

Chapter 9

Developing Language Awareness in Primary School Children With Multilingual Virtual Talking Books: First Results of the Pilot Study

Viviane Lohe

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Daniela Elsner

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the software application MuViT (Multilingual Virtual Talking Books) which was developed within an EU funded Comenius project between 2011 and 2013. MuViT contains digital storybooks in five different languages (German, English, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish). The article specifies the theoretical background of the project, the software application and its objectives, as well as the research interests and first findings with regard to the development of mono- and plurilingual primary school pupils' language awareness while and after working with MuViT for 6 weeks.

1. INTRODUCTION: CHANGES IN OUR SOCIETY CHANGES IN OUR CLASSROOMS

1.1. Multilingualism in Education Contexts

As a consequence of migration, globalization, and increasing mobility, modern societies are characterised by a growing cultural and linguistic diversity. Already in 2006, the Eurobarometer (2006) stated that 56 per cent of EU-citizens speak at least one foreign language in addition to their L1 (cf. Elsner, 2013). 28

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per cent indicate that they even master two foreign languages apart from their first language. Naturally, a growing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity can be observed at inner-city schools, too.

Long ago educational policies and educational planning have reacted to these cultural, linguistic, and technological changes within our society. On a European level, multilingualism is a defined educational goal. The Council of Europe declares that

Education systems need to ensure the harmonious development of learners' plurilingual competence through a coherent, transversal and integrated approach that takes into account all the languages in learners' plurilingual repertoire and their respective functions. This includes promoting learners' consciousness of their existing repertoires and potential to develop and adapt those repertoires to changing circumstances (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 5).

In connection with this, Germany's 'National Integration Plan' states that multilingualism in classrooms shall be considered as an enrichment and not as a deficit anymore (cf. Federal Ministry of Germany, 2007). Accordingly, in Germany's foreign language curricula, raising curiosity and enjoyment of other languages is mentioned as one of the central aims of foreign language education, and the integration of heritage languages is a desired tool to help pupils to find out about similarities and differences between different languages, first, second and foreign languages (e.g. Hessisches Kulturministerium [HKM], 2010, p. 16). In line with all of these documents, foreign language pedagogy proclaims that "the potential of migration-induced multilingualism [...] should be fully utilised" (Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 258) and that "linguistic diversity has to be regarded as an opportunity and not a task" (Luchtenberg, 1997: 121, translation D.E.).

But even though national curricula and European guidelines suggest this integrative approach in regard to heritage languages, the reality shows that the majority of teachers do not deal with other languages than that of the target language in first or foreign language classrooms in a frequent mode (cf. Elsner, 2011; Hu, 2010, p. 67). One out of several reasons for this is that many teachers do not believe that pupils – be they mono- or plurilingual – could benefit from the integration of heritage languages into the classroom to any extent, as they see the school language as the reference language for any learning process, including foreign language learning (cf. Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 262). The most prominent reason for the absence of other languages in the foreign language classroom however, is the lack of concrete methodological guidelines for the application and implementation of languages that neither the teacher nor the majority of pupils in the classroom can speak or understand. And, although proposals for the inclusion of other languages for older learners exist (cf. Esteve, 2004; Reif-Breitwieser, 2004; Preker-Franke & Preker, 2011), suggestions for the comparison and integration of different heritage languages at primary school level are restricted to single word comparisons of the target language and the dominant language of the surrounding. A lack of knowledge with respect to plurilingual awareness coupled with insecurity in dealing with unknown languages by teachers as well as the missing material are the essential reasons why, apart from the well-known and often criticised "monolingual habitus of the German school" (cf. Gogolin, 1994), multilingualism indeed is an accepted educational goal in theory but is still ignored as a learning objective in practice to date.

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