

English as a lingua franca for Bulgarian participants in the EU Comenius programme

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Abstract: Over the recent years, English has more and more steadily established its role as an international language and its status as a lingua franca has been increasingly discussed (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008; Jenkins 2000, 2009; Seidlhofer 2004, 2005, 2011; Wright 2009). Its universal use can be explained with the economy principle and is a typical example of the pragmatic (instrumental) function of language use. This article is focused on the attitudes towards the use of English as a lingua franca among students who have participated in language exchanges under the EU Comenius Programme (in comparison to their classmates who haven't participated in the exchanges). It will also show the preferred combinations of languages of the students and the leading place of English among the preferred languages. The research methodology uses both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews) methods. The research itself has been carried out in schools in Bulgaria that participated in bilateral partnerships under the Comenius Programme in the period of 2010 – 2013.

Keywords: English, lingua franca, students, Comenius Programme, preferred combinations of languages.

Introduction

Over the recent years, English has more and more steadily established its role as an international language and its status as a *lingua franca* has been increasingly discussed (Firth 1996; Crystal 2003; Graddol 1997, 2006; Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008; Jenkins 2000, 2009; Wright 1999, 2009; Seidlhofer 2005, 2011; Van Parijs 2011). Its universal use can be explained with „the need for mutual intelligibility” (Crystal 2003) and is a typical example of the pragmatic (instrumental) function of language use. [1]

Definitions

In terms of definitions, we can use Firth's definition describing English as a lingua franca as “a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication”. [2] This definition is also used by Seidlhofer (2005; 2011) [3] and a similar one is adopted by Jenkins (2009). [4] It can also include native speakers as well, as long as they participate in an intercultural communication. Other terms for the global use of English are used as well – „English as a global language” (Crystal 2003) [5], „English as an international language” (Jenkins 2000) [6], „world English” (Brutt-Griffler 2002) [7] and others.

Kachru (1985) develops a model representing the spread of English in the world consisting of three concentric circles – *the inner circle* including the countries where English is a native language (UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and which varieties are described as „norm-providing”, *the outer circle* comprised of former colonies, where English has become part of the countries' institutions and has had influence as a second language (e.g. Singapore, India) and where the varieties of English are regarded as „norm-developing”, and *the expanding circle* where English is used as an international language and is regarded as „norm-dependent”.

This classification has been much debated and its critics argue for its reconsidering (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008; Schmitz 2014). [8] One of the arguments can be that English as a lingua franca (ELF) is not owned by native speakers, as long as it serves for intercultural communication (Widdowson 1994). [9] It is defined functionally, not formally by the norms, it can be adapted by non-native speakers as well (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008). [10]

New trends in education related to ELF

The spread of English as a lingua franca can expectedly bring up some changes related to the teaching of English. According to David Graddol (1997; 2006) [11], a dramatic „qualitative change” is about to happen due to the role of English as a lingua franca and the consequences for the language and the way we conceive it.

Jenkins (2000; 2009) [12] has outlined some common features of EFL – for example, the pronunciation of difficult sounds in English, such as „th” /θ/ and /ð/ and the ‘dark l’ allophone [ɫ], that are not necessary for international understanding and could be dropped. Seidlhofer (2011) [13] differentiates between English as a foreign language and English as a lingua franca in terms of linguacultural norms, objectives and processes, which implies that the use of a completely different approach towards English as a lingua franca is required. The main focus is put on the communication purposes, not on the norms. In relation to the new conditions Graddol (2006) [14] outlines a paradigm shift from English as a foreign language.

Rizvi & Lingard (2010) [15] notice a trend of lowering the age of English language instruction, together with an increase of the use of English as a means of instruction in other sciences. Also, they mention the development of a huge private industry in English teaching driven by the widespread desire to learn English.

Criticism to ELF

The spread of English globally is seen as a threat to the linguistic diversity by many scholars (Philipson 1992, 2003; Dalby 2003, Yuka 2006) [16]. It is considered as „a function of linguistic imperialism” and its use is seen as implying the exclusion of other languages (Philipson 1992). It is also considered „an instrument for global hegemony” (Rizvi & Lingard 2010) and its global spread poses a number of significant questions related to the meaning of English language development for other languages (Pennycook 2001). [17] However, other scholars (such as Wright 2009) [18] suggest that we escape from the hegemony paradigm and get rid of „the legacies from the nation-state era” [19], as „a lingua franca is of general benefit to Europeans” [20] and its use cannot oust the other languages from their domains of use. Crystal (2003) [21] also argues that the globally spread languages, such as English, used for mutual intelligibility and the local languages reinforcing the cultural identity can happily coexist, as they serve different functions.

Case study – Bulgarian students' attitudes towards English as a lingua franca

Objectives

Multilingualism in the European Union is considered a constituting element of European identity and plurilingualism is considered a function of this configuration (Stoicheva 2006, Стойчева 2006) [22] in English. In the EU, there are 24 official languages, around 60 regional languages and hundreds of immigrant languages. However, the preservation of the European linguistic diversity faces one very serious challenge, namely the ubiquitous use of English as a lingua franca (Wright 1999, 2009; Jenkins 2009; van Parijs 2011). [23] However, English is also seen by some researchers (Risse 2010; Wright 1999) [24] as a necessity for developing a common public space for debates in the EU. On the one hand, there is the need for maintaining each language and preserving the linguistic diversity in the EU, which represents the symbolic

function of language, and on the other hand – there is the need for easy communication between people of different linguistic backgrounds, which represents the pragmatic function of language.

That is why one of the main aspects of the research – namely, the links between plurilingualism and European identity, touches upon the attitudes of the participants towards English as a lingua franca, as part of their attitudes towards the European language policy (along with other factors, such as their preferences towards other foreign languages, attitudes towards the values enshrined in the EU language policy and their linguistic repertoire).

The focus of this article is on the role of and the attitudes towards English for the students participating in a Comenius bilateral exchange. The aim of the article is to examine whether or not the use of English threatens the linguistic diversity in the linguistic repertoires of the participants in the exchange. The data is taken from a research focusing on the effects of plurilingualism (related to the participation in bilateral exchange programmes under the EU Comenius Programme) on the formation of European identity.

Parameters of the research

The research has been carried out among Bulgarian secondary schools that have participated in bilateral language exchange partnerships under the Comenius Programme, part of Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013) of the European Commission. The methodology that has been used includes both quantitative methods (survey) and qualitative methods (interviews). Quantitative methods include ex-post facto experiment, consisting of a survey among two groups – students who had participated in the exchange projects and had travelled to another European country and their classmates who had not participated. Also, interviews were carried out with some of the participants and their teachers involved in the projects to check the results of the survey.

The methodology consists of an analysis of the EU foreign language policy (language management, language practices, language beliefs), an analysis of the Bulgarian foreign language policy (language management, language practices, language beliefs) and an empirical survey comprised of **a quantitative research** (a survey with 28 empirical and 5 conceptual indicators (foreign language repertoire; bilateral exchange; European identity; linguistic attitudes and other factors) carried out in 21 Bulgarian schools participating in bilateral projects in the period 2010 – 2013 and covering 279 participants in bilateral language exchanges under the Comenius Programme and 255 of their non-participating classmates who are a control group), **a qualitative research** (semi-structured interviews with participants) and **an expert evaluation** (semi-structured interviews with teachers).

Methodological design

For the design of our survey, we have used several conceptual indicators that are operationalised in empirical indicators through the questions of the survey. We are going to pay attention to some of them for the purposes of this article. The conceptual indicator **foreign language repertoire** is operationalized into the following empirical indicators: *combination of foreign languages, level of foreign language proficiency, additional language training, purpose of studying and use of foreign languages*. The conceptual indicator **linguistic attitudes** is operationalized into the following empirical indicators: preferences to other foreign languages; preferred combination of languages in EU; attitude towards English as a lingua franca; attitudes towards the impact of foreign languages on some European values (tolerance and inclination to dialogue with other cultures; attitudes towards the impact of foreign languages on the social cohesion in the EU).

Results

We are going to concentrate only on the results concerning the linguistic repertoire of the participants and their attitudes towards English as a lingua franca, as well as the use of foreign language during the exchange, as this is related to the main focus of this article.

Results from the quantitative research

First, the results of a *frequency analysis* of the indicators are going to be shown.

Linguistic repertoire

The results from the survey show the following data in relation to the first, second and third foreign language, respectively:

- *First foreign language*

According to the results from the survey the most popular first foreign language for the participants in the bilateral exchanges is English as it was expected (68.2%), but still we have a comparative diversity in the first foreign languages (German – 13.4%, French – 7.5%, Russian – 6.1%, Italian – 3.2% and Japanese – 1.4%).

For the non-participants the diversity is a bit lower, and the share of English is greater (76.1%). The rest of the languages are distributed as follows: German (11.4%), Russian (5.5%), French (4.7%) and Italian (2.4%) – Table 1.

Table 1. First foreign language at school

	Participants in Comenius Programme		Total
	No	Yes	
<i>First foreign language at school</i>			
Japanese		1,4%	,8%
Italian	2,4%	3,2%	2,8%
French	4,7%	7,6%	6,2%
Russian	5,5%	6,1%	5,8%
German	11,4%	13,4%	12,4%
English	76,1%	68,2%	72,0%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

- *Second foreign language*

Data shows that not all of the participants in the bilateral exchanges have studied a second foreign language – only 83.5% of them. This can be explained with the fact that some of them are not in the secondary school yet where it is compulsory, or with the fact that in small towns and villages there aren't enough teachers trained in foreign language teaching. There is diversity in the second foreign language, as most often the second foreign language is German (31.8% from the students studying a second foreign language), followed by English (29.2%), Russian (18.9%), French (10.3%), Italian (7.7%) and Spanish (2.1%).

Only 73.7% from the students who haven't participated in the exchanges study a second foreign language, as the language diversity is the same as among the participants: German (38.8%), English (23.4%), French (13.8%), Russian (13.8%), Italian (7.4%) and Spanish (2.7%) – Table 2.

Table 2. Second foreign language at school

		Participants in Comenius Programme		Total
		No	Yes	
Second foreign language at school are	Spanish	2,7%	2,1%	2,4%
	Italian	7,4%	7,7%	7,6%
	French	13,8%	10,3%	11,9%
	Russian	13,8%	18,9%	16,6%
	German	38,8%	31,8%	34,9%
	English	23,4%	29,2%	26,6%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

- *Third foreign language*

Only 8.2% of the participants in the bilateral exchanges speak a third foreign language. The most common languages as a third foreign language are: Russian (47.8%), English (26.1%), French (13.0%), Spanish (8.7%) and German (4.3%) – Table 3.

The percentage of the non-participating students studying a third foreign language is slightly higher than among the participants – 9.4%. The most widespread languages for them as a third foreign language are: Russian (41.7%), French (25.0%), Spanish (20.8%), English (8.3%) and German (4.2%) – Table 3.

Table 3. Third foreign language at school

		Participants in the Comenius Programme		Total
		No	Yes	
Third foreign language at school	Spanish	20,8%	8,7%	14,9%
	French	25,0%	13,0%	19,1%
	Russian	41,7%	47,8%	44,7%
	German	4,2%	4,3%	4,3%
	English	8,3%	26,1%	17,0%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

From this data we can conclude that there is a relatively good diversity of foreign languages in the Bulgarian educational system, as there is no strict fixation on English in spite of its dominating role due to its international influence. In the respondents' repertoire there is a stable presence of German and French (due to some economic, political and social factors), as well as of Russian - traditional for Bulgaria and ideologically conditioned. Although with a lower percentage, Italian and Spanish are also present in the respondents' repertoire, the former – most probably because of the traditions of its teaching in Bulgaria in the early 20th century, whereas the latter one – probably due to its increasing popularity in the global scene.

Attitude towards English as a lingua franca

In terms of realizing the pressing necessity for European citizens to speak English, the majority of the respondents agree with the statement that English should be obligatorily spoken in the EU (73.2% of the participants and 67.6% of the non-participants respectively) – Table 4. This can be interpreted as a realized necessity for a “working” language, in which the communication in EU is carried out most easily.

Table 4. Necessity for the Europeans to speak English

		Participants in the Comenius Programme		Total
		No	Yes	
English should be obligatorily spoken in the EU	Strongly disagree	8,1%	3,7%	5,8%
	Rather disagree	9,7%	7,4%	8,5%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	14,6%	15,8%	15,2%
	Rather agree	36,8%	36,8%	36,8%
	Strongly agree	30,8%	36,4%	33,7%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The data also shows the dominance of English in the respondents' repertoire and its use as a de facto *lingua franca*. These conclusions have also been confirmed by the results of the qualitative interviews carried out with some of the participants in order to clarify the relations between the separate indicators in the qualitative research.

Language used in the Comenius exchange

Data shows that half of the participants have used *only English* for communication during their exchange (50.2%). The other stated combinations are English and Italian (6.5%), Turkish and English (5.4%), German (4.7%), German and English (4.3%), English and German (3.9%), English and Polish (2.9%) and English, French and Italian (2.9%). This clearly shows that English is de facto *lingua franca* for the participants, as they use it in situations in which they cannot express themselves in the language of the hosting country. It is also included in combinations with the language of the hosting country, but a great part of the participants communicate entirely in it during the exchange. There are also combinations with „big” European languages (German, French and Spanish). This means that the knowledge of the hosting country language is not enough if the language is „small” and further steps should be taken for its better mastering, which would promote the acknowledgement of language diversity as a value.

English as a lingua franca – a multifactor analysis

In order to answer the question of whether English is a de facto *lingua franca* for the respondents a multifactor quantitative analysis has been carried out. The characteristics included in the analysis are the following empirical indicators from the questionnaire:

- *Study of English at school;*
- *Use of English for communication during the bilateral exchange;*
- *Agreement with the statement that every European citizen should speak English;*
- *Agreement with the statement that English should be spoken by every European;*
- *Agreement with the statement that studying English should be promoted in the European Union.*

We assume that English is a de facto *lingua franca* for all respondents for whom the above-mentioned characteristics are valid. The results show that this is so for 59.5% of the participants and 61.2% for the non-participants (Table 5 and Table 6). The similar percentage shows that this is now achieved through the exchange but is a result of other factors.

Table 5. English as a lingua franca (participants)

	Number	%	Valid
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Valid	No	107	38,4	39,2
	Yes	166	59,5	60,8
	Total	273	97,8	100,0
Missing		6	2,2	
Total		279	100,0	

Table 6. English as a lingua franca (non-participants)

		Number	%	Valid
Valid	No	88	34,5	36,1
	Yes	156	61,2	63,9
	Total	244	95,7	100,0
Missing		11	4,3	
Total		255	100,0	

Qualitative interviews (foreign language repertoire)

According to the results of the qualitative interviews with participants in the bilateral exchanges, English has a dominating role (used by all the respondents), as in most of the cases it is used together with another EU language (German), or with a language that is official in Europe, but not in the European Union (Russian). The Russian language is present in the repertoire of around one third of the respondents, which coincides with the trend in the quantitative data analysis in relation to the traditional teaching of Russian in Bulgarian secondary schools. In some cases, as a result of the exchange the repertoire has been expanded with a new European language (Italian) which the respondents speak at a very low level, and in some rare cases languages of the neighbouring countries are present (Greek and Turkish).

In terms of the preferences for studying a new foreign language, almost all the interviewees have declared their wish to study new foreign languages, as only in one case the participant has stated that he wants to improve „*the international English because now every nation already speaks English*”. Among the preferred new foreign languages are German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Finnish and Japanese. The respondents present various integrative and instrumental motives for their choice, such as „I like the way it sounds”, „the culture attracts me”, as well as motives such as „I would like to continue my education abroad”, „one day I will need it, if I find a job in my area”. However, there is no language which meets both the integrative and instrumental needs of the respondents, in many cases they declare several new foreign languages which they would like to study. In this way we can conclude that the interviewed participants in the Comenius Programme bilateral exchanges demonstrate positive attitudes towards developing plurilingualism, which they relate to a great extent to social cohesion.

Conclusions

On the basis of the data presented above, we can conclude that there is a comparative diversity in the foreign language repertoire of the students who have participated in the bilateral exchanges. There is no fixation on the English-only pattern, although the role of English is dominant and it is used as a de facto lingua franca by the students. Data shows that the attitudes towards using English as a lingua franca are positive. The results of the survey prove that the use of English doesn't threaten linguistic diversity for the participants. Thus, on the basis of the research results, we can agree with the statement of Crystal (2003) that the use of English as a lingua franca can co-exist with the language diversity, as they serve different functions for language users.

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