

The Heinrich-Heine Gymnasium in Cologne, Germany, offers a plurilingual drama group. Nearly all of the languages spoken by the members of the group are used. These languages are not just the language of education and the context language, but also the local dialect, foreign languages taught at the school and pupils' family and heritage languages.

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How can participating in a drama group promote plurilingualism?

Initial remarks

The pupils at our school speak a wide range of languages. The methods used for the plurilingual drama group, and its success, tap into the potential of this cultural diversity.

Acting makes children and young people more confident and free. During the process of jointly developing a presentation/play, all participants should be and are able to become active and have ownership. When assuming a role in the shelter of a group of actors, it is essential to try things out. You can do things that are ridiculous and make a fool of yourself. The goal is not perfection but rather to foster free expression, which allows pupils to become more confident and their individual contributions to be more spontaneous.

For participants, acting in a number of different languages is a new experience. While some young people welcome the opportunity to use their language skills, others are reluctant to demonstrate their plurilingualism. There are various reasons for this. However, in most cases, it is because pupils have not experienced respect or appreciation for their heritage or family language. Languages have different statuses that are linked to the social status of the group of speakers (Brizić 2011: 255; see also the interview with Brizić in Swaaf 2011). In this pecking order, foreign languages learned at school are ranked higher than many heritage languages. Therefore, speaking a language that is not the majority language can be perceived as a cause for a person to be excluded. Reluctance and even refusal to speak one's heritage language is also based on the expectation – assumed or already experienced - that this will bring about rejection. For this reason, in order for a project to succeed, it is absolutely necessary for a learning environment shaped by mutual acknowledgment, to be in place from the very beginning. Any discrimination against individual language biographies must be prohibited.

Plurilingual drama groups can be conducted at any school regardless of the age of the pupils. Of course, the individual conditions of a school and the specific goals of a plurilingual drama group will influence the way a group is conducted, designed and presented. However, multilingualism and plurilingualism are givens among learner groups at all of our schools. Pupils bring different first languages, family languages and heritage languages with them to school; these include dialects, sociolects and idiolects. English is the first foreign language taught at school and is part of pupils' language repertoires from the time they attend primary school.

The plurilingual drama group project represents a complex process in which participants are introduced to competencies associated with school-based and individual learning, such as communication and presentation, and are given the means to practice and develop these competencies.

Goals

One of the primary goals of school-based learning is for pupils to master German as the language of learning and teaching, as this language is a prerequisite for and the basis of successful learning processes in all school subjects.

Pupils in need of remedial education in the language of teaching have successfully mastered a number of other language learning processes and have learned one or more languages that do not play a role in their current school setting. Enabling pupils to recognise the potential of these competencies and addressing language learning processes is an essential goal of the concept presented in this paper.

Language learning strategies are continually addressed and discussed in the course of plurilingual rehearsals and as scenes and plot lines are developed. During this process, all participants become aware of the strategies and are able to experience them. Pupils practice methods of language comprehension in different languages. These methods include code switching, mediation and most importantly, gestures, facial expression, guessing and repeating. During this process, participants recognise and experience strategies that they can use for learning a foreign language.

Being frequently reminded of a deficiency and your need for remedial support can cause individuals to suffer from low self-esteem. Children and young people with a first language other than German are often among these individuals. This experience can also negatively impact cognitive abilities and “hinder successful participation in education” (Uslucan 2014: 356). In the process of developing a plurilingual play, pupils’ existing plurilingualism is valued. This fosters mutual awareness of linguistic and cultural competencies, and by valuing them, changes pupils’ views of these competencies. This in turn promotes uninhibited participation in group processes and the absorption and processing of learning content in the classroom.

Pupils initially act out scenes in small groups and then develop a play with the entire ensemble. This process involves a great deal of discussion and coordination. Participants hone their ability to make precise observations and analyse the acting, as well as their ability to give positive feedback and constructive criticism. Working together on a theatre project that addresses cultural and linguistic differences promotes mutual awareness of the participants’ diverse personalities. Pupils’ mutual respect will open up new ways for them to interact at school.

Taking part in the group benefits the foreign language learning processes of everyone involved, including those young people whose first language is German. The pupils gain a new view of aspects of their first language, become acquainted with the sound of languages they have never heard before, and with the help of exercises, learn to recognise similarities and differences between these languages.

Project description

The project starts with some fun exercises that promote team spirit.

An initial exercise for raising participants' awareness of their language repertoires and language learning process involves the language portraits developed by Neumann (1991). By creating language portraits, children and young people, as well as adults, reflect on their language competencies and become aware of these skills. In addition, language portraits make it fun for them to shape and present their language repertoires. Language biographies include dialects, sociolects and idiolects. The participants use different colours to fill in a blank template. In my drama group at a Gymnasium in Cologne, language biographies included the local Cologne dialect and youth and sign languages. Once participants have developed their language biographies, they present them to the rest of the group. This provides each pupil with the opportunity to make their first prepared presentation in the group. Every time I have experienced these initial presentations, the other group members have been a rapt audience, attentively listening to the presenting member.

'Ball bearing with language buttons' is an exercise that allows existing language diversity in a group to be clearly demonstrated. The 'language buttons' that can be pressed in the ball bearing can be replaced by sticky notes on which the participants write down all of the languages they speak. They stick the notes on their clothing, forehead, hands or legs. The participants can let their imagination run wild. Working in pairs, one partner presses a 'button' and says a sentence in the respective language. The other partner repeats the sentence. The participants love this exercise because they all act and speak simultaneously. While the teacher sometimes finds the volume level in the room deafening, it makes those participants who may feel reticent less inhibited. In this acoustic 'protected space', quieter and more reticent participants also speak in their first language and imitate what they have heard in the foreign language without feeling put on the spot. We observe that the participants become more confident and louder.

In feedback discussions, pupils said that they were surprised at the number of languages and at the particular languages they had heard, some of them for the first time.

They were able to describe their observations about articulation and pronunciation. Pupils used adjectives such as 'hard', 'soft', 'happy', or 'fast' to describe the way the languages sound. They tried out words and sentences in the languages they had heard. Pupils also mentioned the fact that they had been able to recognise some words in a foreign language, mentioning 'international words'. They also mentioned situations in which these words facilitated comprehension.

Turkish-speaking young people reported that their language does not have any prepositions. This makes it difficult for them to use prepositions in German or other languages correctly and consistently (Tunc 2010). Non-Turkish-speaking listeners use this opportunity to speak about the need for and function of prepositions and about the absence of this type of word in 'young people's language'. In these situations, young people find it interesting to reflect on language. They learn in passing and first hand, not from a teacher, but still from an expert, thereby "promoting autonomy on the part of the learner" (Königs 2004: 98).

Acting out scenes with limited linguistic material or without any language at all allows pupils to realise how the use of imaginary single-syllable and nonverbal language, with facial expressions and gestures, can help them express themselves more completely.

Exercises that promote the feeling of community and team spirit, and phases of these exercises in which language diversity is addressed and reflected on, can prepare pupils for a multilingual drama group.

The teaching project as an open process

The result of the project should be the production of a plurilingual play. The collaborative project work is conducted as an open process. Participants start with scenes, from which they develop a plot-line that influences and determines the development of additional scenes. The pupils must constantly negotiate how their production should look. They consider the results of small group work and in so doing, construct their opinion of the preliminary results. They learn to meticulously observe and analyse, have constructive discussions, and continue development based on mutual feedback.

In this process of playing a role when rehearsing the play, pupils discover and expand their own repertoire of expression. This includes language in all its diversity. Languages from pupils' repertoires and from school-based foreign language instruction, as well as words and phrases from other participants' languages, are spoken. During this process, the role of German is not only to facilitate understanding among the participants, but also to allow them to precisely name and describe what they have seen on the stage, to analyse a scene in context, argue a point, formulate feedback or suggest alternatives. In so doing, the drama group contributes to expanding and solidifying the linguistic register of the language of education.

While initially the participants expressed their desire to act in a play that had been selected for them, they began to enjoy their development of their own play during the course of the process. The director's task is to stimulate the creative process. Participants can use props, for example suitcases, to act out scenes addressing topics such as travelling, border-crossing or difficulty in being understood. Participants are curious and enthusiastic about trying out 'biographical theatre' methods such as 'freeze', 'slow motion' and 'synchronicity'.

During the work for preparing a stage production, there are recurring phases in which the participants are encouraged to reflect on the diversity of languages in the room, the plurilingualism of individual characters and the way their own role is shaped in terms of language. What language will they use to speak with whom and when? Why? What means of expression are used?

Different methods are discussed and are tried out when pupils act out scenes. The methods are included in the final production in order to allow the audience to understand everything that is said despite the many languages used in the play. These methods include a rapid change from one language to another in passing, mediation, repeating questions and, of course, gestures, facial expressions and biographical theatre methods.

Role of the teacher

It should be clear from the description above that the teacher's role in this project is different from that of a teacher in other school-based teaching scenarios. No teacher speaks all of the languages spoken by the pupils in the drama group. In a drama group, the director's task is not to test the actors' perfect mastery of a language, nor should he or she strive to do so. During this process, the focus is on initiating and supporting a creative process. Pupils, with their different personalities, should be able to participate in the group and should not have any qualms about the way they present their contribution.

The various phases leading up to the presentation of the play must be organised and supervised. Support must be provided and a range of stimulating material should be on hand that constantly supports the group's creative process (see Fasse 2014 for an example of how the phases can be conducted).

Conditions

It is essential that everyone involved is open to the notion of a process whose results will not be known until the final product emerges. There are no predetermined results that can be used as a benchmark for achievement. The participation of everyone involved, with their individual contributions and cooperation, is the key element of the results. Under these conditions, each participant can feel that their own involvement is essential and that their competencies are valuable. The director/teacher can only promote this process if his or her attitude towards the actors/pupils is characterised by trust. The director/teacher is responsible for providing materials, for the requisite external conditions for the work and for tasks, exercises and questions that encourage the young people to consider further aspects, ideas and opportunities. Thus, his or her role is more that of a facilitator than a teacher.

Other conditions that make this type of work possible are space and time. A room with dimensions, equipment and acoustics conducive to acting is an absolute prerequisite.

If only 90 minutes are available for the group work, as is the case with my drama group, and a classroom has to be cleared of the tables and chairs and then restored to its original state, valuable time is lost. For this reason, a dedicated room can be a great motivator. Having a rehearsal space or a stage is much more stimulating for the pupils than the classroom they experience every day, whose seating arrangement tends to remain unchanged during the day.

In my drama group that meets for one double period (90 minutes) per week for one academic year, I have already created two plays. These 90 minutes are tacked onto a school day comprising six periods. Before we start, participants need to do relaxation and loosening-up exercises in order to be able to act out scenes, to continue to develop what they have already rehearsed and to be able to deal with each other as partners. Hence, rehearsal afternoons or all-day rehearsals provide the opportunity for more in-depth exchange and lead to greater satisfaction on the part of the participants.

Taking the drama group mainstream at the school

After the successful performance of two plays, the concept of the drama group has gained attention and approval.

It has also given rise to intensive discussions with colleagues who teach English, French, Spanish and Latin – the foreign languages taught at the school. Some of the exercises on the topics of language biography and perception of existing plurilingualism are taken up in the context of foreign language instruction.

The need to promote linguistic competence as a prerequisite for academic success, including at Heinrich Heine Gymnasium, is an increasingly frequent topic of debate and one that presents teachers with new challenges. Designing subject teaching in a language-sensitive manner means having to make new efforts and attend training courses. Having a school drama group continues to be viewed as an optional extra that must take a back seat to traditionally important academic subjects. The link between acting and helping pupils to advance, especially in their language competencies, is still not recognised to a great enough extent.

Transferability

The concept presented here is not tied to a particular type of school. I have tried it out at a Gymnasium in Cologne, Germany, with a particularly high percentage of pupils with ‘international family histories’. The adjacent Realschule is also very interested in the project and I am currently working with this school. At secondary and comprehensive schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, the percentage of plurilingual young people is generally higher than at a Gymnasium. Hence, it is particularly important to promote competency in language(s) at the same time.

Because of the growing number of people migrating to Germany from crisis areas (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2014), more international remedial classes are needed for children and young people who are required to attend school. This poses a huge challenge because the level of German language skill in these learner groups tends to vary significantly. There are also differences among learners with regard to age and academic background. For this group, the German language, like the new surroundings and culture, is still alien. The young people are not always literate and they often use a different writing system than we do. The group does not have a common first language.

The concept presented here allows for participants’ cultural and language biographies to be carefully observed and respected. If these experiences and skills are used sensitively, the concept can lead to exciting results. For the young people who are expected to attend a regular German school as soon as possible, learning German is the main goal and theatre pedagogy can play a fundamental role in helping them achieve this goal. Holl (2011) has presented a wide range of possible forms for this type of teaching.

It is not necessary for pupils to read or understand written documents in order to take part in a theatre production. Language skills are exchanged and absorbed in a light-hearted manner. A group of young people who are complete strangers can develop into an ensemble that can learn together more comfortably in other classes. ‘Loops’ (Dockalova 2011) and ‘chunks’

(Aguado 2012) can be used to practice and cement useful phrases. Based on the automation of 'correct, appropriate and fluid production' (Aguado 2012: 17), young people can start contributing content in a light-hearted manner. Practicing these phrases with the help of theatre pedagogy techniques is used as a first step towards developing a complete production.

The curriculum for international remedial classes includes eight periods of German instruction per week. The students are already required to attend classes in subjects such as physical education, music, and art, in German, and classes taught through German in other subjects are added depending on their particular level of German.

In the process of acting in multiple languages, young people experience appreciation for their existing plurilingualism and are encouraged to use German, the language that the entire group is expected to learn together. Pupils who are enrolled in the separate international remedial class are highly motivated to switch to the mainstream class. The experience I have had with my German-as-a-Foreign-Language instruction has shown me that unconventional and action-oriented teaching methods are particularly effective when it comes to promoting successful learning. Cooperation among the teachers working with a preparatory class could allow a drama group to be added to the curriculum as an integral component of German instruction.

Conclusion

The number of pupils whose first language is not German is increasing across the entire school system. In all schools, we have to provide children and young people with the language skills they need to succeed in school and actively participate in our society.

With its reflection on language(s) and the use of language(s), a plurilingual drama group promotes participants' awareness of language and language learning, and in so doing, supports them in the process of learning the foreign languages taught at school. By the same token, in the phases when they reflect on language, during the discussion about the structure of their play, and when presenting constructive feedback, participants expand and cement their knowledge and use of German as the language of education. By presenting their existing plurilingualism as an essential component of our drama group's activities, participants feel appreciated and enriched. This experience is transmitted to the rest of the school during the final production of their play.

The concept of a plurilingual drama group assumes that participants have something to say. Pupils develop their play collaboratively in a creative and participatory process. The final presentation is the result of rehearsals, agreements and experiences. This play is performed on a stage in a variety of languages and demonstrates the actors' language diversity. It can be understood by everyone present.

The concept of a plurilingual drama group should be thus considered as a contribution to a whole-language policy.

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