

Barbara Baloh  
University of Primorska, Faculty of Education  
Koper, Slovenia

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## FUTURE EDUCATORS AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON INTERCULTURALISM AND SLOVENIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING

*Abstract:* It is necessary to discuss interculturalism even when we are not surrounded by immigrants, foreigners, and members of minority groups, since they are always part of our reality as cultural diversity (whether local, regional, linguistic...) is a feature of every modern society. Teaching children in an intercultural and multilingual environment must be based on the knowledge of the reality of the linguistic and cultural framework in which the teaching process is taking place, and it is necessary to monitor and adapt it to newer social and historical developments accordingly.

As stated by R. Bešter and M. Medvešek (2016), in all ethnically and culturally diverse societies (including Slovenia, according to the author of this article, it is necessary to develop democratic thinking, mutual respect, and prevention of discrimination and unequal relations and power balances among different social groups. At the same time, ethnocentrism needs to be alleviated, both as concerns of culture and language. To achieve this, it is important that the educational system too remains focused on these objectives and values.

Considering the theoretical bases, the current researchers were interested in seeing what the students of the undergraduate programme Primary school teaching, who will become class teachers, and the students of the undergraduate programme Pre-school teaching, who will become preschool teachers, think about interculturalism, intercultural communication and teaching the Slovenian language in an intercultural context.

*Keywords:* Future preschool teachers, future class teachers, views, interculturalism, Slovenian language learning.

### INTRODUCTION

There are many multicultural communities around the world since people move from one part of the world to the other for various reasons. The modern times entail the need to acquire intercultural competences/abilities, to be able to live interculturally in a multicultural world. Through competence and ability one

understands a series of relations, skills and knowledge that enable us to adopt adequate and efficient behaviour in a given context. Competences include a cognitive (knowledge) and a personal dimension (socially-emotional and motivational), ethics or principles that consciously or unconsciously shape values, decisions and actions.

Numerous studies and initiatives show that this enables the European, as well as the Slovenian society, to be aware of the importance of strengthening intercultural awareness, communication and dialogue.

According to various studies (Mello 2001, Zipes 1995), the opportunities to contemplate the concepts of identity, diversity, culture, monoculturalism, multiculturalism, also arise in kindergartens and schools, specifically in terms of establishing positive and constructive relationships with adults and peers, understanding personal cultural environment and being aware of the changes in personal identities.

Educators and teachers at all education levels play a crucial role in the promotion of intercultural understanding, since they are not merely agents of knowledge transfer, but also role models who transmit and help to shape the foundations for responsible, fair and intercultural functioning of individuals in society. As specified by the Council of Europe (2008), a successful establishment of intercultural dialogue is a prerequisite for development and stability of inclusive societies that aspire to the integration and social cohesion and reject marginalisation of vulnerable social groups, while at the same time contributing to the fight against prejudices and stereotypes in public life and political discourse.

As the primary school teachers and preschool teachers play an important role in modeling children's understanding of their socio-cultural environment and language acquiring, we find necessary that in the university teacher training curricula also the multicultural topics are included. There are not many studies in Slovenia researching the intercultural competences of teachers and educators, especially of those teaching the Slovenian language.

In this article we present the results of a research on students' comprehension of the related topics.

## THEORETICAL FRAME

*Intercultural language teaching methodology in the light of teaching the Slovenian language in different linguistic contexts*

While working on preserving multilingualism in the educational process in Slovenia, we encounter different rationales which have been changing since

Slovenia's declaration of independence in the 1990s to date because of historical developments and opportunities, and thus transforming the pedagogical and didactical discourse in the field of the Slovenian language teaching. The main rationale for teaching the Slovenian language today is preserving the mother tongue (first language), the second is preserving the mother tongue in areas with ethnic minorities (second language/language of the environment). Cultural and linguistic diversity of modern Slovenian society highlighted a new rationale for teaching the Slovenian language, i.e. preserving the mother tongue of minorities that are not recognised officially, and who therefore go through the education process in a language that is foreign or second for them. Increasingly frequent is the rationale or desire to learn and develop communicative competences in more than one language. M. Žefran, S. Bratož and A. Pirih (2017) believe that an individual develops their communicative competences on the basis of a thorough knowledge of different languages and experiences with them, where these are mutually connected and affecting one another. The individual can activate this competence in different communication circumstances with the intention to effectively reach the communication goal, since one finds themselves in numerous situations where linguistic sources are activated in ways other than our mother tongue.

As stated by S. Rutar (2014), the rationale behind multilingual learning and teaching are universal human and children's rights. In this regard, the current researchers would like to continue with the consideration of intercultural language teaching methodology, which, according to N. Zudič and A. Zorman (2006), does not only consider language learning/teaching, but also includes the developed ability to coexist with people who speak the language. It stems from the hypothesis that language acquisition is based on real situations which are meaningful to the child. The same authors (Ibid.) deem that the intercultural teaching methodology is based on inquiry-based learning through interaction and therefore takes into account the language communicative function and considers it to be a symbolic system of understanding the world and processing experiences.

As regarded by R. Bešter and M. Medvešek (2016), in order to put the principle of interculturalism in education into practice, the teachers must, on the one hand, be highly qualified in the field they are teaching, and on the other they must know how to handle (and take into account) ethnic, religious, cultural and other differences encountered in the classroom, meaning that they must already have developed intercultural competences.

On the basis of multi-year research in the field of interculturalism and bilingualism, the current researchers attempted to summarise their experience into a few characteristics of an intercultural teacher's profile. An intercultural teacher accepts the multicultural nature of the society, has a positive relationship with their own culture and is open to other cultures, knows how to behave confidently and

without prevailing over other cultures, works with diverse groups, finds diversity valuable and respects differences, handles the challenges of the multicultural facets of the knowledge society and is committed to encouraging equal opportunities.

R. Bešter in M. Medvešek (2016) state that educational options can be limited if the teacher does not take into account their ethnic, linguistic and cultural source. It is therefore necessary for the intercultural teacher to be also "curious research-wise" and study both their own interculturalism and that of the others. The same authors (Ibid.) state that the more positive the relationship to cultural diversity of an individual is and the greater knowledge he acquires, the more they develop the necessary skills in the process, reflects on their actions in intercultural situations and thus the higher the probabilities will be that they reach a greater level of intercultural competences.

Further on, the current researchers will present Bennett's model of developing intercultural sensitivity (1993), based on studying behavioural patterns, on the basis of which it is possible to determine how an individual acquires experiences of cultural diversity.

#### *Intercultural competences and intercultural sensitivity*

In Slovenia, intercultural competences of teachers and educators (especially those who teach the Slovenian language) were not given much attention in the educational process. Nor are there many studies with a holistic, in-depth treatment of this area.

The research on interculturalism questions carried out by the Italian researcher Marina Medi (2017) shows the following stereotypical answers: the immigrants are weak and require help and special care; the immigrants are poor and must be helped and solidarity must be expressed in order to help them; the immigrants must overcome language and culture obstacles which prevent them from becoming socially integrated as soon as possible (the value of the individual's cultural wealth and thus an opportunity to discover the other is never underlined here); the immigrants do not differ from the majority of the population, hence they must be offered the universal Western culture values, the only ones that can be accepted in this environment; the immigrants differ from us in terms of their cuisine, songs, dances, folklore, exoticism of their own culture (these are in fact the only areas which most European nations can accept easily, whereas the language is not among them).

As pointed out by the authors R. Bešter and M. Medvešek (2016), building on the model by Darla D. Deardoff (2006, 2009) and its upgrade (Boecker, 2008), intercultural competences are developed as concerns four dimensions: 1) attitudes and views of the others/the different ones; 2) knowledge, understanding and

specific skills; 3) intercultural reflection (which represents the desired internal result) and 4) constructive interaction (which represents the desired external result).

The more defined an individual's attitude towards cultural diversity, the more sensitive and understanding and accepting of interculturalism he is. When an individual defines their attitude towards cultural difference based on some experience, they maintain the acquired attitude towards all phenomena related to that culture. They are capable of generalizing the acquired knowledge to different capability levels and to different types of cultural diversity. This means that they maintain the same attitude towards all forms of cultural diversity, regardless of the type of culture they are facing (Zudič-Antonič, 2008: 117).

On the other hand, Bennett (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (dmis, presented further on) can be of assistance to educators and other education workers in discovering their own level of intercultural sensitivity, as well as discovering the level of intercultural sensitivity of individual children who acquire their knowledge of the world from broader (educational institutions, company of adults and peers, media ...) and closer (family) environment, while being influenced by different internal – endogenous (personal, psychological) and external – exogenous (socio-cultural) factors.

Bennett (in Zudič-Antonič, 2008: 117–119) presents two categories of intercultural capability development, ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism is the process of rejecting a culture. It is about evaluating other cultures based on the individual's own culture, so it is an opinion, a belief, a feeling of an individual that the culture in which he lives is superior, dominant and therefore he does not acknowledge other cultural communities with a different culture, religion, language. Ethnorelativism is a process of accepting intercultural differences.

Table 1. Intercultural sensitivity development stages

ETHNOCENTRIC STAGES	denial defence minimisation
ETHNORELATIVIST STAGES	acceptance adaptation integration

according to Zudič-Antonič, 2008

The current researchers can summarise them into a few key goals: strengthening personal and collective identity which will not contradict the others/different ones but will communicate with them; developing research curiosity which

will be democratic, sensitive and respectful of others; knowing how to think about oneself, about others, about stereotypes and prejudices and showing the capability for self-criticism; encouraging awareness about complexity and relativity of different views on (intercultural) reality and being able to change one's own view; accepting and constructively co-existing with the others/different ones and acknowledging their rights.

When discussing the early language learning and intercultural development, we have to highlight that children become aware of their environment and themselves through language and culture. That is the reason why students in different courses<sup>1</sup> must learn about different didactic strategies for language acquisition of Slovenian as mother tongue and second/foreign language.

Considering the theoretical bases shown, we were interested in seeing what the students of the undergraduate programme Primary school teaching, who will become teachers, and the students of the undergraduate programme Preschool teaching, who will become educators, think about interculturalism, intercultural communication and teaching the Slovenian language in an intercultural context.

## RESEARCH

### *Problem*

As stated by authors M. Žefran, S. Bratož in A. Pirih (2017), there are several studies in the field of foreign language teaching where authors determine the views and beliefs of students (both students of languages as well as other subjects) towards learning and teaching a foreign language.

The authors (Ibid.) refer to many studies and their bases and goals: Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) – an instrument to assess beliefs about learning a foreign language, developed by Horowitz (1988) in the latter part of the '80s; Rieger (2009) determines the differences in beliefs about language learning based on gender and language type; Peacock (2001) studies the differences in beliefs of future ESL teachers and experienced ESL teachers; Jeoffrion et al. (2014) studies the ideas of French students about plurilingualism where they find that the French academic environment is highly monolingual.

However, there are not many studies in Slovenia researching the intercultural competences of teachers and educators, especially of those teaching Slovenian language. The current researchers found no studies that would focus on the future primary school teachers and preschool teachers who are not language teachers but are trained in early Slovenian language teaching and have a very important

1 This is the case on the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska.

role in the development of students' and children' views on mother tongue and different languages and can therefore directly influence their beliefs.

### *The goal of the research*

The aim of the research was to study the views of future teaching staff on interculturalism, intercultural communication, and on teaching Slovenian language in an intercultural context. Students had to answer to the following questions in the questionnaires:

What are the views and beliefs of the future teaching staff on interculturalism and immigrants?, What are the views and beliefs of the future teaching staff on language learning?, According to the future teaching staff, to what extent is culture related to language?, What are the views and beliefs of the future teaching staff on learning the mother tongue? and What are the views and beliefs of the future teaching staff on the immigrants and their learning of Slovenian language?

### *Methodology*

The dominating research methods included a theoretical content analysis and non-experimental quantitative scientific research, in which the descriptive method of pedagogical research prevails. For the assessment of opinions and attitudes a questionnaire was developed; a four-point instead of a five-point scale was used for the views, where the option "Neither agree nor disagree" was intentionally left out, since the current researchers wanted to achieve more self-reflection in the answers.

The survey was conducted on an *ad hoc* sample of students of the Faculty of Education at the University of Primorska. It included full-time students of the Preschool teaching (N=52) and Primary school teaching (N=48) programmes. The participation in the survey was on a voluntary basis and it lasted approximately 15 minutes. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. Answers were gathered in the period between 18/10/2018 and 25/10/2018. A total of 100 forms were filled in. There were 98 female and 2 male participants. This is why the frequency of the answers in the analysis is equal to the percentage, so the current researchers used only one number in the table to make the results more comprehensible.

### *Results and discussion*

In determining the participants' views and beliefs on interculturalism and on immigrants, the current researchers were above all interested in the participants'

views on Slovenian culture and language in the light of immigration (Table 2) and the future teaching staff views on immigrants and their Slovenian language learning (Table 6).

Table 2. The participants' views on the Slovenian culture and language in the light of immigration

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Language is an important element of a culture	0	0	37	63
When we study a different/foreign language, it is not necessary to know the culture of that language	20	73	6	1
We need to respect everyone, regardless of their language and culture	0	0	26	74
In our society, it is necessary to prevent negative prejudices and ethnic stereotypes about the immigrants	0	2	46	52
The immigrants must completely adapt to the majority, i.e. to the Slovenian culture	2	55	35	8
The Slovenian culture and language are in jeopardy due to the immigrants	26	44	26	4

The current researchers find that the participants treat the language as an important element of a culture, which is especially important if one considers the fact that linguistic communication is the most complete and the most accessible transmitter of culture. The participants also confirm the fact that culture is inseparably connected to language. When people study a language, the cultural background is studied as well. It can be observed in the views of future educators and teachers that they do not treat their own culture of origin as superior and that they do not feel that their own culture and language are in jeopardy due to the presence of immigrants.

Further on the current researchers were interested in the participants' opinions on preventing negative prejudices and ethnic stereotypes about immigrants.



Generally speaking, by prejudices the current researchers imply certain negative views that one has about someone; a prejudice is therefore something that is not based on our experiences but is created in our mind. Ethnic stereotypes, however, are simplified and non-justified judgements on members of different nationalities, so we deem the participants' view important, because children acquire behavioural and communication patterns from their role models in the period of primary socialisation (from the society in general, as well as from their parents, carers, educators, teachers...). The current researchers find that most participants think that negative prejudices and ethnic stereotypes about immigrants should be prevented in modern society.

Furthermore, we were interested in seeing how the participants viewed bilingualism/multilingualism and bilingual/multilingual society (Table 3).

Table 3. Bilingualism/multilingualism and bilingual/multilingual society

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The multiculturalism and multilingualism enrich the Slovenian nation	0	24	55	20
It is better to live in a monolingual than a multilingual community	20	69	11	0
A bilingual society means that an individual knows both the minority and the majority language	0	0	0	0
The bilingualism means that two people speak in their different mother tongues, yet understand one another	17	45	33	3

The changed reality of modern Europe has forced us to rethink and re-evaluate the view on key elements of personal identity. One of the key elements is interculturalism. The intercultural society is sensitive to change and is under constant transformation, therefore it is necessary to think about the role of educational institutions in it (preschools, schools and universities) which provide the young with the tools needed to live in the new reality. This is why the participants' answers confirming that multiculturalism and multilingualism are a wealth, that it is better to live in a multilingual community in this modern era, and that bilingualism implies equivalence of two language codes, are encouraging.

We were also interested in participants' views on immigrants (Table 4).

Table 4. Participants' views on immigrants

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Slovenian culture is in jeopardy due to immigrants	19	54	23	4
A multilingual society means there will be greater problems	24	52	24	0
More immigrants mean there will be more crime	25	49	21	5
More immigrants mean there will be greater poverty	30	57	12	1
The immigrants take away jobs and social security benefits from the native population	22	50	25	3
I feel uncomfortable when I'm next to an immigrant	45	40	14	0

As is apparent from the table, the participants do not present negative views on immigrants. Positive views on immigrants can be a positive influence in forming views on language and cultures related to it, which is a prerequisite for the development of interculturalism and intercultural individuals.

In determining participants' views and beliefs on language learning the current researchers were interested in seeing how much importance was attributed to the languages in their environment, thus the set of statements refers to the importance and learning of languages in the environment of future educators and teachers (Table 5).

Table 5. The importance and learning of languages in the environment of future educators and teachers

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important to speak several languages, because we can then communicate with various people	0	1	46	53
The importance of speaking foreign languages is overrated	9	65	21	5

Early learning of a second/foreign language negatively influences the mother tongue knowledge	29	62	9	0
Children must start learning a second/foreign language as soon as possible	3	33	56	8
Children must first learn well their mother tongue, and only then can they learn a second/foreign language	5	53	30	12
You can learn a second/foreign language very well even if you didn't start learning it as a child	1	12	66	21
A speaker who starts learning a second/foreign language early on, comes close to a native speaker in their knowledge of the language	3	34	60	3
I prefer to talk to people who speak my language	4	21	55	20
When I speak a second/foreign language, I am always afraid that I will make mistakes	1	19	63	17

The analysis of future educators' and teachers' views on the importance and learning of languages in the environment reveals a complex picture. For Slovenians, the Slovenian language has had a highly unifying role throughout history, stemming from the need to belong to a community, the need for territorial cohesion, for statehood, and from the need for validation of personal roots, therefore the fact that the participants/young people overcome historical beliefs and attribute high importance to the learning of a second/foreign language is of utmost importance. It is interesting that future educators and teachers prefer to talk to people who speak their language and that they are always afraid they will be making mistakes when speaking in a second/foreign language. In this regard, we can probably refer to the foreign language anxiety discussed by authors M. Žefran, S. Bratož and A. Pirih (2017).

The last set of statements refers to views of future teaching staff on immigrants and their learning of Slovenian language (Table 6).

Table 6. Views of future teaching staff on immigrants and their learning of the Slovenian language

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The cultural and linguistic diversity in the preschool /primary school enriches teaching	0	0	76	24
It is necessary to use only the Slovenian language in the preschool /primary school teaching	4	46	46	4
The immigrant children must learn the Slovenian language as soon as possible	3	9	76	12
The assessment programme in the Slovenian language classes can be adapted for immigrant children for 1 year only	13	71	13	0
It is good that the immigrant children preserve their culture of origin and their mother tongue	0	3	60	37
It is good that the educator/ teacher encourages other children to learn the immigrants' language	0	29	64	7
It is good that the educator/ teacher encourages communication in the immigrants' language as well	2	35	55	8
It is good that the immigrants' language is used in informal situations in the preschool/primary school	4	38	52	6

In the early language learning/teaching, the child's positive experience with the language is the best motivation for further work and an incentive to reach a higher level of knowledge. For the preschool and primary-school-aged child, the language is a means of communication and never a goal, because the child is interested in obtaining new information, in what we are communicating with

the language and not the language per se with all its grammatical and pragmatic dimensions. The child needs above all a supportive environment for language development, where they will be able to use speech. This means that they need to have an opportunity to hear and use speech in different circumstances, while also needing encouragement from adults and peers. Language teaching/acquisition in preschool and early primary school age must proceed in a planned way, because it demands specifically developed and well-considered methods of and approaches to learning, which must be based on the knowledge of child development and preschool learning. This is confirmed by participants' views which show a positive stance towards immigrants' learning of the Slovenian language while preserving their mother tongue. As pointed out by S. Rutar (2014), the awareness of the link between the language and the meaning in a particular environment is important for the organisation of a bilingual learning environment, therefore the presence of different languages in kindergarten and school may offer a chance for reflection on a similar, same or different meaning.

## CONCLUSION

It is necessary to determine and recognise views and beliefs of various stakeholders in the learning process to design and establish efficient intercultural practices in education. The views of future educators and teachers on interculturalism and the Slovenian language learning have an important influence on encouraging language diversity, which is one of the basic values of the modern European society.

The research finds that, to build a school for the future, the diverse needs of children must present a challenge for the teacher/educator in designing the teaching process to help each child reach optimal results. It is a path of research, cooperation, change and a never-ending process of searching for optimal solutions. This is why it is important for the teacher/educator to become aware of their role in the process of the language planning for the child, because they have a direct influence on the development of the child's linguistic competences (grammatical and communicative) with their own cultural capital.

That's why in the university education is necessary to develop educators' and teachers' pedagogical competences, to provide special skills and knowledge, to ensure the spreading and delivering of knowledge and to find solutions and challenges presented by diverse needs of students in modern schools. It is also necessary to encourage the teachers' desire for acquiring knowledge and skills to change the relationship with students, which would enable the co-creation of a modern Slovenian language teaching, with sensitivity for multiculturalism.

In the future, research should be carried out on views of other stakeholders responsible for the education planning, since the development of intercultural capability must be embedded into many activities of the educational institution and of the broader local community rather than being restricted to individual subjects or specific activities, sporadically organised by the educational institution.

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