LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION. TODAY'S CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES
НАВЧАННЯ МОВИ ТА МІЖКУЛЬТУРНА КОМУНІКАЦІЯ. ВИКЛИКИ ТА ТРУДНОЩІ СЬОГОДЕННЯ У НАВЧАННІ ТА ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ

M. PACE, Ph.D., Associate Professor
М. ПЕЙС, доктор філософії, доцент
Email: mario.pace@um.edu.mt
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9906-9408
Університет Мальти, Мальта
University of Malta, Malta

Abstract. An important sub-objective of the Lisbon Strategy states that there is a need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe. Over the past two decades, countries in the world have become ever more interdependent and many existing borders have been erased. Multilingualism, or proficiency in more than one language, is internationally gaining positive support and is viewed as an educational goal by many countries. This has brought about a situation where foreign language teaching and learning has become more necessary than ever, not simply for linking with the rest of the world but above all for producing active citizens able to function in today's ever-shrinking world. Good communication skills in foreign languages has never been so important and necessary. Such rapid and profound social changes have not only increased the number of foreign language teachers and students and brought about complex and intriguing problems related to quality in teaching and learning, but they have also deeply affected present-day teaching methods and approaches. In today's world, if foreign language teaching is to be successful, it is important that teaching systems and programmes are continuously remodelled, keeping in mind the social changes that have occurred in recent years. Such changes compel us to adapt to new social, cultural and linguistic realities: young people's language use, their way of doing things, their way of studying today is very different to what it was some years ago. These also present a vast array of qualms that have to be dealt with in the foreign language classroom, namely, assessment strategies, the correct use of technological resources, and mixed ability and multicultural classrooms. All this implies that in order to make students become autonomous learners, which is the ultimate goal in language teaching, what is presented in class has to be relevant and pertinent to the students' everyday life experiences.

Key words: social changes, teaching and learning, paradigm shift, autonomous learners.

Introduction and Literature Review. Understanding the changing scenarios taking place around us and the ability to measure their effects on the teaching and learning processes in class is essential if we want to remain relevant to the students' needs. The world has changed. So have the students and the educational institutions. Language teaching has seen some radical changes in the past few decades, moving from chalkboards to whiteboards and to Smart Boards. Notebooks and textbooks have been replaced with mobiles, laptops and iPads. Online courses, hands-on learning, overseas exchanges, collaborative spaces, all have become the order of the day. We have moved from very traditional and formal ways of teaching languages, characterised by passive instruction and repetitive practices, to flexible, creative, and agile classrooms, with students logging in and learning from anywhere and at any time of the day. Knowledge of foreign languages is today considered a lifelong skill. This explains why the European Commission fosters multilingualism and language learning and its goal is to have a Europe where everyone is taught at least two languages in addition to their own mother tongue from a very early age.

The teaching of foreign languages (FL) has always presented various challenges to teachers, learners and researchers alike. As a result of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual classrooms typical of the 21st century, the societal changes that we are constantly witnessing and the onset of COVID-19, language teacher educators today face new, unprecedented challenges in their bid to entice students learn languages other

than their mother-tongue. Current trends in foreign language teaching should reflect the principal paradigm shifts that occur over the years in our society, where multilingualism and intercultural communication play a fundamental role in order to communicate effectively, to extend one's circles beyond the local dimension, to develop an open disposition towards diversity and change and, therefore, also to enhance professional and economic development (Pace, 2015) [1].

But before speaking about challenges and difficulties, I believe that it is pertinent to take stock of the current scenarios and analyse what is happening around us as this has direct implications both on intercultural communication as well as for the teaching and learning of Languages. Gone are the days where all students in class spoke the same language, had the same values, came from similar cultural backgrounds. Apart from the fact that classrooms today are characterised by multiculturalism and multilingualism, other issues like the presence of technology in class and its use cannot be ignored. We live in a world where being able to interact with people coming from different countries, having diverse cultures and speaking different languages is critical to our success. Over the past two decades, countries in the world have become ever more interdependent and many existing borders have been erased. This has brought about a situation where foreign language teaching and learning has become more necessary than ever not simply for linking with the rest of the world but above all for producing active citizens able to function in today's ever-shrinking world. Good communication skills in foreign languages has never been so important and necessary. As stated by King (2018: 2), "… multilingualism is especially important in an age of increased and rapidly growing international migration. People migrate for many reasons – escaping oppression and war, searching for better opportunities – but it is clear that the languages that they have access to or aspire to use can greatly influence the pattern of migration and the success with which migrants are able to integrate and contribute to their host societies." [2]. In other words, there is a crucial need for competencies in more than one language given that language and intercultural competences have become core

employability skills in many fields. In fact, apart from cognitive, academic and behavioural benefits, FLs give job seekers a cutting edge and are critical to productivity of future generations.

An important sub-objective of the Lisbon Strategy [3] states that there is a need to improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education throughout Europe. Over the past two decades, countries in the world have become ever more interdependent and many existing borders have been erased. Multilingualism is internationally gaining positive support and is viewed as an educational goal by many countries. This has brought about a situation where foreign language teaching and learning has become more necessary than ever, while good communication skills in FLs has never been so important and necessary. Chaika (2022: 3614) affirms that "Today, the status of a foreign language is constantly growing its value, which is due to the strengthening of economic, political and cultural ties between countries, on the one hand, and on the other, the internationalization of information exchange and the increasing role of media." [4].

On the other hand, however, we are living in a time characterised by uncertainties. In fact, today's globalised times are both exciting and worrisome, with the ground shaking under our feet with what is happening around us. A lot of what we took for granted about language, culture, intercultural communication, communication in itself, is not what it was when I, and maybe some of you, entered this field of research some or many years ago. Teaching methods have changed; our modes of communicating have changed; the way people speak and interact with each other has changed; the scope/s of learning a language or a FL have changed. Consequently, around the globe, parents struggle to ensure that their children, whatever their age, achieve a good command in a number of foreign languages with the result that a large number of opportunities to learn languages have been provided in many different ways. As a matter of fact, to be better able to meet such changes and demands, a large number of countries have moved from a system of foreign language teaching designed to educate just a few to one of mass education and this required a transformation in the meaning and the orientation of the work of language teachers.

Such rapid and profound social changes have not only increased the number of foreign language teachers and students and brought about complex and intriguing problems related to quality in teaching and learning, but they have also deeply affected present-day teaching methods and approaches.

Yet, notwithstanding all this, we still need to go a very long way. The European Survey on Language Competencies (ESLC) [5], designed to collect information about the foreign language proficiency of students in the last year of lower secondary education or the second year of upper secondary education in EU member states with the intention 'not only to undertake a survey of language competences but a survey that should be able to provide information about language learning, teaching methods and curricula' (European Commission 2007a) [6], found that:

i. Language competencies provided by educational systems still need to be significantly improved.

ii. There is an overall low level of competences in both first and second foreign languages amongst students in all participating states.

iii. Despite a growing recognition that proficiency in at least one other language is advantageous in today's world, a lot still needs to be done.

The current scenario. In today's world, if foreign language teaching is to be successful, it is important that teaching systems and programmes are continuously remodelled and developed in line with the needs and realities of our learners. To be able to respond to these evolving needs and to be able to remodel and create new programmes of study, it is pertinent to ask ourselves three vital questions.

1. Why is it so important to know who our learners are?

2. What are the main challenges and difficulties that need to be faced and overcome by teachers of languages in order to successfully motivate their students?

3. Where do we want to arrive?

The social changes that have occurred in recent years compel us to adapt to new social, cultural and linguistic realities: young people's language use, their way of doing things, their way of studying today is very different to what it was some years ago. This means that if we do not keep in mind who our youth are, their characteristics, their way of doing things, their study habits, we risk running a situation where we honestly believe that our message is getting through, we are convinced that our teaching is effective when in fact learning is not taking place, or rather only a fraction of what we are trying to teach is being grasped.

Due to space and word limit constraints, I will only focus on what I believe are the most pertinent characteristics of today's youth and on how these impact on intercultural communication and on the teaching and learning process. The first one is linked to the fact that many children live away or separated from their parents and the obvious consequences of such a situation. Given such an absence of parents (for various reasons, including changing formal family structures and the rise of parental labour migration) from young people's lives, such students very often lack the necessary emotional and cognitive "filters" which form the basis of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, considered of utmost importance in order to be able to maximise their educational paths, with various researchers proving how such an absence may greatly influence children's educational outcomes (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013; [7] Zhang, Behrman, Fan, Wei, & Zhang, 2014. [8]).

Another characteristic of today's youth is that they have access, at a very early age, to unlimited digital information and to unpredictable virtual experiences and relationships. This in itself might sound positive. But the problem is that very often students do not have the skills to determine and distinguish between what is true or trustworthy and what is not. This might lead to situations where students compare what is being taught in class to what they find over the net, which might not be precise and correct, with the consequence that they start doubting which is the correct source and version. Apart from this, their main mode of communication is digital. And we all know that the language used when we communicate on the social media (the way we write, etc.) is at times totally different from the language taught in class or that found in textbooks. Students in class have to be constantly reminded to switch from text lingo to proper "language", to change from informal written communication techniques, using short syntax writings and acronym full

sentences, to more formal ones, to watch out for orthography, and grammatical errors given that social media encourages people to give little, if any, importance to spell things right. The same goes when teaching speaking skills, given that for many young people communication is sometimes limited to only using social media, making it hard for them to communicate in person.

For this same reason, I call today's young people "digital natives", in the sense that their way of communicating and organising their free time is very often closely linked to the WEB 2.0. Now the WEB 2.0 provides students with immense opportunities for sharing and for interacting whilst encouraging them to be dynamic, participative and be protagonists in various fora and platforms. This means that they have a very intimate relationship with technology. And if we have a look at some of their most common characteristics which result from such an intimate relationship and that have a direct impact on their way of learning we see that they are multi-tasking, they find it hard to concentrate for long stretches of time, they prefer shorter texts/ input and they react better to visual stimuli. So although at times we might not see the social media and technological resources in a very positive light, due to various reasons, the fact remains that Web 2.0 is more of a social resource than a technological tool. And if by learning a language we mean learning how to interact in that language and being fully immersed in a continuous changing context, then Web 2.0 is innately ideal for language learning given that the social web is a network of persons and contents with the aim of interaction using language as well as a whole set of connections and relations between contents and persons.

Challenges and difficulties in teaching and learning foreign languages. All of the above have very serious ramifications on the way these students learn, the use of technology in our teaching approaches and the way we, as educators, communicate with our students. And this brings us to our 2nd question: What are the main challenges and difficulties that need to be faced and overcome by teachers of languages in order to successfully motivate their students?

I firmly believe that there are two categories of challenges and their respective difficulties when it comes to FL teaching and learning. There are what I call the "everyday challenges" that teachers of languages have to face in class and in which I will not delve here, namely those associated with classroom management, student motivation, meeting all the needs of the students in class, analysing and identifying the best techniques to teach what the students need most, learning how to use in the best possible manner the technological resources available and assessing student learning. Then there are what I call the "present day" challenges which are all closely knit to each other and which are fundamental to success in our profession. To begin with, as a result of migration teachers are witnessing in class a new group of learners whose presence in turn requires rethinking aspects both in teacher education as well as in classroom management. Unfortunately, most teachers are not adequately prepared to teach classes where a good number (at times the majority) of students do not speak the same language and the language of the country is not their mother tongue. To make matters more complicated, another difficulty arises when the language structures of the mother tongue of some of the students differ from those of the language of communication in class.

Another challenge is to keep the pace with language change. To be fair, this has always created difficulties for teachers of FLs, but with the onset of social media and the NET, the challenge has become much bigger given that language change is happening at a very faster pace. There are three main factors leading to this fast change acceleration process, the first of which being the Internet, which is fostering new experiences faster than ever before. In fact, if up to some decades ago, it used to take a generation to accept or introduce a new word, today all you need to do is put a new word/phrase on the social media and everyone starts using it immediately. Now the challenge for teachers is that they have to keep pace with this given that quite often the everyday language of the students is not the language used in textbooks or that of their teachers. Whether we like it or not, we are surrounded by new phrases, words, and ideas that reflect the culture of young people and we must ensure that we, as teachers, understand what they mean if we really want to communicate and engage with them. This leads us to the

second factor, which is the globalization of the language. It has become extremely difficult for a language teacher to tell his/her students that there is only one kind of language (English/ French/ German ecc) and that "this is the way you should say something" because as soon as they listen to natives of the country where that particular language is spoken or when they visit the country, they will surely listen to/ encounter another kind of language which is not the textbook language. The challenge is that while it is important to retain the respect of the "traditional accent or language", it is equally important to make students aware of other varieties of that same language. In the context of individuals who seek to communicate in a foreign language, one of the main taxing aspects of communication is being able to interact fluently with people with different accents. Not understanding what someone else is saying due to accent differences often leads to embarrassment, rejection, or misunderstandings and this gives rise in students to frustration and lack of self-confidence. This could be overcome by encouraging students to improve their reading and listening comprehension skills by exposing them to texts of as many different varieties as possible: emails; chatlines; newspaper articles; academic writing; SMSs; internet articles; book excerpts; etc.

Even the third factor is closely linked to the previous two. Thanks to social media and texting where messages tend to be written quickly and in short bursts, young people today communicate differently to older generations. Thanks to such current trends, young people can get their meaning across in fewer words, be it through the use of emoticons, conjoined words or abbreviations. Linguistic creativity and cultural references are hallmarks of this language, where some phrases have even been born simply due to a popular meme or a mistake on social media that people found funny and co-opted. So unlike once upon a time when Shakespeare introduced new words, today the mantle has been passed to the youth of the day and thanks to the social media they become extremely popular around the globe in a very short period of time.

Now this brings us to another very important aspect in FL teaching and learning. Assessment procedures. The philosophy of the classroom should be to expose students to as many different varieties of the language as possible. But we must be careful with examinations!! They are much more conservative because as a rule examining boards are notoriously conservative. We cannot interpret language ability as solely a cognitive attribute of language users as this ignores the essentially social nature of the interactions that take place in discourse. At the same time, as Bachman (2013) argues, measuring the interactional competence of individual test takers can be problematic for both methodological and ethical reasons [9]. So one of the greatest challenges of every language teacher is to find a balance between what needs to be done (and what is usually done) in the classroom in view of assessments, due to the heavy burden imposed on them by the strong monopolization of the testing organizations to the assessment polices, and what the second language acquisition and applied linguistics experts are suggesting: that we need to reflect in our teaching what is really going on in the world in terms of multilingualism, truncated repertoires, multitranslingual practices, etc. Such a situation asks for a serious and strong debate on what importance should be given to standardized assessment, which has been leading the world assessment policies for decades, and on whether classroom-based assessment, such as assessment for learning (AfL), assessment of learning (AoL), learning-oriented assessment (LOA), dynamic assessment (DA), should be given more weight and value. Such a debate is crucial given that today's cultural diversity in the language classroom not only makes the teachers' day to day work difficult, posing pedagogical and social challenges, but also presents challenges when it comes to assessing students' language abilities. Teachers as well as students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning while at the same time assess them individually. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences perceive the world and how they process the language/s and intercultural

aspects being taught in class. They also have to deal with, among others, the students' different linguistic backgrounds, their varying levels of proficiency in the target language, their exposure to the target language. In other words, to be effective, assessment must recognize the diversity of learners and allow for differences in styles and rates of learning.

The way forward. Nowadays, learning is not solely confined to the classroom during the prescribed hours of our lessons/lectures, but students have infinite options outside the "classroom hours" to further their learning through online courses, MOOCs, chatrooms, online resources, Apps and platforms. Furthermore, the internet, technology and the media, together with virtual social networks provide great opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use, in sharp contrast to the classroom where, very often, such opportunities can be quite limited. And the variety of today's learners within the same classroom and their aspirations to develop different communicative repertoires and to acquire different language skills in accordance to their particular needs, leads to another question: The Where. Where do we want to arrive? And the answer is that we should strive to transform our students into autonomous learners. To do this we need to be aware of the challenges faced by the learners themselves in the FL classroom, namely frustration – which is often the result of their having studied the language for a number of years and still feel they are still not confident in communicating with it; relevance, or the lack of it - they do not feel the need for the language as they see no direct relevance to everyday life; lack of opportunity to practise the language – and maybe this is where technology can come in very handy; lack of self-confidence – this is why positive feedback is essential. To help students overcome such frustrations and to be successful in our bid to help students of languages become autonomous learners it is imperative that the teaching/learning material presented in class is not only varied, original, hands on and challenging, but above all practical and relevant to their needs and touches on their emotions and feelings.

During the last couple of years, we have all witnessed how the COVID-19 crisis revealed the unpreparedness of education systems, infrastructure, educators and learners for distance learning, and the fragility of adult literacy programmes. Teachers across the globe were largely unprepared to support continuity of learning and adapt to new teaching methodologies. Even in contexts with adequate infrastructure and connectivity, many educators lacked the most basic ICT skills and struggled to facilitate quality distance learning. Times and situations have changed and this has given rise to alternative methods of teaching and learning languages. Apps, podcasts, online tutoring platforms, 1-on-1 online lessons, digital books, amongst others, now dominate independent foreign language learning, offering flexibility and self-directed learning. This does not mean, however, that foreign language learning has become easier or less taxing, believing and arguing that one can learn everything and access all study material from the comfort of home. In fact, although no one can ignore or underestimate the benefits of online remote language teaching and learning, technology is not all that matters after all and that notwithstanding the creation of a multitude of platforms intended to facilitate language learning, many of the existent problems and challenges mentioned above will not be solved solely by the use of technology while new ones will be created. Indeed, today, more than ever before, I strongly believe that to make language learning effective, practical and relevant to the students' needs and everyday lives, language programmes should focus on 3 key aspects of motivation, namely autonomy, competence and social relatedness.

Conclusion. It is a known fact that across the globe, one of today's realities is that millions of kids grow up learning two languages or more. Immigration, marriages between people coming from different countries, work mobility of parents, escaping from war and persecution and other factors have brought about in many countries a relatively new landscape of diverse national origins, often referred to as "superdiversity" [10] where young children can speak multiple languages, at times even before starting their primary school. Such dramatic changes in intercultural communication have very serious repercussions on language teaching and learning, and more than ever before parents, language experts, linguists, teachers and all other stakeholders should come together, reflect critically and analyse how best to take full advantage of such realities. One possible

way is to give more importance to the use of languages in different contexts, focusing more on the interconnectedness of language and culture in a fluid and complex system rather than insisting on reaching a level of proficiency as close as possible to that of a native speaker. After all, we need to keep in mind that apart from all the cognitive advantages of speaking different languages, language teaching and learning's ultimate aim is to enable learners to express themselves in diverse situations and circumstances.

References

1 Pace, M. (2015). Speaking their language. Reviving the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools in Malta. The Language Proficiency Assessment National Project. *INTED* 9th International Technology, Education and Development Conference. IATED Academy, 609-617.

2. King, L. (2018). The Impact of Multilingualism on Global Education and Language Learning. *Cambridge Assessment English.* United Kingdom.

3. European Union, Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community, 13 December 2007, 2007/C 306/01, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/476258d32.html [accessed 25 August 2022].

4. Chaika, O. (2022). Foreign Language Teaching: Content of Poly- and Multicultural Education. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*. Volume 05 Issue 08 August 2022. ISSN(online): 2644-0695. Pages 3614-3621.

5. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/language-survey-final-report_ en.pdf. p. 5.

6. European Commission (2007a) Communication from the Commission to the Council of 13 April 2007 entitled 'Framework for the European survey on language competences' [COM (2007) 184 final – Not published in the Official Journal].

7. McLanahan, S., Tach, L., & Schneider, D. (2013). The causal effects of father absence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 39, 399–427. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145704.

8. Zhang, H., Behrman, J. R., Fan, C. S., Wei, X., & Zhang, J. (2014). Does parental absence reduce cognitive achievements? Evidence from rural China. *Journal of Development Economics*, 111, 181–195. doi:10.1016/j.jdeveco.2014.09.004.

9 Bachman, L., F. (2013). Ongoing Challenges in Language Assessment. In *The Companion to Language Assessment*, First Edition. Edited by Antony John Kunnan.© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.DOI: 10.1002/9781118411360.wbcla128

10. The term "superdiversity" has been coined by the German anthropologist Professor Steven Vertovec, the Founding Director at the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, and Honorary Professor of Sociology and Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, Germany.

Анотація. Важливою підціллю Лісабонської стратегії є потреба покращити викладання іноземних мов на всіх рівнях освіти в Європі. За останні два десятиліття країни світу стали все більш взаємозалежними, а багато існуючих кордонів стерто. Багатомовність, або володіння кількома мовами, отримує позитивну підтримку в усьому світі та розглядається як освітня мета багатьох країн. Це призвело до ситуації, коли викладання та вивчення іноземних мов стало більш необхідним, ніж будь-коли, не лише для встановлення зв'язку з рештою світу, але, перш за все, для формування активних громадян, здатних функціонувати в сучасному світі, що постійно звужується. Хороші навички спілкування іноземними мовами ще ніколи не були такими важливими та необхідними. Такі швидкі та глибокі соціальні зміни не тільки збільшили кількість викладачів і студентів іноземних мов і спричинили складні та інтригуючі проблеми, пов'язані з якістю викладання та навчання, але вони також глибоко вплинули на сучасні методи та підходи до навчання. У сучасному світі, щоб викладання іноземних мов було успішним, важливо постійно переробляти системи та програми навчання, враховуючи соціальні зміни, які відбулися за останні роки. Такі зміни змушують нас адаптуватися до нових соціальних, культурних і мовних реалій: використання мови молодими людьми, спосіб ведення речей, спосіб навчання сьогодні дуже відрізняється від того, що було кілька років тому. Вони також представляють величезну кількість сумнівів, з якими доводиться мати справу в класі іноземної мови, а саме: стратегії оцінювання, правильне використання технологічних ресурсів, змішані здібності та мультикультурні класи. Усе це означає, що для того, щоб змусити учнів стати самостійними учнями, що є кінцевою метою викладання мови, те, що представлено на уроці, має відповідати повсякденному життєвому досвіду студентів.

Ключові слова: соціальні зміни, викладання та навчання, зміна парадигми, автономні учні.