

Multilingual researcher education at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: a case study

Abstract. This article discusses the impact of multilingual researcher education on multilingual research practices at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Because of internationalising educational programmes in higher education, learner groups become more and more multilingual and heterogeneous, which calls for an appropriate pedagogical approach. The question is, how and to what extent multilingual researcher education programmes determine the success of dealing with multilingual research practices of (future) researchers. Multilingual research education within the programme of the Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is discussed. It is felt that research methodology courses, master paper supervision and research internships in a multilingual context – where students can use more than one language in the research process – are considered an example of good practice in the light of the university’s successful internationalisation policy.

1. Introduction

Brussels is officially a bilingual city (French/Dutch), but the majority of Brussels’ residents speak French as their first language and only a minority report Dutch as their first language. Many families are bi- or multilingual at home (cf. VAN MENSEL 2018). Approximately one third (also) speak other languages, whereby English, Arabic, Spanish, German, Italian, Turkish belong to the top six of foreign languages spoken. English is the international language or ‘lingua franca’ for science, business and tourism. Moreover, Brussels is located at the heart of Europe where many institutions of the European Union are located, which officially makes it an international and multilingual city. Brussels is thus a small but linguistically diverse and complex region where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception both within the public and the private spheres. Similarly, in the whole of Europe multilingualism seems to become more and more commonplace for individuals and societies alike. Because of this evolution and partly due to the universities’ current internationalisation policies, learner and researcher groups are becoming increasingly more heterogeneous with

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regard to their language backgrounds, which calls for more appropriate multilingual pedagogical approaches (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018), and this also applies to methodology courses both within exact and human sciences programmes. This article discusses the impact of multilingual researcher education on multilingual research practices as part of the internationalisation strategies in place at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The question is, how and to what extent multilingual researcher education programmes determine the success of dealing with multilingual research practices of (future) researchers. Based on the analysis of research education within the Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, I will examine these questions further. Research methodology courses, master paper supervision and internships with practical research training for pre-doctoral and master students in a multilingual context – where students can use more than one language in the research process – are considered an example of good practice in the light of the university's successful internationalisation policy.

First, I will discuss the multilingual realities for students and researchers at a university in a by definition multilingual city, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Then I will turn to the university's internationalisation policy with a special focus on researcher education. As a case study, I will highlight the practices within the internationally oriented study programme 'Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies'. The paper concludes with potential benefits that research seminars of this kind may bring to various stakeholders. Furthermore, it points at challenges of promoting and strengthening the use of a variety of languages within multilingual education in researcher training.

2. The multilingual city of Brussels

Since mid 2019, the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region has got its own minister for the promotion of multilingualism and the image of Brussels. For this, the project 'Be Talky' was created. On its website we can read the following:

Our city has 1.2 million inhabitants, who speak more than 100 different languages. The advantages of multilingualism are numerous. In addition to the opportunities it opens up in the labour market, multilingualism promotes cohesion among the people of Brussels. In our super-diverse city and beyond, speaking several languages is important for shared citizenship and the mutual understanding it requires. Multilingualism is now a central ingredient of Brussels' identity and will be even more so in the future (<https://en.betalky.brussels/about-us/>).

That multilingualism still needs promotion in a city like Brussels can partly be explained through the fact that myths, such as the alleged disadvantage of growing up with two or three languages as a child, still persist (cf. FESTMAN et al. 2017). A second explanation can be found in the different status and prestige different languages still have in society (cf. GARCÍA 2009). Some languages – e.g. the languages that are taught at school such as English, French, Dutch, German or Spanish, are being valued dif-

ferently from (i.e. seem to have more prestige than) many immigrant or minority languages that are spoken in the Brussels' homes, such as Arabic, Chinese or Turkish, but which make up for the diverse, multicultural and multilingual society. However, it is precisely this diversity that is believed to offer great potential. A third explanation is the status of English as the international language for science, business and tourism, which would reduce the need for the promotion of multilingualism (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018). However, falling back on the motto 'L1 plus English – we are bilingual' does by no means do justice to social reality of Brussels. Rather the idea is that English coexists with all other languages that play a role in the multilingual context of Brussels and its (higher) education (cf. LOCHTMAN 2015). In the present paper it is suggested that the success of foreign languages other than English in research and in higher education depends on the principles of multilingual education. "The teaching of, in and through foreign languages might even prove to be an example of good practice for a successful internationalisation programme" (LOCHTMAN 2018: 81).

The top eight languages that are most widely spoken at home in Brussels are French, English, Dutch, Arabic, Spanish, German, Italian and Turkish (cf. LOCHTMAN 2017). The majority of Brussels' residents speak French as their first language (about 60%) and only a minority use Dutch as their first language (about 10%). The remaining thirty percent of residents in the city speak other languages (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018). French, English, Dutch, German and Spanish are traditionally taught as foreign languages at school. Because of internationalisation and globalisation as current determining social developments in the European capital, international research projects and exchange programmes are increasingly being promoted in higher education. In this context, English is used as a *lingua franca*. The next section discusses the internationalization policy of the Dutch-speaking university in Brussels, the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* (VUB). It will be shown that in order to facilitate, sustain and promote the use of foreign languages other than English in research and researcher education, an experience-based multilingual pedagogy is needed (cf. *ibid.*).

3. Internationalisation policies in higher education

Internationalisation is currently a top priority in higher education. On the whole, a distinction can be made between a strong and weak form of internationalization (cf. TREVASKES/EISENCHLAS/LIDDICOAT 2003; MARLINA 2013). A strong form of internationalisation focuses on the integration of an international and intercultural dimension into the curricula and educational programmes. The weak form is linked to economic arguments, focusing on maximizing profits based on the worldwide exchange of researchers, teachers and (fee-paying) students (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018). According to HU (2016: 257), the weak form and thus the economic arguments even prevail in most internationalisation policies at universities. Since knowledge, knowledge gain and research output must also be measurable (and therefore subsidisable), university rankings and performance indicators were introduced (cf. HU 2016). Internationalisa-

tion is quantified through key performance indicators (KPIs) for Education/Teaching, Staff and especially also for research output (cf. LOCHTMAN 2017). The main KPIs for research at the VUB are:

- the number of international or joint PhDs (i.e. in cooperation with an international partner university),
- the number of excellent researchers from abroad, e.g. ERC, Francqui, Odysseus, etc. (This KPI is also related to research output, networking and reputation),
- the number of international peer-reviewed publications.

Due to the great importance of KPIs related to the amount of scientific output, there is an increased focus on English as a *lingua franca* in both research and teaching, in that the output is made available to the wider public. This has led to concerns that English may soon dominate all other languages and that in terms of culture, an ‘Anglo-Americanized’ uniformity could arise (cf. RAMPTON 1995; HOBERG 2012). This way, the use of English as a *lingua franca* could even play a cultural imperialist role, especially in economically weaker countries which in turn could pose a threat to the continued existence of diversity and multilingualism (cf. HOBERG 2012). As a result, there is an increasing demand for an education and research policy that focuses on cultural diversity and multilingualism (cf. KRAMSCH 1996; BYRAM/RISAGER 1999; HOBERG 2012; LOCHTMAN 2018).

4. Researcher education within the Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies (VUB)

4.1 Multilingual pedagogy in researcher education: intercultural sensitivity, blended learning and principles of multilingual education

One crucial advantage of multilingualism in education is that it could be considered a route to improve equal opportunities and cohesion (cf. REICH/KRUMM 2013: 91; BE TALKY no year) among student and research groups alike. This implies that, within a group, multiple languages are regarded equivalent and perceived as a means of communication. When a research topic is described and discussed in a particular language, that language becomes particularly relevant, which, in turn, is believed to lead to great advantages both in terms of language learning (especially with regard to the academic register) and social inclusion (cf. DE GRAAFF 2013; LOCHTMAN 2018). Moreover, teachers from within the multilingual education context appear to be convinced that students are more open-minded and more tolerant than students from a monolingual context, and that they are more open about learning new languages and discovering new or different cultures, thus broadening their horizons. As such, the multilingual environment is also believed to overcome stereotypes and prejudices (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018, 2020) and is believed to promote intercultural sensitivity as one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence (cf. CHEN 2010). Intercultural sen-

sitivity is understood to be the individual's affective "ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (CHEN/STAROSTA 1997: 5). According to this definition, intercultural sensitivity could be understood as "a prerequisite or even a predictor for achieving intercultural competence (cf. CHEN/STAROSTA 2000; HAMMER/BENNET/WISEMAN 2003; WU 2015)" (LOCHTMAN 2020: 31). According to CHEN/STAROSTA (1997), open-mindedness and non-judgmental attitudes are two key elements of intercultural sensitivity. Open-mindedness towards cultural differences is also believed to be a characteristic of multilinguals and could therefore be regarded as an important skill needed for students doing research in a multilingual research environment.

Nowadays, multilingual researcher education inevitably involves blended learning activities. Online exercises and research activities are supported through a Moodle environment, fostering learner autonomy and lowering foreign language (classroom) anxiety. According to DEWAELE (2019) a higher degree of multilingualism and a higher frequency of use of foreign languages, a higher degree of socialisation in the foreign language, a higher degree of networking in the foreign language and higher self-ratings for one's own language competence are all linked to a lower foreign language (classroom) anxiety. Conversely, a higher level of anxiety may lead to less willingness to initiate communication (cf. *ibid.*), i.e. a lower "readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons" (MACINTYRE et al. 1998: 547). A higher degree of multilingualism has also been linked to higher levels of foreign language enjoyment, lowering cultural distances, a higher level of proficiency in a foreign language (cf. DEWAELE/MACINTYRE 2014) and a higher level of emotional intelligence (cf. DEWAELE 2019). Finally, a high level of foreign language enjoyment could also be linked to a higher level of cultural empathy, to better exam results, to positive attitudes towards foreign languages and to the relative status within the student group (cf. DEWAELE/MACINTYRE 2014).

Multilingual pedagogy consists of a set of principles that are also of interest to the context of multilingual researcher education, as there are: intercomprehension and communication in multilingual situations (comprising the notions of code-switching and translanguaging), awakening to languages, learner autonomy and efforts to develop and implement an overall language curriculum (cf. GARCÍA 2009; WEI 2011; MORKÖTTER/SCHRÖDER-SURA 2018: 225; LOCHTMAN 2018; HUFSEISEN/MERKEL-BACH 2020). Intercomprehension refers to communication strategies used by speakers who do not speak the same, but similar languages that provide sufficient transparency to understand each other. Code-switching implies a more or less unintentional process of switching between languages and translanguaging refers to a methodological strategy in which switching between languages is a more intentional procedure (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018). Moreover, translanguaging is believed to create a social space for multilingual students "by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitudes, beliefs and performance" (WEI 2011: 1223). This way, multiple languages could be used flexibly and strategically so

that students can choose the language of their research assignments without being stigmatized (cf. GARCÍA 2009). Such communication situations which are often based on scientific sources in different languages, lead to multilingual discussions and differentiation of the scientific content, and are believed to promote the competence of language and intercultural mediation in researchers.

4.2 Cognitive advantages of multilingualism

Multilingualism and multilingual pedagogy are also believed to have beneficial effects not only in the linguistic, communicative and intercultural domains, but also in cognitive domains such as attention, working memory, and cognitive control (cf. BLOM et al. 2014; BLUMENFELD 2014; FRIESEN et al. 2015). Cognitive control can be defined as the coordination and regulation of thoughts to respond appropriately to stimuli in the environment (cf. BRAVER 2012). Advantages of multilingualism are believed to include inhibitory control, attention, updating information in working memory, cognitive flexibility, planning, reasoning, and problem solving and shifting of mental sets (cf. FIDLER/LOCHTMAN 2019; VAN DEN NOORT et al. 2019: 2) which are key skills for a successful (student) researcher. When switching from one language to the other in a multilingual research environment, the multilingual researcher needs to manage the use of multiple languages in the brain (cf. ABUTALEBI/GREEN 2008). This constant management is believed to develop and enhance the domain-general cognitive control (cf. WU et al. 2019). In other words, this extra training in managing multiple languages in multilinguals is thought to be the reason multilinguals have an advantage in cognitive control (cf. VAN DEN NOORT et al. 2019: 2).

4.3 The programme

Because of the internationalisation policies in place, the number of international students and researchers increases over time, and degree courses and doctoral schools attract scholars and students from all over the world, which also results in a great diversity in terms of language backgrounds. Research groups are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and at the same time, the English language is gaining more and more importance in research and teaching. Here, the universities face many challenges (cf. LOCHTMAN 2018).

Within the context described above, the Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies at the VUB focuses on reading, writing and speaking in multiple languages and in multilingual contexts. The one-year programme consists of sixty ECTS credits and offers students the possibility to major in at least two languages (i.e. Dutch, English, French, German, Italian or Spanish), but there is also the possibility to study more than two languages at the time. More concretely, students can choose courses in up to ten different languages within a profile and are therefore not restricted to the language(s) they choose to major in, which attests to the programme's emphasis on

multilingualism and cross-disciplinary learning. The languages on offer are: Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian. The programme furthermore assigns twenty-four ECTS credits to domain-specific modules, which equals four elective courses in either literary studies, linguistics or any of the other four profiles, and twelve ECTS credits to language-specific modules, which equals two elective courses of six ECTS. The profiles to choose from are (apart from literary studies and linguistics): psycho- and neurolinguistics, intermediality, multilingualism and foreign language acquisition and multilingual mediation and communication. Knowing how to communicate effectively in an increasingly multilingual and transcultural world is believed to greatly benefit students in their personal, academic, and professional life. The multilingual profiles are dedicated to helping the students develop their (multilingual) communicative skills, with a particular focus on making them harness these skills in a manner fitting to context, genre, audience, and/or communicative goal. The profiles also aim to equip the students with theoretical insights in that they learn to reflect critically on how they operate between languages, as well as on the challenges pertaining to communication in a multilingual society. Considering its status as the international (academic) lingua franca, English is at the centre of this programme, but every other week class meetings are devoted to exercises and activities where the students will have to mediate between English and their language of choice¹. The programme's courses in research methodology are oriented towards the broad fields of either literary studies or linguistics: for each domain there is a specific module which offers methodological support for the completion of the master paper specifically and which caters for reading, writing and speaking in multiple languages. The year-long courses pay attention to both narratological and statistical skills and both oral and written assignments in a multilingual environment.

4.4 Evaluation: learning by doing, the Master's thesis and the research internship in a multilingual environment

The programme requires the student-researchers to write their MA thesis of eighteen ECTS in (one of) their target (foreign) language(s). For this, student-researchers actively engage in reading sources in multiple languages, relying on the principle of multilingual pedagogy such as intercomprehension, translation and multilingual writing strategies. On top of this, courses in academic English are provided, because for many students English is a foreign language. The research process for the MA thesis is evaluated through both a written and spoken assignment in the target language. For the written assignment, students will have to present a research proposal including a multilingual annotated bibliography at the beginning of the writing process. Not only do the students have to present personal and original work, they are also expected to define the subject (and corpus) adequately, taking into consideration the feasibility of the study in a multilingual context. The oral assignment is a presentation on the state

¹ <https://www.vub.be/en/study/multilingual-master-in-linguistics-and-literary-studies#programme>

of affairs of the research activities in the middle of the writing process. Both for the written and the oral presentation language form and style are evaluated. For the oral presentation in the target language, pace of delivery and pronunciation are considered as well. In addition, the student researchers are evaluated by their supervisor and a second reader who are competent in the language of delivery and can thus offer individual supervision. Moreover, the students are able to choose their supervisor and have the possibility of collaborating with fellow students and as such, of writing a joint MA thesis. Such collaboration often involves intercultural communication and mediation. Increasingly more students are suggesting or choosing a master's thesis topic related to multilingualism and/or in another language than English. Table 1 displays some examples of topics selected by the students in 2020–2021.

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| – CLIL in English, Dutch, French or German. |
| – La influencia de la lengua materna en el aprendizaje del español como lengua extranjera. |
| – Identity Formation for Multilingual Students |
| – The Arabic Classroom: towards a multilingual and inclusive society? |
| – Schrijven van onderop. Een vergelijkend onderzoek naar brieven van Italiaanse en Vlaamse soldaten uit de Eerste Wereldoorlog. |
| – <i>La Tregua</i> di Primo Levi, dal libro al film: analisi stilistico-linguistica. |
| – The importance attached to mediation when interpreting from Chinese language |
| – La variation linguistique: jusqu'à quel point la variation au niveau du français de France et de Belgique est-elle reflétée dans les différences entre la LSF et la LSFb? |
| – Der Erwerb der Klammerstruktur bei chinesischen DaF-Lernenden |

Table 1: Some examples of Master's thesis topics in multiple languages

The Master's thesis topics in table 1 reflect the advantages of researcher education in a multilingual context. Since Belgium is a trilingual country with three separate school systems in Dutch, French and German, and English being the lingua franca for business and research practices, the topic of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in secondary and higher education is of high relevance to both teachers and learners. CLIL represents a successful and demanding way of multilingual didactics which subscribes to the objectives of individual multilingualism, the acquisition of academic or specialist knowledge, social inclusion, multiculturalism and internationalisation (cf. LOCHTMAN 2015: 89f.). The multilingual contexts of Brussels and Belgium offer ample empirical research opportunities for student-researchers, making them aware of and more open-minded towards linguistic diversity and the advantages of multilingual education. Topics also include languages with less prestige (i.e. migrant languages such as Arabic, Chinese), aimed at raising students' intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence/mediation, and social inclusivity, all of which is believed to lead to less foreign language anxiety and a higher willingness to communicate in the foreign language (cf. DEWAELE 2019). This way, students are also encouraged to reflect on identity formation in multilinguals. Highly popular within

(applied) linguistics are furthermore topics on second or foreign language acquisition (e.g. the role of explicit and implicit knowledge), on interlanguage sociolinguistic or pragmatic competence and on language variation in society. Literary topics focusing on multilingualism and multilingual mediation mainly include papers on intermediality (e.g. the link between literature, digital humanities, film studies, theatre and performance arts), literary translation and the presence and influence of authors with different language backgrounds in/on the multilingual society that is Brussels. For all the topics, i.e. linguistic and literary topics alike, student-researchers are encouraged to actively engage in reading and discussing references in multiple languages, again relying on the principle of multilingual pedagogy such as intercomprehension, translation and multilingual writing strategies. Moreover, in doing so, student-researchers are believed to be more susceptible to developing a certain advantage in cognitive control (cf. VAN DEN NOORT et al. 2019).

Although the possibility for collaboration exists between student-researchers from both similar and different linguistic backgrounds, resulting in joint master's theses, almost all of the master students seem to prefer to work independently on their research topic. Nevertheless, it is believed that such collaboration opportunities would strengthen the advantages of the programme's multilingual pedagogical aims. Possibilities to encourage such collaboration are definitely to be considered in the future.

A second main aspect of multilingual researcher training within the programme is the elective internship, which covers a variety of sectors and domains and research stays in a multilingual environment. The internship is entitled 'Multilingualism and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching' and is managed by a team of ten training supervisors (academic staff, each representing a different language) and one coordinator. For student-researchers, there is the possibility of a research-oriented internship at the language and linguistics departments of the VUB, e.g. in preparation of a PhD or a research career. The student-researchers are expected to actively participate in an ongoing research project on multilingualism, multilingual education, language acquisition or language teaching at the VUB (e.g. with one of the internship supervisors) or elsewhere. Participation may involve one or more of the following research-related activities:

- developing data collection procedures and materials (e.g. questionnaires, language tests, speech elicitation protocols)
- collecting data
- processing (e.g. transcribing) and/or analysing data
- self-study, to get acquainted with certain research methodological procedures (incl. statistics) on the basis of textbooks or online courses.

Minimally thirty hours and maximally hundred and fifty hours should be spent 'on site' (i.e. on the premises of the organisation, school, company or research centre). The remaining time is spent on the preparation (incl. finding and contacting a mentor), writing (minimally two) short interim feedback reports to the internship supervisor, keeping a log book and producing a final written report. All the written assignments

are in the target foreign language. The final report should contain a critical description of the internship provider and of the activities performed during the internship. It should also contain a scientific reflection linking practice to theory. Language form (accuracy), style (appropriateness; formal written language), cohesion and coherence (logical sequencing of sentences and paragraphs) are an essential part of the evaluation process.

Both the Master's thesis and the internship in a multilingual environment are believed to be good examples of implementing the pedagogical principles of multilingual research education offering the student researcher to practice translanguaging and mediation strategies, and developing learner autonomy in a multilingual environment where English is not the only target foreign language. Such learning by doing is also believed to lower foreign language anxiety in researchers who are working in a multilingual environment.

5. Conclusion

The organisation of multilingual researcher education leads to the idea that the promotion of multiple languages other than English at universities is possible through an adequate approach to multilingualism pedagogy and can therefore be beneficial for the development of multilingual skills in researchers as part of the research institution's internationalisation policy (s. also BRADLAW/HUFEISEN/NOELLE in this volume). Through the unique characteristics of Brussels, the city offers a truly multilingual location to practice research in an international and multilingual environment. Indeed, this situation allows for the development of multilingual and experience-based research methodologies. The advantages of multilingual research practices are plenty, such as promoting social cohesion and inclusion among researchers, general cognitive advantages, the promotion of open-mindedness and the development of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication and mediation skills and lowering negative emotions that may interfere with the language learning process fostering learner autonomy. The use of foreign languages other than English in this context could serve as a role model within the current internationalization policies of European universities.

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