

# PLURILINGUALISM IN TEACHER EDUCATION FOR MULTICULTURAL SCHOOLS AND KINDERGARTENS IN ESTONIA

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## Abstract

*Plurilingualism as the principle and the aim of education policies presupposes that all teachers know several languages, are aware of particularities of multicultural educational environments and can apply methodology of content and language integrated learning. This paper will discuss how these principles of plurilingualism are realized in teacher education in Estonia which is a multicultural country inhabited by representatives of more than 100 ethnicities with Estonians being the title nation. The Russian language is spoken by almost 30% of the 1.3 million population of the country. Such an ethnic and linguistic composition of the society puts forward a number of challenges for the Estonian system of education – to its system of general education with 20% of it working in Russian, to tertiary education and to teacher education in particular. One of the ways of meeting the requirements set to plurilingual teacher education is the implementation of a trilingual teacher education model with the focus being placed on content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and with language immersion being a part of it. By analyzing various aspects of the model the authors will present the advantages and challenges of its realization.*

**Key words:** CLIL, multiculturalism, plurilingualism, teacher education.

## Introduction

With contemporary society being mostly characterized as multicultural, education, as one of its socialization institutions, has to be of the same nature. The concept of multiculturalism, originating in America, presupposed the emergence of a mixture of cultures which had resulted from close communication and interaction of representatives of various ethnic groups. In other words, on the basis of many separate cultures there was created a new common diverse culture, and hence a new group identity was formed. Modern concepts of multiculturalism pay greater attention and respect to individual cultures – their coexistence and mutual enrichment, as well as the formation of new cultural experiences which are based on the idea of preserving and developing a whole variety of traditions and values of various national and ethnic groups (Nieto, 2004; Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005; Sleeter, 2007; Bennett, 2007; Banks, 2008). Modern educational environments should support interaction between people of various cultural backgrounds, and create pre-conditions for independent and free self-determination of socio-cultural identity. With such support, the participants of the educational process will acquire experience of cross-cultural interaction on the one hand, and they can enrich and develop their own cultural background on the other.

According to Banks (1988) multicultural education has evolved in the following way: mono-ethnic direction in education – multiethnic direction in education – multiethnic education

– multicultural education. The transfer from one phase to the other can be considered as both the reaction and historical development and progress in education, caused by changing socio-political and socio-cultural conditions. Thus, education has passed from cultural monism to cultural pluralism.

With the main principles of multiculturalism being implemented, the educational environment is characterized not only by a positive respectful attitude to various cultures, and a readiness to dialogue and tolerance, but it is supposed to be plurilingual in its essence. Plurilingualism, as the principle and the aim of education policies, presupposes that all teachers know several languages, are aware of particularities of multicultural educational environments and can apply methodology of content and language integrated learning (European Commission, 2005).

### **Teacher Education Principles in Estonia**

Estonia joined the European Union in 2004. It is a small country where Estonian is the sole official language. Today Estonia is a multicultural country inhabited by representatives of more than 100 ethnicities with Estonians being the title nation. The Russian language is spoken by almost 30% of the 1.3 million population of the country. Such an ethnic and linguistic composition of the society puts forward a number of challenges to the Estonian system of education – to its system of general education with 20% of it working in Russian, to tertiary education and teacher education in particular.

Various frame documents describe expectations from teachers. The Estonian Professional Standard for Teachers underlines the importance of developing the knowledge and skills of working in a multicultural educational environment. Teachers are expected to take into consideration their students' various language mastery and cultural backgrounds while organizing the study process. Moreover, the teacher is supposed to have an understanding of the history and culture of Estonia, Europe and the world; to represent the values of the national identity and to shape the society's intellectual potential (Teacher's Professional Standard V, 2005). The Estonian Integration Programme until 2013 puts a lot of emphasis on the role of the teacher in preserving and supporting cultural values; the teacher has to secure a positive attitude and respect toward other cultures (State Integration Programme for 2008-2013, 2008). The Teacher Education Strategy until 2013 underlines the importance of including the methodology of teaching subjects in a foreign language into all teacher education programmes. At the state level there is an understanding and support of the organization of content teachers' internship in educational institutions of different types and with languages of instruction different from the students' mother tongue (The Estonian Teacher Education Strategy for 2009-2013, 2009). The new National Curriculum for Basic and Upper-secondary schools, adopted in 2010, emphasizes the importance of content and language integrated learning methodology for the development and support of students' plurilingualism (Basic and Upper-secondary School National Curricula, 2010).

### **Principles of Plurilingualism in Teacher Education**

In today's Estonia there are no mono-lingual educational institutions at any of the educational levels. In Estonian kindergartens, together with studies of the mother tongue, there are classes of Estonian for children whose native language is Russian, starting from the age of three years; English is taught to children of 5-6 years old in many kindergartens. Mainstream secondary and upper-secondary schools offer at least three languages to study – mother tongue, first foreign language (English as a rule), second foreign language (German or French); in the case when Estonian is not a native language of school students, it has to be studied as a

second language from the first school grade. To make the multilingual model of kindergarten and school education successful, it is important for teacher education to be truly plurilingual. One of the ways of meeting the requirements set out for plurilingual teacher education is the implementation of a trilingual teacher education model, with the focus being placed on content and language integrated learning (CLIL) with language immersion being a part of it.

At the end of the 1990s Estonia started to develop and implement the main principles of content and language integrated learning by following good Canadian and Finnish practices of early and late language immersion. The key task of language immersion programmes in Estonia is to develop knowledge and understanding of the Estonian society, together with the mastery of Estonian and Russian languages, and to instil corresponding cultural awareness. Annual researches (Language Immersion Scientific Researches 2001-2009, 2011), and monitoring of the language immersion programme implementation, have shown that students who are enrolled with language immersion programmes acquire not only three languages (Estonian, Russian and English) but demonstrate the required content knowledge of all subjects included into the National Curriculum; they also demonstrate the ability of critical thinking and they perform as active and open participants in communicative acts. Schools with different types of classes – both language immersion classes and classes conducted in the school language of instruction – are excellent places for a mixture of cultures, since the same teachers work in both types of classes. This data has also been confirmed by studies into the academic success of the first basic school graduates from language immersion programmes by Sau-Ek, Loogma, Võõbus (2010).

The idea of inclusion methods of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and language immersion into teacher education in Estonia was first introduced by Narva College of the University of Tartu in 2001. Narva College of the University of Tartu (founded in 1999) is a structural unit of the University of Tartu, the only Estonian classical university, with the rights and obligations of that of a faculty. The College is located in the border city of Narva – on the border of Estonia with Russia (62000 inhabitants, 96% of the population are Russian speaking). The characteristic feature of Narva College is that the majority of its students are native Russian speakers. The strength of Narva College is that it is the only place in Estonia providing teacher education for Estonian multilingual educational institutions – pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers of humanities and social studies in three languages (Estonian, Russian and English). This trilingual tertiary education model meets the expectations of Estonian Russian-speaking youth as the recent research data show (students' survey – see the *Assessment of the model of plurilingual education in students' feedback* section of the article), and corresponds to the European Union's strategy aimed at plurilingualism (European Commission, 2008).

The College teacher education curricula put a particular emphasis on training teachers for content and language integrated learning (CLIL teachers) with language immersion being a part of it. This training presupposes that teachers will get knowledge of the principles and advantages of multicultural education; they will be aware of how languages are acquired and what the key principles of teaching in a target language are; they will master skills of integrating content teaching with language learning, with a proper balance between them; the teachers will be able to apply CLIL methodology in practice and will learn how to compose study materials to support both content and language learning in the classroom.

Apart from pre-service CLIL teacher training Narva College plays an important role in in-service CLIL teacher training and in popularization of the concept and advantages of content and language integrated teaching at all educational levels by developing the Estonian CLIL network. Moreover, the teaching methods of the College academic staff are based on CLIL methodology, and involve College students in a CLIL learning environment on a daily basis. By experiencing the advantages of this methodology, students already become advocates of this teaching philosophy during their university studies.

The College's CLIL teacher training programme supports best practices in CLIL teacher training in European universities. As comparative research (Lopez, 2011) reveals, in almost all EU countries (France, Germany, Spain, the UK, Austria, etc) with CLIL teaching, educational authorities offer a course, module, subject or even specific degree for training in this methodology. In case of CLIL with regional or minority languages, it is taken for granted that teachers generally have a good command of two languages (the mother- and the co-official). In case of the College programmes, language mastery of the official language is priority number one, as the Estonian educational sphere requires from teachers knowledge of the Estonian language at C1 and B2 levels, depending on whether teaching is conducted in Estonian or Russian/English/German/French, etc.

Hence, one more important aspect of training plurilingual teachers is the support of general and special language studies. Studies of the Estonian language are offered to all students, in the form of general Estonian language classes and Estonian for special purposes classes, along with content teaching in Estonian. For students whose mother tongue is Estonian the time allocated for general language classes is used for studies of Russian or any other foreign language. The volume of Estonian studies amounts up to 30 European credit points (ECPs), and classes can be attended during several terms.

The College implements various models of Estonian language studies: subjects can be taught solely or partially in Estonian; one and the same group of students can be taught by two lecturers: in Estonian and in Russian. While planning content teaching in Estonian several aspects are to be taken into consideration, with the language mastery of the target group of students being the first priority; a special focus is placed on the Estonian language skills and subject knowledge required for teaching certain disciplines at a particular educational level (e.g. physical exercises in early years educational institutions and physical education at school levels I (primary school) and II (basic school up to the 9th grade), nature and human studies with methodology of their teaching at school levels I and II). The academic transcript of each college student provides information about all languages of instruction at the college if the volume of the studies in them is at least 40% of the volume of all compulsory courses.

When the studies are conducted in the Estonian language students are supported with study materials in their mother tongue (Russian), and they can also communicate with their lecturer in their mother tongues. As a rule, students account for their independent work and contact study assignments in the language of instruction, however, in order to support student's interest and provide deeper knowledge of a subject, students and the lecturer can agree on the language of communication themselves. This flexible attitude allows students to apply their language skills in a friendly and safe language environment. The studies are scaffolded by the use of specially devised e-learning materials, materials in a second language for special purposes and bilingual study materials. Estonian language acquisition, and motivation for its studies, are supported by the organization of teaching internships and the study process in a safe Estonian language environment, as well as by organization of thematic study trips aimed at developing content and language competences outside the college (e.g., a number of courses are delivered in the native Estonian language environment when students of the college study in mixed groups with students of other Estonian teacher education programmes; country studies take place in Lahemaa National Park in Estonia; study field trips are aimed at visiting various places in the Ida-Viru County of Estonia). Upon completion of college studies students have to pass final exams or defend graduation theses. In the case of specialities which require a B2 level of Estonian language mastery for the completion of the study programme, graduates can also write their research papers and defend them in Russian. However, at the Master's level graduates have to perform at their finals in their speciality language or in English.

In conclusion, the advantages of the Estonian studies model are predetermined by the principle of forming groups according to the initial language mastery level of the students, and

by offering extensive immersion language programmes in other regions of Estonia, outside Narva, in the form of summer and winter schools of professional or conversational Estonian language studies. However, in spite of the opportunities for Estonian language studies provided by the College, there is room for further improvement as, every year unfortunately, there are cases when students cannot reach the level of mastery which permits them to graduate from the college. The reasons behind it are connected not only with the individual difficulties of students, and challenges of level language exams, but also with the peculiarities of such study forms as, for example, the Open University and Master's studies, and with the reduced number of contact hours, etc.

Alongside with Estonian language studies all teacher education curricula put a particular emphasis on English language studies. The student's level of English language mastery (as opposed to Estonian language mastery) is not assessed by language level exams additional to subject exams, with the exception of the case of English language teacher education curricula. At the level of Master's studies students of the *Teacher of English* speciality have to pass the international *Certificate in Advanced English* (CAE) examination successfully, which gives graduates the right to teach English as a second (L2) or third (L3) foreign language in European and Estonian general secondary and upper secondary schools. With all other teacher education curricula the aim of English language studies is to enable students to acquire the English language at level B2 (Teacher's Professional Standard V, 2005). The task is realized not only through English language classes but during content studies in English. Additionally, in order to motivate college students for studies of the English language, they are regularly informed about numerous students' exchange opportunities within Erasmus programmes (the College has agreements with nine partner universities from Belgium, Holland, Austria, the UK, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Finland), and are invited to apply for participation with them. One more important aspect of everyday support of studies in English is the regular use of research and study literature in English by students of all teacher education curricula.

The main pre-requisite for realization of the above described trilingual teacher education model is in having competent academic staff. When, 10 years ago, the College began its educational activities, its working language was Russian. The key challenge at that time for the academic staff was the improvement of its Estonian language mastery to reach the level of teaching in Estonian. At present all full-time teaching staff's Estonian language mastery is at least at level B2. Content teaching in Estonian is performed by lecturers whose Estonian language level is C1 or that of a native speaker. For the last two years the focus of professional development has been placed on English language mastery, to enable content teachers to transfer to teaching in English. In this way, the College curricula will support international teacher and student exchange. Besides this, special attention is being paid to the mastery of modern teaching methods of integrating content and language teaching.

### **Assessment of the Model of Plurilingual Education in Students' Feedback**

Narva College conducts regular surveys among its students (since 2005) to find out how students evaluate the model of plurilingual education in the College and what kind of support is provided by the College academic and administrative staff in their studies. The survey is carried out once every academic year by distributing a questionnaire which consists of three groups of questions. The first one includes questions aimed at revealing students' attitude towards the quality and quantity of general and for special purposes studies of Estonian/English/Russian in the College; the second group focuses on students' satisfaction with quality and quantity of content teaching in Estonian/English/Russian; questions of the third category help to understand what kind of assistance students expect from the academic and administrative staff.

In the 2010/11 academic year 262 College students participated in the survey. While as-

sessing the support of language and content studies in the college, the majority of the students (Table 1) believe that content teaching is conducted in a safe and enriching learning environment with corresponding language scaffolding.

**Table 1. Support of Language and Content Studies (%).**

	Yes	No	No reply
Are your language studies supported during content teaching?	77.5	22.5	0
Is your content learning supported in language classes?	71.4	28.2	0.4
Are you provided with safe and enriching learning environment created for you?	79.0	19.1	1.9

Apart from what is done by academic staff to support and inspire students in developing language skills and competences, the institutional support and the way studies are organized play a decisive role in instilling plurilingualism in students of teacher education curricula. The survey has revealed that, in terms of the number of contact hours, the volume of studies in three languages in all teacher education curricula is sufficient for the improvement of language mastery; a particular advantage of the College's plurilingual model of studies is seen in the terminological support of the study process in various languages (Table 2). The students believe that the College's policy of increasing the share of teaching in Estonian/English/Russian is the right measure to support them in their efforts to reach the appropriate level of the languages of the curricula.

**Table 2. Institutional support (%).**

	Less	The same	More
Additional learning/teaching of Estonian/English/Russian for professional purposes	10	66	24
Additional foreign language teaching	8	47	45
Increase of the share of teaching in Estonian/English	12	62	26
Support of bilingual teaching for improvement of Estonian language skills (in the study process the terminology is presented in two languages, partial teaching in both Estonian and Russian)	15	43	42
Extracurricular activities in Estonian/English	24	46	30

With the help of the students' answers to the questionnaire the academic and administrative staff perform monitoring of the development of the language mastery of College students and can make necessary correction measures to improve the situation.

However, with Open University students, who are traditionally represented by an older age group in comparison with daytime students, there is less interest in the increase of the share of their studies in foreign languages, as they prefer to study in their mother tongue.

As an integrative part of the monitoring process there are organized regular annual meetings of the programme managers and administration staff with potential employers of teacher education curricula students (directors of general secondary schools, upper-secondary schools and early years educational institutions). They underline the importance of plurilingualism of college students and believe that it as an important asset to their competitiveness in the labour market. In fact, the majority of college students receive offers for after-graduation employment during their teaching internship.

## Conclusions

Plurilingualism is one of the key competences of teachers who are employed with kindergartens and schools of the multicultural type. Multiculturalism in modern education is based on respect for other cultures and tolerance on the one hand, and it presupposes teachers' readiness to work in the multicultural educational environment, which in its turn includes corresponding to this type of education value priorities, and the professional-methodological competences of teaching subject matter in at least three languages, on the other hand.

Realization of plurilingual education in kindergartens and schools requires appropriate teacher education and training. The most popular and widely applicable models of developing the plurilingual competence in Estonia are CLIL with language immersion being a part of it. Hence, these models are successfully implemented at the level of early years and primary/secondary school education, as well as at the level of teacher education at the tertiary level. The implementation of these models in Narva College of the University of Tartu teacher education curricula has required significant changes in both content and organization of the study process; it has also led to a reconsideration and follow-up improvement of teaching methods and strategies in teacher education. Regularly performed monitoring of students' opinions and assessment of the trilingual education model reveals their satisfaction with both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the model's implementation. College graduates are successfully employed within the kindergartens and schools of Estonia, and apply further in their everyday teaching practice the models of language immersion and CLIL teaching. The continuity of a realization of the concept of plurilingualism is supported at all educational levels – from the first level of a child's education (kindergartens) up to the tertiary education level.

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