

Learner-Centered Multilingualism: German as a Foreign Language after English

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines multilingualism as a fundamental condition of learners in the context of foreign language teaching, with a particular focus on German as a foreign language (DaF). It first defines the concept of multilingualism and distinguishes it from related terms such as bilingualism, second language, and foreign language, highlighting the importance of multilingual competence in today's globalized world. The study then explores two key approaches to integrating multilingualism into foreign language education: contrastive linguistics and multilingual didactics. Contrastive linguistics, which builds on the contrastive hypothesis, is analyzed both in its potential to facilitate language learning through positive transfer and in its limitations, including critiques of the strong contrastive hypothesis and the issue of false friends. The concept of multilingual didactics is presented as a pedagogical framework that encourages the systematic use of learners' existing language knowledge, including English as a bridging language, to support the acquisition of additional languages. The paper uses the textbook *deutsch.com* as an example to illustrate how multilingual approaches can be effectively implemented in DaF teaching. The findings suggest that leveraging multilingual learners' prior knowledge, raising awareness of cross-linguistic similarities and differences, and integrating languages strategically into teaching materials can significantly enhance the efficiency and motivation in foreign language learning.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism; Foreign language teaching; German as a foreign language; Multilingual competence; Contrastive linguistics

1 Introduction

In the course of European integration, foreign language acquisition has established itself as a "normative phenomenon" and multilingualism or bilingualism has now become commonplace in EU countries (cf. Wisniowska 2015: 65). Multilingualism is also widespread on the African continent, where many people speak at least one additional African language alongside their mother tongue, often a neighboring African language, as well as the national language, which is typically a European language (Riehl 2014: 9). Worldwide, English is almost universally offered as the first foreign language. The trend is clear: Multilingualism is gaining increasing global significance. But what does multilingualism specifically mean in foreign language teaching, and how can learners benefit from it?

This paper explores the question of how the potential of multilingualism can be utilized in DaF instruction to sustainably support the learning process. After clarifying key terms and presenting the current academic discourse, central aspects of multilingual didactics and contrastive linguistics are discussed. Subsequently, the textbook *deutsch.com* is analyzed as an example of how multilingualism is concretely considered in foreign language teaching. Finally, the approaches are critically reflected upon, and potential optimizations are outlined.

2 Learning potentials of multilingualism in foreign language teaching: contrastive linguistics and multilingual didactics

One of the concrete approaches to multilingualism is contrastive linguistics. Contrastive linguistics "deals with the differences and similarities between two or more languages" (Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 23) and examines "especially in the areas of phonetics, phonology, and morpho-syntax" (Harden 2006: 58). In the 1940s and 1950s, contrastive linguistics was established by Charles C. Fries and Robert Lado, whose assumptions about foreign language acquisition aim to make foreign language teaching more effective. These foundational assumptions were further developed in the 1960s with the contrastive hypothesis (cf. Tekin 2012: 13). In its early stages, contrastive linguistics sought to minimize difficulties in foreign language teaching, believing that "moving from one language to another requires a very specific path, and the better one knows this path, the more securely one reaches the goal, namely mastering the foreign language" (cf. Theisen

2016: 28).

With the emergence of contrastive linguistics, the close relationship between linguistics and foreign language teaching was further deepened (cf. Harden 2006: 57). The goal of contrastive linguistics in foreign language teaching is not to compare different language systems but to diagnose and predict potential learning difficulties and problems in foreign language acquisition (cf. Harden 2006: 58).

Contrastive linguistics is based on the contrastive hypothesis. In the 1950s, the hypothesis stated that "using the concepts of similarity and difference, it is possible to predict and describe structures that cause learning difficulties or facilitate them" (Oksaar 2003: 98f.). This statement was later referred to as the strong contrastive hypothesis. After criticism of the strong hypothesis, a weaker variant emerged about 20 years later, claiming that "contrastive comparisons could explain many errors made by learners" (Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 24). Currently, it is recognized that "learners constantly rely on their first language when acquiring a second language—or, in other words, they systematically and continuously transfer the habits of their mother tongue to the foreign language being learned (transfer)" (Tekin 2012: 19).

According to the basic assumption, the mother tongue can be transferred to the target language. When there are structural correspondences between the source and target languages, positive transfer occurs, leading to correct target language expressions and facilitating learning. When there are structural differences between the compared languages, negative transfer (also: interference) occurs, leading to incorrect expressions and learning difficulties (cf. Tekin 2012: 19; Oksaar 2003: 99). In this sense, numerous contrastive grammars emerged in the 1990s to facilitate foreign language learning through positive transfer. Some well-known works include *Grammatiken im Vergleich: Deutsch—Französisch—Englisch—Latein* (Glinz 1994) and *Deutsch—polnische kontrastive Grammatik* (Engel 1999).

The current approaches of contrastive linguistics in foreign language teaching, according to Brdar-Szabó, include both explicit and implicit awareness of contrastivity in foreign language teaching (cf. Brdar-Szabó 2010: 524f.). The former involves the contrastive teaching of grammatical phenomena and suggests that, instead of the dominance of absolute monolingualism in foreign language teaching, the mother tongue should also be used as diversely as possible (Brdar-Szabó 2010: 525f.). Juhász describes three forms of contrastive teaching of bilingual phenomena as follows:

(1) Interlingual isomorphic phenomena must be understood once and can then, in most cases, be automated immediately without further awareness.

(2) Strongly divergent phenomena must be taught in sharp contrast to the first language and must be made conscious several times during subsequent automation through confrontation with the first language.

(3) In cases of contrast deficiency, the corresponding phenomena must frequently be made conscious to overcome homogeneous inhibition." (Juhász 1970: 164)

Implicit awareness includes strategies that "ultimately aim to ensure that the learner infers hypotheses about the structure of the language being learned and constantly refines them" (Brdar-Szabó 2010: 526), such as selection, complexity reduction, and progression.

Selection means that the determination of learning content, the mother tongue, and contrastivity should form the basis for selecting the grammatical phenomena to be addressed (cf. Brdar-Szabó 2010: 526). "Selection is always accompanied by complexity reduction," which can be divided into three types: "structural, functional, and developmental simplification" (Brdar-Szabó 2010: 527; James 1980: 158). Structural simplification requires reducing the complexity of the structure being taught, while functional simplification means that second-language input is taught by eliminating finer distinctions. Developmental simplification can make learning easier for learners at a certain point but may later hinder learning, so this should not be overlooked. Progression refers to the arrangement of the grammatical components of the learning content in sequences based on contrastive considerations (Brdar-Szabó 2010: 527).

In the context of foreign language teaching, contrastive linguistics was expanded in the 1970s to include general error analysis (also: error linguistics, error studies), the goal of which is "to create a basis for the evaluation and correction as well as for the therapy and prophylaxis of foreign language errors" (Tekin 2012: 39). How can teachers gradually incorporate error analysis into foreign language teaching?

According to Hufeisen/Neuner, error analysis involves three steps: error identification, error classification, and error explanation (cf. Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 67). In error identification, a form must first be recognized as "incorrect or not corresponding to the German norm." This presupposes that teachers themselves know the norm and master the German "standard language" (cf. Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 67). The second step involves "describing the error or deviation" (Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 67). Error explanation deals with "determining the likely causes of these errors" (Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 67). However, Tekin believes that error analysis consists of five steps. The first three steps are similar to Hufeisen/Neuner's statement, and "criteria and means for (4) correction and evaluation as well as for (5) therapy and prophylaxis of

foreign language errors" should also be added (cf. Tekin 2012: 41).

The previous focus of error analysis was solely on identifying the sources of so-called "interlingual errors", which are "caused by interference or negative transfer, i.e., the adoption of structures and elements from L1 into L2" (Harden 2006: 79). Tekin argues that substitution, overdifferentiation/convergence, and underdifferentiation/divergence are determined by negative transfers (cf. Tekin 2012: 151). Substitution refers to the incorrect insertion of a form from one's own language into an unknown form in the second language (cf. Tekin 2012: 151). Overdifferentiation/convergence occurs when "there is no or a different distinction in L₂ for two elements in L₁" (Tekin 2012: 151). Conversely, underdifferentiation/divergence means that a differentiation present in the target language is not given in the source language (cf. Tekin 2012: 152).

In addition to these interlingual errors, Harden also emphasizes so-called intralingual errors, "whose causes lie within the target language itself or within what the learner knows or thinks they know about the target language" (Harden 2006: 79). In this sense, the following error causes are possible: (1) Overgeneralization of rules. Often, two correct structures of the target language are mixed in an incorrect form. A typical example is "Sie kann schwimmt" (She can swims). In German, only "Sie schwimmt" (She swims) and "Sie kann schwimmen" (She can swim) are correct (cf. Harden 2006: 79). (2) Ignorance of rule limitations. A rule is "stretched, so to speak." An example would be: "Du sollst hier nicht rauchen" (You shall not smoke here). Instead: "Du darfst hier nicht rauchen" (You may not smoke here) (cf. Harden 2006: 79). (3) Incomplete application of rules. In questions, only intonation is used instead of "word order as a marker for interrogation." An example is: "Das ist Bismarkstraße?" (This is Bismark Street?). Instead: "Ist das die Bismarkstraße?" (Is this Bismark Street?) (cf. Harden 2006: 79f.). (4) Formation of false hypotheses. A certain difference between the mother tongue and the target language is not fully understood. Often seen: "Wir haben sehr Spaß" (We have very fun). Instead: "Wir haben viel Spaß" (We have a lot of fun) (cf. Harden 2006: 80).

Another approach to multilingualism in foreign language teaching is multilingual didactics. According to Meißner, this term has caused confusion in recent times due to its ambiguity and "extends far beyond the interest of foreign language didactics into the fields of sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, language acquisition research, and more" (Meißner 2003: 23, 25). Nevertheless, multilingualism refers to "networked language learning to improve foreign language teaching, language learning competence, and the promotion of productive and receptive multilingualism" (Meißner 2003: 27).

According to Neuner, multilingual didactics is not a new teaching method but primarily a didactic concept for the individual learning of languages in the context of guided, institutional teaching (cf. Neuner 2009: 2). Reinfried shares a similar opinion and notes that multilingual didactics is "significant in the conception of teaching materials as well as in lesson planning and implementation" and that "particular attention must be paid to the interlingual linking of learning strategies, vocabulary, and grammar" (Reinfried 2001: 11f.). He further suggests that, in addition to language teaching, multilingual didactics connects with the "development of language awareness" and "intercultural comparison" as well as the "multicultural perspective of migration societies" (Reinfried 2001: 12).

For a long time, the idea prevailed that multilingual didactics was founded with the support of contrastive linguistics. Königs disagrees and argues that "the contrastivity" of multilingual didactics differs from that of "traditional contrastive linguistics" (Königs 2009: 22f.). "In foreign language acquisition," contrastivity does not only consider the languages themselves but also "the establishment of references between several [...] systems" and the "conditions and situations under which learning takes place" (Königs 2009: 23).

Furthermore, the English language and the learners' heritage and family languages should be included. Numerous projects, such as DaFnE (German as a Foreign Language after English, where German is learned with the help of English), EaG (English after German, where English is learned with the help of German), and EuroCom (Euro Comprehension), aim to awaken learners' prior knowledge of languages and use the already known language as a transfer language to the respective target language (cf. Meißner 2003: 25). Additionally, several teaching materials have emerged, such as Dimensionen (Hueber), Deutsch ist easy (Hueber), deutsch.com (Hueber), and Eurolingua Deutsch (Cornelsen), which are particularly suitable for multilingual learners.

For foreign language learners who have "no prior knowledge of grammar," such as gender, case, or "other German-language elements," English plays a special role in DaF teaching, serving either as a metalanguage or a transfer base (cf. Meißner 2003: 25). An empirical study conducted in Poland shows that the DaFnE concept "brings more advantages than disadvantages" (Wypuż 2015: 89) in DaF teaching:

Undoubtedly, the concept corresponds to the changes being made in EU countries, reflects the linguistic situation of contemporary societies, promotes multilingualism, and prepares students for the necessity of lifelong learning. [...] Moreover, DaFnE has a positive influence on the economization of learning, i.e., accelerating or facilitating the learning

process of further foreign language(s). (Wyputz 2015: 89)

Specifically, in the "development of vocabulary" such as "teenage language," "sports," "information technology," "fashion," and "advertising," positive transfers play an active role (Misniowska 2015: 65).

However, interference errors and positive transfers are two sides of the same coin: similarities between English and German are "a reason for the most frequently made errors" (Misniowska 2015: 65f.). For students, "the advantages of applying knowledge about acquired language skills are not conscious," and "the simultaneous learning of two foreign languages" seems more like "an additional burden" (Misniowska 2015: 65). For teachers, this concept represents a significant "linguistic and organizational" challenge (Wyputz 2015: 89f.). They are additionally required to master both English and German language skills perfectly. Moreover, this concept is very time-consuming in "planning and preparing lessons" (Wyputz 2015: 90). Teachers are also forced to "adapt existing materials or create their own teaching materials" due to the "lack of textbooks for tertiary languages" (Wisniowska 2015: 66). Nevertheless, it is worth applying the DaF/E concept in foreign language teaching.

3 When words betray: the problem of "false friends" across languages

The English word "gift" sounds identical and looks similar to the German word "Gift," but it means "present." An "artist" is not an "Artist" but a "Künstler." Such word pairs are called "false friends." According to Tekin, the phenomenon of "false friends" refers to expressions that have phonetic or morphological commonalities and similarities in two or more languages but whose semantic meanings are different (cf. Tekin 2012: 151). He further points out that not only differences but also commonalities and similarities between two or more languages can cause errors during foreign language learning (cf. Tekin 2012: 151).

His claim seems contradictory to the strong contrastive hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, contrastive linguistics is based on the assumption that the commonalities between the mother tongue and the target language facilitate foreign language learning, while the differences could disrupt the learning process (cf. Oksaar 2003: 99). Two variants of the contrastive hypothesis are distinguished: the "original strong or predictive" and the "weaker" contrastive hypothesis (Traoré 2014: 42), and both "are based on the transfer processes of structural elements from the source language" (Traoré 2014: 42). Despite its widespread use in DaF teaching, this linguistic discipline is not flawless, and especially the strong contrastive hypothesis has been vehemently criticized (cf. Traoré 2014: 43). Even today, "the boundaries of contrastive linguistics are repeatedly demarcated" (Theisen 2016: 32).

The strong contrastive hypothesis assumes that "structural comparisons between the source and target languages enable predictions about learner language behavior" (Oksaar 2003: 99). Notably, only the inclusion of the source and foreign languages is mentioned, which makes the strong contrastive hypothesis too limited because the influencing factors in foreign language acquisition also include other already mastered languages (cf. Traoré 2014: 43).

In addition, there are false friends, the similarities between the source and target languages, which can also lead to learning difficulties (cf. Hufeisen/Neuner 2000: 23). This has also been proven by empirical studies, showing that this hypothesis is incorrect. Interference errors are not only caused by structural differences between the source and target languages but also by the lack of contrast in homogeneous inhibitions. Learners tend to confuse similar things during the learning process (Juhász 1970: 72).

Furthermore, the causes of linguistic errors are much more diverse than the similarities and differences between language systems. "Extralinguistic factors" and "psychologically conditioned processes" must also be considered, such as "affective, neurophysiological, memory-psychological elements," the "teaching and learning methods applied," the "specific prerequisites of learners," and "learning and developmental psychological factors" (cf. Traoré 2014: 43; Oksaar 2003: 99f.; Tekin 2012: 158).

Another criticism of the strong contrastive hypothesis is that "language comparisons and their results are aimed solely at teachers, not learners" (Tekin 2012: 33). If foreign language learners have no awareness of their mother tongue, then a comparison between the mother tongue and the foreign language makes no sense (cf. Tekin 2012: 33).

The weak contrastive hypothesis involves the empirical examination of learners, where easily and difficultly learnable structures are differentiated, and interference errors in the foreign language acquisition process are predicted through contrastive analyses (Traoré 2014: 43ff.). From this emerges error analysis, whose task is to create a basis for the evaluation and correction as well as for the therapy and prophylaxis of foreign language errors (Tekin 2012: 39).

The first criticism, as mentioned above, is that error linguistics initially focused only on interlingual errors and neglected intralingual errors. However, not all errors can be explained. Moreover, interference should not be seen as the

"only source of foreign language errors," but the "peculiarities of the language system" must also be considered (Tekin 2012: 158). In addition to linguistic factors, contrastivity alone, given the great "complexity of language teaching," especially "foreign language teaching," is less decisive for the success or failure of language acquisition (cf. Nickel 1980: 635). From this, it can be concluded that contrastivity alone is only one factor in the emergence of error sources.

The critical examination of contrastive linguistics shows that contrastivity in foreign language teaching must not be regarded as a panacea. The overemphasis on structural comparisons is too limited if other influencing factors—such as individual learning biographies, motivation, learning strategies, and emotional aspects—are not simultaneously considered.

In my opinion, contrastive linguistics should be integrated into foreign language teaching, but not in the original strict form of the strong contrastive hypothesis. Rather, the focus should be on a dynamic, flexible approach to language comparisons that gives learners space to form their own hypotheses, reflect on errors independently, and actively develop language awareness.

Multilingual didactics offers a suitable overarching concept for this, which includes not only linguistic structures but also cognitive, affective, and sociocultural aspects of language learning. The use of bridging languages like English is undoubtedly sensible, but the learning environment should be designed to actively include and value other heritage and family languages as well.

4 Deutsch.com 1 as example

To examine the influence of multilingualism in DaF teaching in a practical way, the textbook *deutsch.com 1* was selected, as it explicitly considers the concept of multilingual didactics. The analysis follows the criteria of textbook analysis according to Neuner (2009), with particular attention to the following aspects: consideration of learners' existing language knowledge, promotion of language awareness, use of positive and negative transfers, and the role of English as a bridging language.

The analysis is qualitative-descriptive, based on the contents of the coursebook and workbook, with a special focus on transfer examples, metalinguistic hints, and the methodological design of exercises. The goal is to determine how the textbook concretely implements the potential of multilingualism in teaching.

Deutsch.com is a textbook published by Hueber Verlag and was released under the direction of Gerhard Neuner in 2008. This teaching material is divided into three volumes, corresponding to the proficiency levels A1, A2, and B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The present volume *deutsch.com 1* targets CEFR level A1. Each volume consists of six modules, and each module comprises three lessons (18 lessons in total). The first three lessons, each spanning two double pages, serve as starter modules, using existing language materials to build basic topics and vocabulary fields. The remaining lessons contain six pages each, including two double pages that systematically present grammar, vocabulary, and phrases, as well as a journal page and an overview page.

In addition to the coursebook, other teaching components are available: audio CDs for the coursebook, a DVD, a workbook, a teacher's manual, glossaries, an interactive coursebook for whiteboards and projectors, and digital versions of the coursebook and workbook. For German learners abroad, regional editions have even been published for their mother tongues, such as Spanish.

The target group of *deutsch.com* is young people or adults in Germany or abroad who specifically "want to start learning German but already have experience learning foreign languages" (*deutsch.com 1*: 3). In the preface, the authors emphasize the significant role of multilingualism, stating that the multilingualism concept builds on the mother tongue and extends beyond it to activate and expand language knowledge (*deutsch.com 1*: 3). This creates "transfer bridges" between the existing languages and the newly learned language, German (*deutsch.com 1*: 3). Therefore, a contrastive comparison of different languages is particularly important. Not only English but also the mother tongue is considered (*deutsch.com 1* Workbook: 48).

With the help of positive transfer, the learning process of the German language is accelerated, saving time and motivating students to learn more. Contrastive differences, especially negative transfers, are considered and prominently listed as learning tips or strategies on the margins of the pages so that the hints are not overlooked. An example is: "You understand international words. But the pronunciation is different in every language!" (*deutsch.com 1*: 14). This aligns with Juhász's opinion: "In cases of contrast deficiency, the corresponding phenomena must frequently be made conscious to overcome homogeneous inhibition" (Juhász 1970: 164). By comparing similar structural correspondences between the mother tongue, English, and the foreign language German, awareness of multilingualism is created, and foreign language

teaching is made more effective.

Furthermore, English serves as an important bridging language. Often, numerous English terms appear as loanwords also used in German, for example (deutsch.com 1: 32): "Hobbys," "Sport," "Mode," "Position," "Aktivitäten," "Interessen," "Kultur," "Musik," "Pop-Rock," and so on. The textbook encourages teachers to point out these linking words to sensitize students to the similarities with words from other languages (deutsch.com 1 Textbook: 8). This significantly facilitates reading comprehension, activates prior knowledge in English, and ultimately promotes learning efficiency.

Moreover, the textbook offers many task formats that encourage comparisons between learners' known languages and German. For example, learners are asked to compare sentence structures or question words in English and German. Such comparisons promote awareness of language structures and encourage independent reflection on linguistic similarities and differences.

The promotion of learning efficiency—i.e., efficient learning through the conscious use of prior knowledge—is a central goal of the textbook. By continuously activating prior knowledge, not only is the learning process accelerated, but learners' motivation is also increased.

Overall, the analysis shows that deutsch.com 1 is a successful example of the implementation of multilingual didactics in DaF teaching. Positive transfers are deliberately promoted, contrastive differences are systematically addressed, and the role of English as a bridging language is effectively utilized. However, the concept could be expanded by more strongly incorporating learners' other heritage and family languages.

5 Summary

The present paper has shown that multilingualism in foreign language teaching is not only an enriching resource but also an indispensable prerequisite for contemporary DaF instruction. The analysis of the theoretical foundations and the textbook deutsch.com 1 demonstrates that considering learners' existing language knowledge demonstrably supports the language acquisition process and makes learning processes more efficient.

Contrastive linguistics helps compare language structures, identify potential learning difficulties, and make positive and negative transfers visible. However, the criticism of the strong contrastive hypothesis must not be ignored. A purely system-oriented analysis is insufficient to capture the complex learning process in foreign language teaching. Rather, the learners' perspective must be brought more into focus, and their individual language biographies must be actively incorporated.

Multilingual didactics offers a forward-looking concept for this. It emphasizes the conscious activation of prior knowledge, promotes language awareness, and strengthens intercultural competence. The analyzed textbook deutsch.com 1 already implements these principles in key areas: it creates transfer bridges, uses English as a bridging language, integrates metalinguistic hints, and supports learning efficiency through targeted tasks. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement in the inclusion of learners' other heritage and family languages to more comprehensively account for multilingualism.

For future teaching practice and textbook design, the following recommendations can be derived:

Teaching materials should increasingly integrate intercultural and language-comparative tasks that include languages other than English that learners know.

Teachers should be specifically trained in handling multilingual learning environments and sensitized to the potentials and challenges of multilingualism.

The promotion of language awareness and the ability to independently compare languages should be systematically anchored in teaching.

In conclusion, it can be stated: A multilingual-oriented foreign language teaching opens up diverse opportunities for more efficient learning, higher motivation, and sustainable development of language learning competence. The consistent consideration of multilingualism can thus make a decisive contribution to modern, learner-centered DaF instruction.

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