic group strives to preserve its national identity through following and observing national rites, customs and traditions. The purpose of studying a second language, e.g. English in the USA, Canada, etc., is to make a society more homogeneous (the “melting pot” phenomenon). In this case ESL learners may fear losing at least part of their ethnic identity.

In a monolingual society, or at least in a society with one language is predominant, multiculturalism and multilingualism can be achieved formally, and one of the purposes of learning English and other foreign languages is to build bridges between different cultures. In this case, learning a foreign language cannot be restricted to

academic studies. Through observing the rites, traditions and customs of the target language population (either through active *simulation* of everyday situations with different communicative styles, or *making parties* to celebrate various holidays), the learner can acquire, if not a new identity(-ies), then at least a new and deeper understanding of an alien culture—which may eventually cease to be alien, losing at the same time the sense of superiority or condescending attitude that often accompanies stereotyping and prejudices peoples' experience towards alien cultures.

The Setting

The students of the Foreign Languages Departments at Birobijan State Pedagogical Institute study two foreign languages as a rule: one as their first foreign language (FL1) and the other as their second foreign language (FL2). The geographical and ethnographic situation of the Jewish Autonomous Region dictates the necessity of studying European languages, Jewish languages, and Oriental languages. English is taught as FL1 with either Yiddish or French as FL2; or as FL2 with Chinese taught as FL1.

At first, English was used as the medium of instruction in teaching Yiddish, due to the lack of Yiddish textbooks in Russian, and we were forced to use Yiddish textbooks in English. As it turned out, it was beneficial for acquiring linguistic, sociolinguistic

and communicative competences in both languages. Therefore it was decided to continue this practice and to enlarge on it. Not only English as an FL1 has been used for teaching Yiddish, but also English as an FL2 has become useful in teaching Chinese.

Due to the new “Standards for Higher Education,” which allows for a more flexible curriculum, we started a new project: the simultaneous study of two foreign languages, beginning with the first year. The idea behind this project is somehow backed by Peter A. Reich. He speaks of double immersion, that is immersion in two languages, referring to a program developed by two private Jewish schools in Montreal in which Anglophone students take half their day in French and half in Hebrew and, as research shows, the students suffer no losses in English and make great gains in both French and Hebrew (Reich, . 1986: p. 222).

The goals of this project are not just to develop linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences within the frame of one foreign language, but to make an attempt to achieve a more profound knowledge of the cultures involved through constant comparative studies of these languages, the mentalities behind them, and the communicative styles of the native speakers of these languages.

It has been assumed that graduate students have achieved a certain level of proficiency in FL2 to transfer their reading and speaking skills to FL1.

The Experiment

The experiment conducted was to explore the following issues:

- Participants: 15 upper-intermediate learners, Russian students of Chinese and English.
- Materials: Two versions of *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery in English and Chinese.
- Procedure: Subsequent immersion in two languages.

The graduate students were offered a class which we usually call “Home Reading”. Specially selected short stories or novels divided into segments and accompanied by tasks are given to students to be read at home and subsequently discussed in the class. This is the usual procedure for learning a foreign language. What was not quite usual this time was the fact that the same book, *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, was used first for English, and then for Chinese classes.

At first the students saw only the English variant of the text. They performed all the tasks based on vocabulary items and grammar and discussed the main issues raised in the text in English. For the next class, conducted by a native speaker of Chinese, they were given the Chinese variant of the text to work with its vocabulary and grammar and to discuss the same issues, but this time in Chinese.

The main idea behind this sort of immersion was to see whether the English language may serve, not only as a medium/vehicle for learning another foreign language, but also as a facilitator for better acquisition of Chinese vocabulary/lexicon and grammar, and a springboard for discussing socio-cultural and cross-cultural issues concerning the countries involved, in order to make cultural comparisons.

Assessment: Via questionnaire completion

In the next stage the students were offered a short questionnaire aimed at getting their opinion of this sort of practice, and learning whether it helped to facilitate the acquisition of both linguistic and communicative competencies more than using traditional practices.

Results:

Table 1 contains the questions and shows the results as a percentage of the total number of students.

Table 1: *Questions and Results*

Questions	Answers (%)		
	Easy	Medium	Difficult
1. Was the text easy, medium, or difficult to understand from the point of its vocabulary and grammar? The English variant The Chinese variant	86	14	0
	33	60	7
2. Was it easier to understand the Chinese variant and to acquire Chinese vocabulary and grammar after reading and discussing the English variant first? General understanding Vocabulary Grammar	Yes	No	To some extent
			0
	93	7	27
	60	13	33
3. Was it easier to discuss the main topics/themes of the text in Chinese after first doing it in English?	Yes	No	To some extent
	87	0	13
4. Did the discussion of the main issues raised by the text in English motivate you to discuss them in Chinese and to know more about cultural similarities and differences of the three countries (Russia, England/the U.S.A., China)?	Yes	No	To some extent
	93	0	7
5. Was it interesting to discuss the main issues of the text in Chinese after discussing them first in English?	Yes	No	To some extent
	67	13	20
6. Would you like to continue this practice of learning English and Chinese?	Yes	No	
	100	0	

From the table we can see that, though the content was the same, the Chinese variant was more difficult for the students—only 33% of them found it easy, in comparison with 86% of those who found the English variant easy. They noted that while working with the text in Chinese they had to write down more new words than when they had read the English variant. But when it came to whether it was easier to work with the Chinese variant after the English one, 93% of the students noted that it was much easier to understand the text as a whole, 60% of them thought that it helped them to recognize vocabulary items, and only 20% of the students found that it helped them to understand grammar. Practically all the students were of the opinion that it was easier to discuss the main issues of the text in Chinese after first reading it in English. The overwhelming majority of the students—93%—found it highly motivating to discuss the same issues, making cultural comparisons in their Chinese class. However, the percentage of those who found it interesting to discuss the same issues was less—67%—some students answering the question in the negative referred to the process of reading and translating the text (one of them even wrote that he/she disliked translating texts from Chinese knowing their contents). On the other hand, there were students who noted that, knowing the content in English, they were very interested to see how it would look in Chinese. And finally, all the students

expressed the desire to continue this kind of practice. They were all sure that it helped them to memorize vocabulary items both in English and in Chinese much better. They also came to the conclusion that finding similarities and differences in cultures while performing different exercises on cultural comparison lead them to a better understanding of other people and made them more tolerant.

References

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Conclusion

It is a well-known fact that people take different social roles, use different communicative styles, and use different language styles depending on the social contexts they find themselves in. It would much enhance mutual understanding between different ethnic and national communities if we started doing research on comparative studies of social and linguistic behaviour, defining the areas of this research and finding, first, the ethnic/national model for each of the determined areas, and second, constantly comparing these models in the process of language acquisition.