

Continuity across languages, cultures, and stakeholders: Carrying plurilingual suitcases into classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores the creation and testing of teaching materials aimed at promoting plurilingual and intercultural education in Swiss secondary schools. The piloting of these materials, grouped into six thematic units, involved 207 students from ten classes in Eastern Switzerland, revealing a highly diversified linguistic spectrum including European and non-European languages. The feedback brought to light positive engagement on the part of the students, but also challenges. These included the teaching materials' perceived lack of relevance to the pupil's everyday life outside school, and the difficulty for teachers to fit these activities into their busy schedules. While teachers expressed enthusiasm for plurilingual didactics, they perceived practical limitations due to time constraints as a significant obstacle. However, teachers recognised the potential of these activities to inspire pupils to be creative and alleviate their apprehensions about unfamiliar languages and cultures. The information gathered from the initial testing phases offers valuable insights for refining these materials and aligning them with the practical needs of classroom teaching, presenting an essential guide for effective implementation in different educational contexts, with the aim of ensuring a certain regularity to experiences of plurilingual education.

Keywords: Design-based research, task-based pluralistic learning, collaborative development, plurilingual didactic activities, classroom implementation, plurilingual education

1. Introduction

Plurilingualism and the didactics of plurilingualism (Neuner, 2009; Jessner, 2008) have become increasingly important in pedagogical discourse in recent years. This is a direct consequence, among other things, of European endeavours to ensure language skills in at least three languages, with the aim of fostering linguistic, as well as cultural, intercomprehension between the different

regions of the EU (Jessner, 2008: 14). In Switzerland, where a multilingual context already exists at the administrative and cultural levels, the need to address the growing cultural and linguistic diversity among learners in schools, along with the necessity to ensure national cohesion across language boundaries, has played a crucial role in fostering interest towards plurilingual didactics. Generally, the expectations attached to plurilingual approaches in terms of increasing the efficiency of foreign language learning in school settings are very high (Neuner, 2009). (Times New Roman 12, single line spacing, flush-left)

Accordingly, the language curricula for obligatory schooling in Switzerland, developed between 2010 and 2014 and now in force in all language regions, include competence aims referring to individual plurilingualism and awareness of linguistic diversity as a resource, encouraging the individuals to compare different languages. Nonetheless, there is currently a substantial bipartition in the structure of language teaching in Switzerland between the French- and the German-speaking part of Switzerland (apart from the special cases of the canton of Ticino, in the south of Switzerland, and the canton of Grisons, which have their own particular contexts¹). The distinguishing factor lies in the varied sequence of introducing the teaching of national languages and English. In French-speaking Switzerland and along the French-German language border) and precedes English (from the fifth school year). In the rest of German-speaking Switzerland, the order is reversed, with English typically being introduced as the first foreign language from the third school year, followed by French from the fifth. Despite this bipartition, it can be seen that at least at the curricular level, working on three different languages (two national languages plus English) is established throughout Switzerland from the fifth school year onwards, while additional languages (typically a second national language) are often offered from the 7th or 8th school year.

While these curricular principles provide favorable conditions for the implementation of plurilingual didactics at school, a significant lack of research thereon is reported in the literature (Barras, M. et al., 2019: 378). At the same time, studies of teachers' attitudes towards such practices show ambiguous results (Ibid: 379 -382), with a favourable and positive attitude towards the underlying principles of plurilingual didactics clashing with the practical and, above all, timing demands of everyday practice at school. This raises the question of what factors can contribute to the successful integration of plurilingual didactics for a wide range of learners.

2. The QUATTRO-project: Carrying plurilingual suitcases into classrooms

The QUATTRO-project² addresses these questions situated in the Swiss curricular context outlined above. In the following, we present the didactic materials designed and developed for and tested in lower secondary school classrooms – generally comprising pupils in the 12-14 age group – with the aim to jointly promote plurilingual education and the professional pathways of current and future language teacher educators. Three teams of developers directly bring pluralistic activities into schools in a physical suitcase, for classes of learners and their teachers to work with and evaluate. Each of the three sub-teams of developers is made up of a foreign language teacher educator and researcher, an experienced foreign language teacher, and a foreign language student teacher, with the aim to base the development work on a maximally broad range of experiences and expectations, and to gain valuable insights for the professionalization of teacher educators and teachers. The activities were informed by pluralistic approaches (Candelier et al., 2012) and have been developed and piloted with a design-based research approach (Plomp, 2007; Euler, 2014). The activities are divided into separate thematic units each lasting two lessons (90 minutes), with the common objective of transversal development of language learning strategies in a multilingual context and raising awareness of the multilingual reality outside the classroom. A total of six different units were developed, a brief description of which is given below.

2.1 Languages and Space

After having discussed what languages and in which form can be found on various samples of food packaging found in the suitcase, students engage in a linguistic landscaping task of approximately half an hour, involving taking photos of multilingual inscriptions or recording multilingual speech or interaction within the school premises or in the nearby areas (touristic sites, railway station, shops etc.). In the following 25 minutes, they prepare presentations of 5-10 minutes using the data they have collected in groups, reflecting on the distribution and representation of languages.

2.2 Languages and Music

The pupils first listen to songs in a range of known or unknown languages, trying to guess which languages they are and where they are spoken. Then, they get a small suitcase containing tourist vocabulary and phrases for a specific destination. Their task is to write, rehearse and perform a short song in a specific language, and reflect on their experience working with different languages. The concluding activity is a class discussion on language geography where languages are pinned on a large world map.

2.3 Languages and Sport

the activity is organised in groups, with a first preparatory phase in which pupils carry out multilingual listening and pronunciation exercises on topics related to the Olympic Games (athletes, infrastructure, Olympic motto). In the second phase, pupils are asked to put their training into practice in the guided creation of a multilingual podcast presenting the Olympics.

2.4 Languages and Fun

After completing an intercomprehension activity that involves decoding a joke written in Europanto, a constructed language blending elements from various European languages, students are invited to write their own joke or a short story in groups using ‘Klassopanto’, a creative language comprised of all languages belonging to the linguistic repertoire of all learners in the classroom. They are allowed to use ChatGPT if they wish. The main characters in these stories are toys brought by the QUATTRO-Team.

2.5 Language Families

Pupils first engage with the notion of language families by adding short excerpts of Germanic, Slavonic and Romance languages as leaves to a physical language tree. Then, they are offered texts in four lesser-known Romance languages about visiting cities, which they decipher using intercomprehension strategies and translate into French.

2.6 Languages and Art

As part of an Interpol investigation, pupils have to solve several multilingual riddles on art topics, mainly based on intercomprehension and recognition of parallels between different languages, in order to collect clues to unmask a gang of art thieves and identify their next artistic target.

As can be guessed from this very brief description, the rich range of languages involved also offers the possibility to integrate and enhance the learners' home languages. At the level of competences, an attempt has been made to cover a wide range, with activities focusing mainly on speaking and

listening (recording a multilingual podcast, creating a song), on comparing languages (recognising and grouping languages in different language families) or on writing (creating one's own language using Europanto as an inspiration and practicing writing a multilingual text with the support of artificial intelligence).

3. Implementation and results of the testing phase

The first test phase took place at the turn of 2022 to 2023. Each teaching unit was tested twice, independently of the school subject, in different secondary school classes in Eastern Switzerland. The developers, working in mixed teams, brought suitcases into the classrooms and conducted two corresponding thematical lessons with the assistance of on-site foreign language teachers. At the end of each test, data was collected on each student's demographic background and on questions related to the activities just completed by means of a paper questionnaire. For the teachers, on the other hand, a dialogue-based data collection method was chosen, with a semi-standardized oral interview approximately 1-2 weeks after the visit. A second test phase, involving three suitcases at the same time in three working groups – randomly created by mixing three classes of equal age – was carried out between the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024.

During the first phase, the QUATTRO team conducted two data conferences (focus group discussions) to analyze the collected data and make improvements for the second testing phase, following a Design Based Research process. The materials were then tested in ten different classes with a total of 207 pupils with an average age of 13 years (102 male, 102 female, 3 other) who were in their seventh or eighth year of schooling. Two teachers provided several classes and two classes tested several suitcases. The range of languages present in the classes is very varied, mainly in the urban context. In general, beside the main languages, Swiss German and German, English is often mentioned in the questionnaires filled in by pupils as a spoken and known language, much less so French. More sporadic are the languages present in the area as a result of migratory flows, such as other Romance languages (Spanish, Italian, Romansh and Portuguese), Slavic languages (Serbian, Russian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Polish, Macedonian, Bosnian), other Germanic languages (Swedish, Austrian), Albanian, Finnish and many non-European languages (Turkish, Arabic, Tibetan, Japanese, Tigrinja, Igbo, Vietnamese, Farsi). In our opinion, the cultural and linguistic diversity present in a relatively small sample of pupils offers an extremely favourable context for implementation of plurilingual approaches to language learning at school, with the possibility of capitalizing on the heritage languages and cultures of the pupils alongside the canonical languages taught at school. As far as the classroom experience with the different materials is concerned, it is impossible here to give a detailed account of the results.

The pupils were asked ten general questions identical for each teaching unit with additional questions (in a range of 5-10 questions) specific to each suitcase. The questions were aimed at gathering the pupils' impressions in relation to topics such as comprehension of the exercises, relevance of the topics covered, degree of satisfaction in general and working with multilingual materials. Many positive aspects were highlighted, including a significant underlying interest in the topics covered, the multilingual nature of the exercises, and a high degree of enjoyment and satisfaction experienced by students when performing the exercises. However, several critical points also emerged, e.g. there was a low perceived relevance of the topics to the students' everyday extracurricular life. As for the teachers, they were asked about their attitudes towards the didactics of plurilingualism and about the more practical aspects of using the materials in the classroom during the test phase. The results align with the initial assertion of a substantial fundamental willingness to the cardinal principles of plurilingual didactics. However, in line with the previous findings, this willingness clashes with the practical reality, as teachers express difficulty in finding space for this type of activity within their dense curriculum. Despite this, when specifically questioned, the teachers easily identified points of contact or possible intersections with what is

typically undertaken in the language classroom. Two positive aspects can indeed be seen in these two extracts from the interviews. In the first case, a teacher emphasises the motivational potential of such activities:

They [the pupils] thought it was cool, it was just something completely different. They also work creatively sometimes, but no one has ever done that before, combining all languages in one text. To get out of the usual comfort zone, to hold something in their hands and so on, something completely different, that also gives them courage.

Another teacher recognises the contribution that such activities can have on the attitude to other languages and cultures, one of the primary objectives of multilingual education as discussed above in the opening of this contribution:

You can take away the students' fear of a foreign language or a foreign culture. The awareness can also be raised that they already know a lot, can connect with others and communicate. With the language tree, it could be shown that other languages can also be so close to each other.

In conclusion, although the feedback on the suitcase materials has been extremely positive, it remains a challenge to integrate this type of activities into the teachers' regular practice, so that they are not perceived as a one-time 'event' before returning to normal monolingual teaching. To address this potential problem, in the second phase of development, teachers will be offered follow-up and more in-depth activities based on pluralistic approaches. These activities will be implemented independently by the teachers in their regular teaching, without support from the QUATTRO team. These will be carried out in the months preceding or following the work with the suitcases. The aim is thus to give a certain regularity to the moments of plurilingual education, according to a principle of spiral education, and attempting to establish further design principles for implementation.

Endnotes

- 1) Ticino, the only Italian-speaking canton in Switzerland, introduces French in the third school year, German in the seventh and English only in the eighth. In the canton of Grisons, the only officially trilingual canton, a second national language (depending on the area, German, Romansh or Italian) is introduced from the third school year and English from the fifth school year.
- 2) See for more details: <https://www.phsg.ch/de/forschung-entwicklung/projekte/quattro>.

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