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TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT MULTILINGUALISM AT UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Brikena Xhaferi
Full Professor, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication
South East European University, North Macedonia
b.xhaferi@seeu.edu.mk

Uskana Smajlaj, MA
Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication
South East European University, North Macedonia
u.smajlaj@seeu.edu.mk

Jeta Hamzai
High Lecotr, Language Centre
South East European University, North Macedonia
j.hamzai@seeu.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' beliefs about multilingualism at universities in North Macedonia. Multilingualism as a concept is related to an individual's ability to speak three or more languages. Given the educational and cultural globalization, multilingualism is crucial in many countries in the world. North Macedonia is an excellent example of multilingualism where different cultures live together and learn the languages of each other.

At Universities across the country, teachers face different challenges while teaching multilingual classes. Linguistic competence in many local languages allows students to learn foreign languages

easily and thus raises students' global awareness and deepens knowledge about their future teaching career.

The study analysed data collected from thirty EFL teachers from four different universities, Southeast European University, University of Tetova, Mother Teresa University and International Balkan University in North Macedonia. The research instrument used was the teacher survey which contained five domains: Teachers' perspective on multilingualism; Students' language learning knowledge; Language teacher collaboration; Learning materials, and other topics related to L2 learning and teaching.

The study results revealed that teachers view multilingualism as a positive asset for the students, and they expressed that they have developed an approach which helps multilinguals to achieve their learning goals. One area which needs improvement is teacher collaboration, as they tend to collaborate regarding materials and textbooks, however, not willing to share their experience on teaching methods/strategies and challenges faced.

Key words: North Macedonia, multilingualism, Universities, teachers' beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism as a concept refers to the use of more than two languages in everyday communication. Generally, multilinguals possess larger linguistic repertoires, and they can also participate in different language situations, therefore, making appropriate extensive language choices (Nordquist, 2019).

The Ethnologue (2022) is a catalogue that provides data on identified languages, and ranked Papua New Guinea as the most multilingual country, with over 839 living languages. Even though this country has a small population of 7 million, most likely, the separation of tribes resulted in developing different dialects. At the same time, the least multilingual country in the world, cited from the same source, is North Korea. According to the Eurobarometer Report ''Europeans and their languages'' (2012), there were identified around 23 official languages, which include 60 indigenous/minority languages. ''The majority of a trilingual population which met the European policy objective include the following countries: Luxembourg (84%), the Netherlands (77%), Slovenia (67%), Malta (59%), Denmark (58%), Latvia (54%), Lithuania (52%) and Estonia (52%). In contrast, the countries

which are ways from this target are `Portugal and Hungary (13% in each), the UK (14%) and Greece (15%)'' (p.2).

Regarding the research context, The Republic of North Macedonia is a multilingual and multi-ethnic country inhabited by many ethnic groups. They are as follows: Macedonians (65.2%), Albanians (24.2%), Turks (3.9%), Roma (2.7%), 1.8% Serbs, etc. There are two official languages in the country: Macedonian and Albanian. People living in North Macedonia speak more than one language in their everyday communication. The education system in North Macedonia comprises of the following cycles of education: Pre-school education (1 year), Primary (8 years), Secondary (4 years), and Higher education (3-4 years) following the Bologna Process.

Also, the citizens of North Macedonia use two or three languages daily which they have acquired from the surrounding. Knowledge of the local languages, Macedonian and Albanian, are one of the main job requirements when people apply for a job position. Whilst the English language is the first foreign language taught in the school from the second grade, primary education. The school curriculum also offers other languages, such as German, in some schools, but there is a tendency to be included in all schools due to its importance in the EU. Additionally, there is a different situation at universities where the languages of instruction are Albanian, Macedonian and English for all fields of study, and teachers struggle to find an approach which would suitable to respond to the needs of the varied student body. Realizing the importance of this issue, investigating the benefits and teachers' perceptions on multilingualism, might offer some innovative ideas for teaching and will fill in the gaps which exist in the system of education in North Macedonia.

In conclusion, it can be stated that educational institutions worldwide should struggle to offer the best possible learning opportunities for their multilingual students and collaborate as much as possible in different projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays, more than half of the population in the world uses two or three languages in their communication, and people are aware of the benefits that multilingualism has. In fact, knowing more languages open our doors to communicating with different cultures on both levels, personal and professional.

Crystal (cited in Bahtia and Ritchie 2013, p.xxi) ‘’estimates that two-thirds of the world’s children grow up in a plurilingual environment…. The processes of globalization now in progress can only increase the extent and character of plurilingualism, as people the world over continue to recognize the advantage of adding a world language to their verbal repertoires”. Plurilingualism, which goes hand in hand with multilingualism, rules the world nowadays and will continue to increase in the future.

“Most of the research carried out about multilingualism supports the acquisition and use of different languages in different domains and illustrates advantages of multilinguals, such as superior metalinguistic and meta-cognitive abilities” (Bialystock, 2011; Cenoz, 2003; De Angelis, 2007 cited in Lundberg 2018, p.268). What is more, multilingualism involves variety of linguistic elements, skills and abilities which are different from individual to individual which later allow them to live together.

Research conducted on multilingualism showed that multicultural education has a significant impact on the achievements of students, including the teachers’ perceptions of their decision-making actions in their everyday instruction. Lundberg (2018), in his study, explored teachers’ beliefs about multilingualism and multilingual students in Swedish primary schools. He used a so-called Q method which combined both qualitative and quantitative data analyses. The study participants were 40 teachers, mostly females, from three different primary schools in Sweden. The results of the study showed that teachers hold positive attitudes towards multilingualism and multilingual students and gladly accepted translanguaging. Nonetheless, there were some pessimistic views regarding the implementation of pluralistic policies in their country. The results of the study opened a path to a debate about the challenges of multilingualism in education nowadays.

Andonova, Sela and Matovski (2022) in their study investigated challenges caused by legal issues and politics of state formation in North Macedonia. They analysed the use of the local language and the rights of linguistics belonging to different ethnicities living in the country. The paper also aimed to identify some current regulations on how the local language is used and the influence they have on the identity of these nationalities in a multilingual and multi-ethnic country. In the end, the paper provides some analytical thoughts, the implementation of the ethnic rights and further requests which should be made.

Additionally, Rustemi (2020) in his research, explored Multiculturalism in North Macedonia as being in close association ‘’with "identity politics," "the politics of difference," and "the politics of recognition," all of which share a commitment to revaluing disrespected identities and changing dominant patterns of representation and communication that marginalize certain groups’’(Rustemi, 2020, p.8). He strongly believes that Multiculturalism represents the power in economy and politics, and very often, minorities in North Macedonia suffer some consequences. The study highlights the importance of social sciences and the advancement of democracy to prevent potential conflicts.

Furthermore, Haukås in her study conducted in Norway in 2016, explored the beliefs of Norwegian language teachers on multilingualism and how they approach teaching and teaching strategies used in the classroom of three languages. The focus group comprised of 12 teachers: French (N = 4), Spanish (N = 6) and German (N = 2). The results showed that multilingualism is useful to language learning, but it is not considered being an asset to the learners. The study participants claimed that they make a good use of the learners' linguistic knowledge of both languages, English and Norwegian, but English languages is more used when teaching the third language. The participants reported that they do not often use the transfer of learning strategies as they believed that learning the third language differs from learning the target language and the second language. It is worth to emphasize that the study participants, believed that learner collaboration across languages might support learners' language learning; nonetheless, that level of desired collaboration in non-existent.

Finally, Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2012) explored perceptions of language teachers towards multicultural education and the teaching strategies used by them in teaching those multilingual groups. The research context was Southeast European University. The research was conducted

using two instruments that is the questionnaire for teachers and classroom observations. The study results showed that for teachers teaching in a multilingual classroom is quite a challenge, but they enjoyed it at the same time. Teachers strongly believed that learning more than two languages can be beneficial for younger generations because of their future carrier. It is also very important to learn the languages of the local ethnicities in the country in order to live in harmony with the others. This fact demonstrates that people living in multilingual and multicultural environments can learn and use two and more languages in their everyday communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this research is to explore and discuss teachers' beliefs about multilingualism at four different universities in North Macedonia. During the professional meetings and seminars, teachers express that they face different challenges while teaching in multilingual classes therefore, this argument served as the basis for conducting this research.

The study analysed data collected from thirty EFL teachers from four universities in the country: South East European University, University of Tetova, Mother Teresa University and International Balkan University.

The research instrument used to collect data was the teacher survey which contained five domains: Teachers' perspective on multilingualism; Students' language learning knowledge; Language teacher collaboration; Learning materials, and other topics related to L2 learning and teaching. The survey was taken from Haukås (2016), which she used in her study with Norwegian teachers.

Research questions

Research questions which guide this study are:

- What are the teachers' beliefs about multilingualism at Universities in North Macedonia?
- Which are the challenges teachers face while teaching in multilingual classrooms?
- What is the level of teacher collaboration with other language teachers to enhance learners' multilingualism?

Research Instrument

The research used a teacher survey which contains 5 domains. The survey consists of the following part: participants' background and 1) Teachers' perspective on multilingualism; 2) Students' language learning knowledge; 3): Language teacher collaboration; 4) Learning materials, and 5) Other topics related to L2 learning and teaching.

Participants

There are 30 teachers who participated in this study, and they volunteered for this research. All teachers were explained the aim of the research, and they were informed about the results.

Universities	***Number of participants per University***	***Gender***	***Teacher qualification***	***Ethnicity***	***Languages teachers speak***
Southeast European University	*10*	*7 Females, 3 Males*	*7/ PhD, 3/ MA*	*6 Albanians, 3 Macedonians, 1 Turkish*	*Albanian Macedonian Turkish English German*
University of Tetova	*8*	*5 Females, 3 Males*	*4/PhD, 4/MA*	*6 Albanians, 1 Macedonian, 1 Turk*	*Albanian Macedonian Turkish English German*
Mother Teresa University	*6*	*4 Females, 2 Males*	*2/PhD, 4/MA*	*4 Albanians, 2 Macedonians*	*Albanian Macedonian Turkish English*
International Balkan University	*6*	*3 Females, 3 Males*	*3/PhD, 3/MA*	*3 Albanians, 1 Macedonian, 1 Turkish*	*Albanian Turkish Macedonian English*

Table 1: Background of the participants

As Table 1 demonstrates, all 30 teachers who participated in this research hold either a master's or Ph.D. degree because these are the main requirements to teach at Universities in North Macedonia. When it comes to the gender of the participants, 19 were females and 11 males

belonging to different ethnic groups: Albanian, Macedonian and Turks. Another important point to mention is that all teachers speak more than three languages, mainly Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish and the language of their profession, English/German.

RESULTS

The survey was sent to the teachers online due to COVID-19 protocols at universities. The following are some of the teachers' responses to questions of each domain. The results are presented in separate tables, and the answers were taken randomly from teachers at different Universities. The survey was taken from and modified from Haukås's (2016) survey used with Norwegian learners.

SEEU= South East European University
SUT=State University of Tetovo
MTU=Mother Teresa University
IBU=International Balkan University

Domain 1: ***Teachers' perspective on multilingualism***

Q1: It is often said that the more languages one knows, the easier it is to learn new languages. What are your views about this statement?

- I agree with this. The brain is already trained for language learning and set for new languages. (SUT)

- Languages belong to language families, so if you speak 1 language from one family group, it is much easier to learn the others, such as: Slavic languages, Germanic languages, Romance languages, etc. (UMT)

- It is true because the new knowledge builds upon the existing schemata in the brain. (SEEU)

- The more linguistic systems one is exposed to and has acquired, the easier it is to predict and make accurate assumptions about other linguistic systems. (IBU)

Q2: Which are the main challenges of learning more languages?

- Staying focused on one language and shifting between two or more languages. (SEEU)

- At the beginning, when mastery is not at an advanced level, there is the risk of confusing words and structures from different languages; however, this is overcome by practice and fluency. (UMT)

- At the initial stages, there is interference and a tendency to use the language that is other than your L1 but is more familiar to you. (SEEU)

- I would imagine it would be some sort of linguistic or mental burden, as code-switching might prove difficult, especially when a person is tired or under stress, but I haven't felt it myself. (IBU)

Q3: How important is students' previous linguistic knowledge in a multilingual classroom?

- Somewhat important, they bring their own experiences into the classroom. (SUT)

- It is very important. As it is stated above, the more language structures with which they are familiar, the easier it is to learn new ones. (UMT)

- According to the literacy transfer hypothesis, when certain proficiency in a foreign language is acquired, the linguistic knowledge from L1 is transferred to the other languages. (SEEU)

- I would say it is very important because the starting point really predicts their performance in the new context. (IBU)

Q4. To what extent do you think students' knowledge of other languages is useful when learning English?

- Students who are good in English are generally great learners of other languages as well. (SUT)

- I would say that English has a very simplified grammar system in comparison to, let's say Albanian, French or German, however, it has a very rich vocabulary, phrasal verbs, idioms, etc. Therefore, knowing other languages may be helpful, but not to a great extent since negative transfer may take place.

-It is very useful, especially if the two languages belong to the same language family. (SEEU)

- It is useful, especially if they have knowledge of a language similar to English, but regardless, it is a benefit. (IBU)

Q5: How many languages do you use daily at your Institution? Which are they?

- Always three – Macedonian, English and Albanian. (SEEU)

- English, Albanian and Macedonian. (UMT)

- Three; mainly English, then Macedonian and Albanian. (SEEU)

- I use English with my students – exclusively, and English and Macedonian with my colleagues.

Figure 1: Teachers' responses for Domain 1

Domain 2 Questions and responses

The second part of the questionnaire asked the teachers about Students' language learning knowledge, and it contains five questions. The responses are presented in Figure 2.

Domain 2: Students' language learning knowledge

***Q6:* What do you think about the fact that language learning, learning how to learn, is such a central part of the curriculum?**

- *Because learners will be trained for life-long learning. (SEEU)*

- Learning how to learn is very important; it makes it easier for us to learn more in a shorter period of time. (MTU)

Q7: To what extent do you spend time learning how to learn (learning strategies) in the foreign language classroom?

- *I spent somewhat time on that, usually at the beginning of the semester. (SEEU)*

- Along with teaching the subject, I think all teachers also teach the students how to learn, some to a greater extent and others to a lower extent. (MTU)

- ***Q8: When is the best age to learn a foreign language?***

- The younger, the better. (SEEU)

-As soon as possible. (SUT)

-At the age of five. (MTU)

-At an early age. (IBU)

Q9: Do your students use English easily, or do they often code-switch?

- *They usually code-switch. (SEEU)*

- Even though I encourage them to speak in English, whenever there is a word, which they do not know in English, they prefer to code-switch rather than asking for the meaning of the word in English. (MTU)

- Yes, very often. (SUT)

Q10: In what situations do the learners use their L1 in the classroom?

- *When they don't know a word. (SEEU)*

- Whenever there is a new word, expression, or a new topic they are not familiar with, they prefer using their L1. (SUT)

- In situations where they do not understand what to do, the instructions. (IBU)

Figure 2: Teachers' responses for Domain 2

Domain 3 Questions and responses

The third part of the questionnaire asked the teachers about collaboration among teachers, and it contains three questions. The responses are presented in Figure 3.

Domain 3: Language teacher collaboration

Q11: To what extent do the language teachers collaborate in teaching English at your Institution?

- There is a great deal of collaboration between the teachers. We work on the syllabi together. (SEEU)

- Unfortunately, teacher collaboration needs improvements. We tend to collaborate regarding materials and textbooks; however, we are somehow not willing to share our experience on teaching methods/strategies, difficulties, etc. (MTU).

- Unfortunately, teacher collaboration is at a minimum level. There is no specific reason for this lack of collaboration. (IBU)-

Q12: Do you have any suggestions regarding what topics language teachers might collaborate on across subjects?

- Assessment and selection of materials. (SEEU)

--Developing curricula and lesson planning by setting group goals, -sharing good and bad teaching practices, etc. (MTU)

- Co-teaching a course. (SUT)

-ESP. (IBU)

Q13: Have you ever worked on a joint project on Multilingualism? If yes, what project was that?

- No. But I have presented and published a paper on multiculturalism and multilingualism at our institution. (SEEU)

- No, but I have taught Multilingualism as a topic (SUT).

-No. (MTU)

-NO. (IBU)

Figure 3: Teachers' responses for Domain 3

Domain 4 Questions and responses

The fourth part of the questionnaire asked the teachers about learning materials they use in their everyday instruction, and it contains four questions. The responses are presented in Figure 4.

Domain 4: Learning materials

***Q14:* Have you noticed whether the textbooks you use include activities in which students are required to draw on what they know from before, such as by exploring similarities and differences between languages?**

-Most textbooks include different activities which require a certain knowledge of the English language. (SUT)

- Yes, many times. (SEEU)

- Unfortunately, very few books deal with similarities and differences among languages, generally Contrastive Analysis and General Linguistics books. (MTU)

Q15: **Which are the most-used strategies in the multilingual classes you teach?**

- Students must always be requested to actively participate in the classroom during different activities. Question sheets are handed to students, and they may ask their peers to answer questions that they choose. (SEEU)

- Open-ended questions, personalization, implementing technology, etc. (SUT)

- Cooperative learning as well as peer and reciprocal teaching and vocabulary building. (MTU)

Q16: **What debate topics do you usually choose for the students?**

- Most topics for debates are linked with society, education and technology. But students may also suggest topics for debates if most students agree with a certain suggestion. (SUT)

- *The ones they find interesting. (SEEU)*

-The ones related to the classroom topic. (SUT)

- The debates usually include topics from culture: music, clothing, sports, etc., as well as technology since there are a lot of common words in different languages related to these topics, and students feel more comfortable to talk about something they are familiar with. (MTU)

Q17: **Which online materials do you use for your multilingual classes?**

- Online materials are minimally used due to the nature of the textbooks and the lack of projectors and speakers in classrooms. (MTU)

- Relevant materials that I find online. (SEEU)

-Different websites relevant to my teaching. (IBU)

Figure 4: Teachers' responses for Domain 4

Domain 5 Questions and responses

The fifth part of the questionnaire asked the teachers about other topics related to L2 learning and teaching, and it contains three questions. The responses are presented in Figure 5.

Domain 5: Other topics related to L2 learning and teaching

Q18: **Are there other topics you want to discuss or reflect on in the group that you find important or relevant for learning and teaching English to Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish students?**
- Teachers feel reluctant to share their teaching experience in multilingual classes because of the fear of being judged. They are judged if they only use the target language, they are judged if they only use students' L1, and they are judged if they code-switch. (MTU)
-How to respect each other's traditions. (SUT)
- Bilingualism and Multilingualism; Cultural diversity; Globalization; International relations and international organizations. (SEEU)
- How to make our students, who come from a very teacher-centred and teacher-dependent background, more independent. (IBU)
Q19: Which changes do you think you should make in the curriculum for multilingual classes?
- Ensure inclusion of material relevant to each culture individually, but also to all cultures in general, to ensure understanding and acceptance. (IBU)
-Learners with specific needs. (SUT)
-Evaluation in Multilingual classes. (SEEU)
Q20: Do you think that your Institution has handled well the issue of multilingualism? If yes, how?
- I think it has, not just of multilingualism but also of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicism – this is the only context where I, as well as my colleagues, have never felt discriminated against due to the background we come from or the language we speak. (IBU)
- Yes. Most teaching assistants/professors speak the English language fluently. English is the working language in all conferences organized by our university. These international conferences directly give students (especially Master students) the opportunity to present their papers and advance in their careers. (MTU)
- In my opinion, SEEU has dealt with multilingualism in the best way possible. There are three official languages within SEEU, and LC usually brings together all the nationalities. (SEEU)
-Yes, very well, though more multilingual courses would be beneficial. (SUT)

Figure 5: Teachers' responses for Domain 5

SUMMARY OF THE RESPONSES TO THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

The last question, open-ended, asked the teachers to give their opinions about the main assets of Multilingualism. The following is the list of the summary of the responses listed by the teachers.

➢ More employability options
➢ the more languages you speak, the more knowledgeable you are
➢ intercultural understanding and respect
➢ developing language awareness
➢ it opens your mind and it boosts your career
➢ higher intellectual and cognitive abilities, increased multicultural awareness, mode adaptive in new environments
➢ creation of cultural awareness
➢ appreciation of cultural awareness
➢ adjustments in the society
➢ become a citizen of the world
➢ encourages language diversity
➢ promotes linguistic diversity among people
➢ promotes lifelong learning in various languages

Table 2: Open-ended question answers

Analysing the results in all five figures, it would be safe to say that teachers of four different universities who participated in the study hold a positive attitude towards multilingualism. They strongly believed that children should learn a foreign language at an early age because the sooner they start, the better they will learn it. Nonetheless, they stated that the process of learning multiple languages is not without challenges, especially if the languages do not belong to the same group and have different language systems. When it comes to the materials used in a multilingual classroom, they use different online materials relevant to their teaching.

Additionally, teachers suggested some changes in the curriculum, which are: ensure the inclusion of material relevant to each culture individually, but also to all cultures in general, understanding and acceptance and learners with specific needs. Despite that teachers did not participate in any multilingual project, they believe that their institutions have handled the issue of multilingualism well because more languages are used in the class, and the inclusion of more courses on multilingualism would be very beneficial.

CONCLUSION

This study dealt with teachers' beliefs about multilingualism in Higher Education in North Macedonia, and it included 4 different Universities, 2 state and 2 private ones. The survey questions revealed interesting results and might help teachers in being more effective in teaching multilingual groups.

Teachers hold positive toward multilingualism and find it very useful for coping at university or in everyday communication. The data also showed that there are no huge differences among Universities except for Domain 3, teacher collaboration, because only at SEEU is the collaboration excellent. Also, a similar element was that none of the teachers who participated in the study took part in a multilingual project but attended a conference and published a paper about it. At the same time, the most positive statement was that all teachers were satisfied with how their institution handled multilingualism very well. ''I think it has, not just of multilingualism but also of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicism – this is the only context where I, as well as my colleagues, have never felt discriminated due to the background we come from or the language we speak''. (Teacher from IBU). This fact is very encouraging for multilingual North Macedonia, where prejudices should not exist, especially in Education.

In response to the first research question related to teachers' beliefs about multilingualism, it can be concluded that all study participants shared the common idea that people who speak more languages can learn additional ones easier because the brain is trained to learning languages. Needless to say, they themselves are multilinguals because they use three languages daily. It is their belief that the more languages you speak, the more you learn because the brain is trained to learn new languages, but they recognize the fact that at the initial stages of learning, learners face several challenges. For instance, the vocabulary and language structure are different, but the learning process can be improved with practice.

Regarding the second research question related to challenges teachers face during their teaching in multilingual environments, they mentioned: adapting course topics to the students, modifying assessment methods, knowledge of students' L1 and modifying teaching materials. According to teachers, multilingual people have many assets and strongly believe that multilingual people are more knowledgeable than monolinguals, have more employment options, and are more aware and appreciate other cultures.

In response to the third research question related to teacher collaboration with other language teachers in order to enhance learners' multilingualism, the results showed that there is not enough collaboration between teachers while developing the course syllabi, with the exception of SEEU. However, for other intuitions, teacher collaboration needs improvements because it is at a

minimum level, and teachers are unwilling to share their experience on teaching methods/strategies, difficulties, etc.

In conclusion, the study shed light on teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism and explored teachers' opinions about the most important elements relevant to language learning. Teacher responses demonstrated that there is a need for improvement in the context of teaching in multilingual classes, and more collaboration is needed to achieve higher results. Teachers' willingness and motivation as not questionable at all because they have listed so many assets that multilingualism has. Hopefully, more studies will be done in the near future on this issue, looking at different perspectives of multilingualism, avoiding all misconceptions and prejudices that one ethnicity might have about the other and living in peace and harmony in one country.

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