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IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH IN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Despite the emphasis on the promotion of pluricultural/plurilingual skills clearly stated in the European Union (EU) policy (EC 2007, 2018), there is no evident concern for plurilingual awareness in many universities. Although studies on active multilingualism initially dealt with general education (see, e.g. European Centre of Modern Languages activities), there has been a growing research and initiatives with the focus on tertiary education system and the emphasis on methodological interventions. Since intercultural education has long been an EU priority (EC 2002), it is pertinent to address linguistic repertoires of students currently enrolled in the tertiary programmes and their implications for teaching foreign languages. Thus, the research object is linguistic repertoires of students currently studying at the University of Latvia (UL). Using language portraits as a research method with students in medicine and biotechnology in the context of English for Specific Purposes, and 3 philological programmes in the context of language studies respectively, the research aims at answering the following questions:

- How do UL students position English among other languages in their repertoire?
- Is there any difference between the positioning of English for students in different programmes?
- What are methodological implications for teaching English at the tertiary level?

The obtained data demonstrate instrumental significance of English and reveal variation in language repertoires of students in humanities and sciences as well as some minor differences among programmes. Overall, the results support the claim for addressing the so far underemployed plurilingual competence in teaching languages in university. The success of the language portrait activity as a tool to probe individual language biographies and intercultural dynamics of study groups as well as the discovered plurilingualism of the UL students suggest the necessity in modelling special tasks for raising and employing tertiary students' plurilingual awareness in a professionally meaningful manner.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, language portrait, linguistic repertoire, plurilingual awareness, tertiary education*

Introduction

"According to the classical concept, monolingualism of a whole country or territories in a country is one of the key characteristics of a well-functioning and 'sound' nation state. [...] The use of the 'correct' language in the sense of the language of the nation [implies] solidarity with the community of all those living in the respective nation." (Gogolin, 2011: 230) Despite the one state language policy of most of the European states, "[r]arely did this way of representing uniformity actually match sociolinguistic reality, and … there is a clear historical affinity between the standard version of the nation-state in Europe and a notorious—and often enough oppressive—monolingualism" (Kraus et al., 2021: 450). Closely linked to rampant industrialisation and growth of general formal education, monolingualism was a result of quite recent social, cultural, and ethnocentric developments (Lewis, 1977, p.22; see also Pavlenko, ed.). Although globalisation and increased migration helped multilingualism resurface in the second part of the 20th century, the ideal of a culturally homogeneous nation state has not lost its appeal for many European countries, the Baltic states including (Giordano, 2018). Language policy implementation not being the issue of this paper, it is nevertheless of note that "we are still living with linguistic wrongs" of the monolingual ideology and its products (Skutnabb-Kangas,1998:12).

Over the last decades, however, "multilingualism has been catapulted to a new world order" (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016: 19). Migration and transnationalism have changed Europe's cultural and linguistic scenery and helped the move from 'simple' to 'complex' diversity, with rich cultural configurations resulting from the interaction of historical forms of multilingualism and more recent patterns of linguistic heterogeneity (Kraus et al., 2021: 450). New exogenous layers of linguistic diversity, including "through the irruption of English as the de facto communicative vehicle of Europeanisation and global affairs" (ibid.: 453), has complemented the endogenous multilingual legacy of European countries.

The changes have affected education in general and presented multiple challenges to language education in particular, leading to the shift in perspective in all the fields concerned with additional language learning (Sembiante, 2016). The future is a multilingual one, and this realisation makes educators re-conceptualise language learning (Paris & Alim, 2017), acknowledge diverse linguistic and cultural skills of their students, and take up a "translanguaging stance" (García, 2017), with translanguaging being "an approach centered not on languages, but on the communicative practices of [multi]linguals" (Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020: 223). Multilingual speakers possess complex linguistic repertoires, which help quickly adapt to diverse sociolinguistic situations (Sembiante, 2016: 46) and

as such "should be envisaged and employed as a resource so as to facilitate learning and support pluriliterate development" (Meyer et al., 2018, as cited in Dafouz & Smit, 2022: 30). Making space for students to use all their linguistic resources opens "a myriad of learning opportunities" and "better enables us to teach complex content, which in turn helps students learn more successfully" (García et al., 2017: 196). However, despite a body of existing research substantiating numerous educational advantages of translanguaging (see, e. g., Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020: 222; Vyshnevska et al., 2021: 8, for detail), studies have revealed "that going against the grain of monolingualism and mono-culturalism is a great challenge for all" (Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020: 219) and the myth of the detrimental effect of using students' home languages when learning English is still prevalent (Sembiante, 2016: 48).

Although "[the] strength of English in education can go against multilingualism in some contexts", the development of bilingualism in national and regional languages has often been due to English added to the curriculum (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020: 301). The dynamic interrelationship of English and multilingualism being outside of the scope of the present paper, the role of English in higher education (HE) is difficult to overestimate. It is noteworthy however that "despite the increasing linguistic and cultural diversification of the university population, a monolingual English-only perspective has tended to prevail, both in institutional policies as well as in research into [English-medium education] programmes" (Dafouz & Smit, 2022: 30). The same attitude is traced in language teaching methodologies used in HE.

Applied since the end of the 19th century, the monolingual approach either radically minimises the use of students' mother tongues in the classroom as in direct or communicative language teaching or totally bans it through immersion. Presenting an effective alternative to the grammar translation method and rote memorisation, the approach was "proclaimed as incontestable and having irrefutable value in ESP teaching for most post-Soviet universities" (Vyshnevska et al., 2021: 2) and gradually turned into the most widely accepted one. However, the approach imposes the "ideal native speaker" as the ultimate model for learners and promotes the ideology of native speakerism favouring 'native-speaker' teachers and leading to political inequalities in English language teaching. Seen as a divisive force and in view of the changed HE, both ideals became hotly contested in the 21st century (Holliday, 2006).

The multilingual turn was so impactful that in the Companion Volume (CoE, 2020) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – the arguably most influential international standard for describing language ability – changes were proposed to certain descriptors

referring to linguistic accommodation by "native speakers" (CoE, 2020: 24). With the vision of the learner as a social agent in the action-oriented approach, the profoundly modified aim of language education is no longer to achieve "mastery" of one or several isolated languages. "Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place" (CoE, 2020: 127). Distinguishing between multilingualism (the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level) and plurilingualism (the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner), the complete set of extended CEFR descriptors describe plurilingual/pluricultural competence as "a single, interrelated, repertoire that [plurilinguals] combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks" (CoE, 2020: 30).

In line with the above, there have been implemented multiple initiatives, mostly at school[1] but in HE too[2]. The existing research testifies that in addition to complex learning needs, students bring a multiplied cognitive, experiential, cultural and linguistic diversity into classrooms, the diversity which may be also treated as a resource. For example, in the previous study by the authors of this paper (Bicjutko, Beļicka 2021), even partial avoidance of the English-native language(s) dichotomy in an ESP course resulted in learners' confidence boost and heightened linguistic sensitivity as well as proved conducive for mastering both specialised terminology and linguistic creativity.

One of the prerequisites for cultural interaction and promotion of plurilingualism is the creation of safe pedagogical space that can promote identity sense-making and cross-cultural exchange (Zaidi et al., 2016), with identity text as an educational strategy for its promotion (Cummins & Early, 2011). In turn, studies revealed that translanguaging is useful and efficient when pedagogical activities are designed thoroughly (Vyshnevska et al., 2021: 8), and one of the keys to support linguistically diverse international classrooms across subject-specific areas is to map specific learning contexts and to identify the different language repertoires at work (Dafouz & Smit, 2022: 41). Then, in the context of teaching English at university, the first step may be to examine students' linguistic repertoire. Thus, **the goal of this research** is to examine the perceptions of University of Latvia (UL) students concerning their multilingual repertoires with the aim of answering **the question:** what is the place of English in UL student linguistic repertoires?

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[1] Language Friendly School Project at https://www.rutufoundation.org/language-friendly-school/ is a case in point.

[2] See, e. g., the activities of EU University Alliances, *Sustainable Multilingualism* at http://uki.vdu.lt/sm/index.php/sm, the special issue of the journal Sustainability "Sustainable Multilingualism in Higher Education", etc.

Methodology

The research presented here belongs to a qualitative research paradigm and the analysis carried out involves a combination of theme-based multimodal and content analysis. The chosen tool is language portrait (Wolf, 2014; Busch, 2018), which is a widely known multimodal language awareness activity to assist language users to represent and reflect on their language experiences as well as to research heteroglossic practices (Coffey, 2015; Lau, 2016; Prasad, 2014). As qualitative research is fundamentally interpretative, the interpretation aims at representing the heterogeneity of responses through the prism of authors' personal and theoretical understanding.

Language portrait is a visual method "disrupting" traditional ways of thinking and talking about languages through enabling a person to see their experiences of languages "as a complex configuration of emotional impressions felt in the body" (Coffey, 2015: 504; also Busch, 2012: 19; Bristowe et al. 2014: 230). Easy to implement and conducive to classroom discussion, the language portrait activity is similar to identity text in creating identity-safe spaces and bringing languages of the community that may have never been addressed in learning (Cummins & Early, 2011). Promoting cultural exchanges, such safe pedagogical spaces are shown to improve student performance at school and help in developing professional identities in global health professions education (Zaidi et al., 2016).

Procedure

Before the activity, all students were informed and by completing and submitting the task agreed that their linguistic portraits would be anonymously and in an aggregated manner used in the research. They also agreed to sign their work for methodological purposes.

Participants were asked to think about their linguistic repertoire, i. e., all languages present in their lives, and, using multiple colours, to map them in the body-shape drawing (see the handout with shape and instruction in Appendix 1). It is of note, however, that obtained images may differ from real linguistic repertoires as any representation is affected by social discourses (Busch, 2012: 9). Still, they are valuable as culture-specific conceptualisations of embodied experience of language use and language learning comprise both "the internal perspective of the experiencing subject-body and the external perspective of the linguistically constituted object-body, the approach ultimately support[ing] a reflection of one's own linguistic repertoire" (Busch, 2018: 11). Since the aim of the present study was twofold, and that was to examine the linguistic repertoire of UL students as well as to heighten their plurilinguistic awareness, the activity consisted of

two steps, with the second one leading to pair and group discussion (see Appendix 1).

To aggregate and process the pictorial representations, certain generalisations had to be made, which mainly concerned reducing the marked body parts to more comprehensive categories. Thus, parts of the head (like forehead, mouth or chin) were interpreted as the head, parts of the trunk (be it shoulders or stomach) as the trunk, etc. Due to its significant metaphorical position, the only exception was made for the heart. There were many cases when students had mapped the same language on several parts of the body. In those cases, the total number of mentions and not of portraits was counted. The students were not instructed which side represented the right/left side of the body. For the analysis, it was assumed that the side with the raised arm was the right one. Finally, the Excel data analysis tool was applied to process the results across all the portraits students had produced.

Research Sample

The language repertoire was studied based on the language portraits drawn by 128 students of the University of Latvia, of them

- 89 students from the 1st year of the Professional Bachelor's Study Programme of Medicine, 1st year
- 22 1st year students of the Bachelor's Study Programme of Biotechnology and Bioengineering, 1st year
- 10 ERASMUS students and 4 students of the Bachelor's Programme of French Philology taking the course of English Grammar I, mixed years, starting from year 2
- 22 1st year students of the Bachelor's Study Programme of European Languages and Business, 1st year.

Results

Predictably, the pictorial depictions provided diverse data for analysis. As the number of the collected portraits did not allow for correlation analysis across the above-mentioned study programmes or for claiming statistically significant patterns in all the programmes, the calculation was done manually to provide for the initial estimate.

To obtain a better representation of the **number of languages** per student, the data is presented in ranges. The results show that most students (89%) had referred to 5–6 languages in their repertoires, with the rest of students referring to 3–4 languages and no student admitting their monolingualism. The mean in the medical programme was 5.6, in biotechnology – 5.4, ERASMUS + French philology – 6.5, English philology – 5.8. So, the high

numbers lead to belief that the students use several languages on a daily basis.

The **placement of the English language** is almost equally divided between the head marked by 24.3% of participants and the right arm marked by 23.8% of participants respectively. The heart appeared in only 4% of the portraits. For the medical students, English features most on the right arm (25.4%) and head (20.2%), followed by the trunk (15.5%) and right leg (11.2%), and hardly ever on the heart. In biotechnology, the head features in the top position (26.3%), followed by the trunk and right arm (13.6% each). Among the students of English philology, the head position prevails (36.4%), followed by both arms, namely, the left arm with 22.7%, and the right arm with 20.4% respectively). In ERASMUS+ French philology, the right arm dominated with 27.8%, followed by the trunk (16.7%) and left leg (16.7%). The head position was mentioned in just 11.1% of the cases. Curiously, both for the programme of medicine and the mixed group of ERASMUS and French Philology, the right arm is a prevalent location for English despite the difference in average number of languages and programme orientation.

To spare the students from revealing sensitive data, they were not asked to state which language was their native one, and that is the reason not to assess the positions of the native language but to analyse **the placement of Latvian**, which is the state language, instead and compare it with English positioning. Thus, concerning the place of the Latvian language, the trunk comes first with 19.6%, the head ranks second with 16.8%, and the heart ranks third with 15.4%. The students of medicine placed Latvian on the trunk in 21.4% of all cases, in the head in 20.6%, and in the heart in 19.1% respectively. English philology students ranked the positions of Latvian as follows: 19.6% – the right arm, 17.7% – the head, 15.7% – the trunk, followed by the heart with 13.7%. In Biotechnology – 20.7% trunk or throughout the body.

Concerning the **colouring of the portraits**, no distribution across the study programmes will be presented here due to the heterogeneity of responses, no insistence on the use of colours in the instruction and occasionally limited access to colours. Still, a few traceable trends could be observed. Thus, for English, 28.6% of the participants selected blue, and 5.8% chose to picture the British flag instead. Although the participants were not asked to state their native language as mentioned above, nevertheless, approximately a half of all students had chosen to indicate it. Keeping in mind that Latvian might represent the native, the second or a foreign language, the variation makes it hard to account for colours. However, out of 109 mentions of colours, 28.4% had chosen Latvian to be red, 15.4% had picked the green colour (*Latvia is a green place*, *nature is*

green, but also – *a natural* (native) *language*), followed by 11.1% pink and 10.1% with a flag. Among other choices, there was also purple 2.8%. Due to the limited colour availability, it could be suggested that the idea behind all these choices is similar.

Discussion

The study reveals the prevailing multilingualism of UL students, with the results for students of sciences going beyond the stereotype of their linguistic backwardness. The difference between the students in English and French philology points at the domineering and limiting nature of English as a lingua franca. Overall, the activity proved to be useful in raising awareness of one's linguistic repertoire (not proficiency), "extend[ing] narrowly mentalist and functional conceptions of language competence [and] encourag[ing] participants to reflect on the affective relationship with different languages" (Coffey, 2015: 312). Although each portrait is unique, there are some discernible patterns like those observed in the previous research (e. g. Busch, 2018; Coffey, 2020).

Thus, in the collected language portraits, the structuring according to the parts of the body mostly refers to common metaphors, that is, the head as the place of reason, the heart denoting affect, the legs (and especially feet) for roots and support, and the hands symbolic of activity and social involvement with no particular difference between the left and the right one. However, there were students, who placed the better-known languages higher in the body. The size matters, with large and small surfaces for important and less important respectively. Most drawings show lines compartmentalising languages, and, therefore, four portraits acknowledging the fluidity of plurilingualism with floods and spills of colours are a welcome sign of the shift in the thinking paradigm. Among the iconic elements, national flags and/or their colours are used frequently, but the choice of colours themselves is mostly a matter of personal preferences, and as such might be revealed through the interpretation of the author.

With only a couple of cases of English in the heart, the location of this language points to no affect, and, predictably, it is the head for the students in English philology, linking it to cognitive strength and control. For science students, English carries more of instrumental significance, which is shown through its mapping on hands/legs. Although the data on colours is not fully reliable as a whole due to the limited access to colouring writing utensils, the colour blue for English is closely associated with the EU flag and may potentially hint at internationalisation. The chosen colour and comments such as *intelligent*, *possibilities*, *openness*, *I dream in*, *calm*, point to the important role of the language as a locus of power. Further description

of the English language as *a safety belt*, *all media intake*, *foundation*, *BrE-mouth*, *AmE – underwear*, *together with LV has taken me far*, *it's as a T-shirt without which you can't go out*, *I use it all the time when I do not have to use Latvian* requires no further interpretation.

As stated above, the question of native language was not raised in the task to avoid bias or unnecessary discrimination. Nevertheless, most of the respondents addressed this issue commenting on their choice of the respective body part, and, though rarely, of the colour(s). Thus, with 49% explicitly mentioning their native language, there are other cases, where it was implicitly suggested (e. g., *the core of me*; *from Smiltene, Vidzeme region*, etc.). The observable trend for Latvian is to place it in the heart and to choose red, purple, or pink for colouring. The straightforward association is with the country flag, though there may be another interpretation such as *dark-red blood in my veins*. The choice of red was explained as *the colour of warmth*, *the place where I grew up*, *I adore this language – my friends are Latvian*. Further, several students of medicine, although indicated that their native language is Russian, still referred to the emotional significance of Latvian in their lives – *it took me far even if I did not notice it*, *very important to express my emotions and my ideas*, *Latvian is my second skin* (vs Russian as the first one), *Latvian is the language of my country*. Supposedly, there might be an emotional attachment among non-Latvian mother tongue students too. Besides, as one Russian mother tongue student mentioned, the native language is in the trunk and the rest is built around it (the core-periphery metaphor). In this case the trunk, to a certain extent, might serve as an outgrowth of the heart. Also, there were several students from mixed families, who indicated both Latvian and Russian to be their native languages and did not separate them, mapping a green or white area for both languages together. As the same colour choice might represent diverse emotions, e. g., blue for Latvian was one case explained *as the air I breathe* and in a different case – *the saddest colour, to me Latvian sounds cold and unpleasant, it is the language I think in*, a further study is required for more comprehensive results.

Overall, what transpires from the analysis is the affective nature of language, and language policies and ideology as impactful of identity. Despite multiple benefits mentioned in the beginning of the discussion, the intensity and difficulty of the language portrait analysis is a serious impediment for using it in research. However, as a pedagogical activity language portrait is a promising ice breaker, promoter of discussion, as well as a means of profiling and mapping linguistic context in the classroom.

Learnings and implications for future practice

The activity of drawing the language portraits was conducted to raise the students' awareness about the languages they are aware of and use in their daily lives, however it turned out to be relevant beyond that.

- **language portrait not only an activity but a useful probing tool**

It allows not only to identify the languages the students possess in their repertoire, but also to understand their linguistic biographies and, to some extent, the emotional state and intercultural dynamics of the groups at hand. As a result of opening up emotionally, a rapport is created that facilitates further collaboration.

- **necessity in modelling special tasks for raising plurilingual awareness**

The activity suggests that students are very much engaged in the activity that lets them explore their own linguistic potential and identity. Moreover, the task can be completed individually and in groups. In the former case, the follow-up task with students explaining their portraits to their peers is paramount and particularly engaging if students talk to each other for the first time. Once the awareness has been raised, it is relevant that it is brought to action through professionally meaningful tasks.

- **introducing crosslinguistic activities to university English courses adds meaningful creativity**

Observations suggest that the students were very involved in painting and discussing their language portraits and were particularly happy to work with pencils in different colours, some of them stating that this reminded them of their childhood. Teaching ESP in university lacks creativity as testified by the students' general interest in the activity and request for similar activities. The received view is 'to teach serious matters seriously', the approach grounded in the beliefs about academic education and the ways of its acquisition as well as in the scarcity of the academic hours. Similar to Dafouz & Smit (2022), we believe that with evolving modalities of education, "consideration of the impact of several languages on the learning needs of our students and the teaching formats used need to take a much wider approach" (ibid., 41).

- **academic engagement through support of multilingual practices and identity affirmation**

The cognitive and linguistic processes involved in the language portrait activity are similar to identity texts, and, therefore, the creation of this multimodal representation is also an enabling sociological process, "a vehicle whereby students can repudiate negative stereotypes and simultaneously construct identities of competence that fuel academic engagement." (Cummins et al., 2015: 559). In turn, the start might lead to the adaptation of a pluriliteracies approach going beyond the stale EFL/EAP models. All

such practices should not be approached spontaneously as they require thoughtful design and piloting to adapt. One way may be the development of multilingual online databases and other digital tools allowing for the development of students' disciplinary literacies. As there is a continued diversification of students' language and cultural background in academia, there is a definite need (also voiced by the students themselves) in plurilingual activities in general and in teaching English in particular.

To sum up, the findings of this study suggest that providing pedagogical space using language portrait is a useful pedagogical strategy to raise plurilingual/linguistic awareness as well as to support cross-cultural education, nevertheless, its long-term impact on language learning requires further research.

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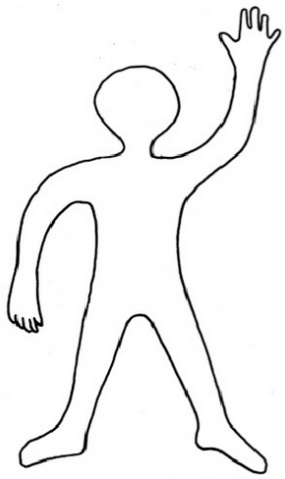
Appendix 1

Step 1.

Colour your language portrait using the figure on the left.
Think about ***all*** *the languages and dialects you speak, understand, recognise, learn, or would like to learn. Mind that your linguistic repertoire is much bigger than 2 or 3 languages. … The only question is where all these items are situated/placed in your linguistic repertoire.*
For each language or dialect, choose a different colour and body part and map it on the figure.

Step 2.

Divide into pairs. Explain to your partner why you chose the colours you did and why you placed them the way you did.



References: https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/cog-2019-0101/html