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## **THE VALUE OF PLURILINGUALISM OR WHAT FACTORS AFFECT THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLURILINGUAL COMPETENCES**

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**Summary.** It is hardly possible to find a person who has never been faced with a challenge of learning another language. If asked, some would share their from-miserable-to-jubilant experiences of language learning at school, others would disclose the nail-biting moments of despair when a career chance just slipped from their hands due to the lack of the required language competences, whereas many would question if there is the best age to start learning a new language and if it should necessarily be one's childhood. Having considered such popular queries as above, the present article has come to a conclusion that the early initial age of learning another language, while undeniably adds to the success of gaining good communicative competences and generates plenty of other benefits, does not deprive a person of a possibility to master a language in a mature age. Learning a language in adulthood, nevertheless, is more sensitive to the motivational and methodological decisions, but the benefits reaped from active plurilingual practices in the elderly age prove to be highly valuable. From a methodological perspective, it is a conceptual article inspired by a conference discussion<sup>1</sup> and drawn on empirical evidence from previous relevant inquiries, longitudinal studies and international research projects. As such, the article is an attempt to pass the relay baton to further studies into the factors that have an impact on the successful development of plurilingual competences and add to the overall value of plurilingualism.

**Keywords:** plurilingualism; plurilingual competence development; language learning and teaching; content and language integrated learning (CLIL); critical period hypothesis (CPH).

### **Introduction**

In the world rapidly developing into a network of multiple and intricate connections there will be less and less prospect of growing, living and working as a monolingual or monocultural personality. Multilingual and multicultural communities, international corporations, global organisations, academia transcending the national boundaries – all of it will keep contributing

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<sup>1</sup> This article was inspired by the participation of one of the authors, Vilma Bijeikienė, as an invited expert in a panel discussion at the conference "Multilingualism in Slovakia (and in Europe): Challenges and Perspectives", Bratislava, 6–7 May, 2019.

to the inevitability of using different languages as well as being flexible to adjust oneself to different circumstances and needs for language choices. With the hi-tech solutions and innovations at hand dramatically effecting the language learning industry and ways of efficiently improving language skills, there is still, however, no one magic pill that will make you speak a chosen language at a blink. Thus, language learning still takes a considerable and continuous effort for the learners and the teachers but gives the plenty in return serving as a unique password highly increasing the chances of any child to open the door to the career and lifestyle that he or she wishes to pursue. With these assumptions in mind, in what follows in this article we will revisit the most usual and topical questions related to language learning and using as well as the needs and trends related to the development of plurilingual competence.

### **Is the popular reasoning “the earlier, the better” true about attaining better results in language learning?**

That might appear as a simple question on the surface but proves to be rather complex under more in-depth consideration and definitely has its ‘on the one hand’ and ‘on the other hand’ contentions. As such, it has been duly responded to by researchers in the field resulting in rich and long-term research tradition on the issue. Likewise, early foreign language learning has been re-emerging as an acute topic in the minds of parents, educators, administrators of educational institutions and policymakers usually boiling down to a common generalisation: the earlier we introduce a child to a foreign language (L2), the better results in learning that language he/she will achieve.

The roots of such reasoning reach as far as the neuroscience of language of the 1960s when scientists such as Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts (1959) and Eric Lenneberg (1967), having analysed the neurological process in a child’s brain, tried to specify the best age or a critical period for the ‘natural’, ‘automatic’ or, in other words, the most effortless period for learning languages. For Penfield and Roberts, it is “before the age of nine to twelve” when “a child is a specialist in learning to speak” and able to “learn two or three languages as easily as one” (1959, p. 235). This, as they contended,

depends on the feature of a child's brain to be plastic, while the brain of an adult, being efficient in many ways, is nonetheless "inferior to that of a child as far as language is concerned" (1959, p. 240). Similarly, Lenneberg, the author of the so-called critical period hypothesis (CPH), indicated puberty as the end of the highest aptitude for language acquisition claiming that "automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age, and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort" (1967, p. 176). The findings of the neuroscientists of the 60s and 70s seem to have received acclaim among more contemporary studies as well: for instance, Susan Curtiss ("Ñandutí", n.d.) maintains that the brain of a child is "just ripe" for language learning and they can handle "no matter how many languages you seem to throw their way" (ibid). Consequently, we may give a partial 'yes' to the question posed above but should remain fully conscious of more complexity yet to be discussed when more specific questions are raised, especially in regard to learning L2 and subsequent languages.

The CPH per se and more generally the role of the age factor in language learning have indeed served as a goad to vigorous testing by empirical studies. Scholars have raised questions as to how the critical age boundaries could be set, which language skills are most susceptible to the age factor, how the methodology of language teaching and learning should be adapted to serve the different needs of the different age groups, and other relevant issues (cf. Meisel, 2013; Nikolov, 2009). David Singleton (2007), arguing a rather critical attitude towards CPH, provides us with an exhaustive discussion of empirical results of various studies that tried to delineate the critical period in language acquisition for the development of different language skills. Amid a variety of such delineations, it is generalised that the acquisition of phonetics and phonology is prone to the earlier stages of childhood, while morphology and syntax is acquired later; thus, undertaking one's L2 pronunciation at an early age could be seen as a prerequisite for the attainment of a native-like accent (Singleton, 2007, p. 49). In his revisiting of CPH in L1 and L2 acquisition, Jüren M. Meisel (2013), generally acclaims the importance of the early onset of language learning stating that the onset range between 3–4 and 6–7 years of age can lead to the development of

native-like L2 competences, while the later start results in “child L2 acquisition” showing properties similar to “adult L2 acquisition” (p. 84). Drawing on a variety of empirical studies, Meisel demonstrates that maturational changes exert different influence on the development of different domains of grammar. He suggests thus redefining the critical period of acquisition as “a cluster of sensitive phases” all of which entail “an optimal period for the acquisition of one out of a set of grammatical phenomena” (Meisel, 2013, p. 85).

Most enlightening insights on the development of various aspects of L2 proficiency dimensions come from empirical studies analysing the influence of initial age of L2 learning vis-à-vis the amount of learning input or exposure to the target language. And here the results are less in favour of the age factor especially as far as the L2 proficiency is concerned (cf. Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017; Muñoz, 2009; Myles, 2017). Jenifer Larson-Hall’s (2008) study of Japanese university students’ EFL achievements is among those that reveal “perceivable age effects” (p. 35) of an early L2 start. In her study she had 200 of EFL learners differentiated into two groups based on their L2 initial age: one group having started around the age of 9 and another around 12 or 13. All learners, as the author puts it, were exposed to minimal L2 input, namely to 4 hours of instruction per week, rather than a more intense immersion context where ‘the younger, the better’ principle is usually expected to hold. The later starters had experienced 6 years of English instruction at junior school, whereas the earlier starters had around 3 years extra prior to going to their junior school. All participants were tested at the age of 18 to 21 on one phonological and one morphosyntactic task. In the interpretation of her results, Larson-Hall’s maintains that her study has demonstrated “some modest advantages to an earlier start” of L2 even in the context of minimal input but with the total amounts of input being “fairly large” (2008, p. 56). She rounds up her analysis of the age factor with an important insight claiming that, while playing “a non-negligible role in improving second language acquisition”, *the earlier initial age of learning L2 also ensures a larger amount of L2 input and more exposure to it and in that way allows the achievement of better proficiency results* (Larson-Hall, 2008, p. 58; emphasis added).

However, in addition to proficiency parameters, one should never neglect other aspects of language learning that prove to be beneficial to

the growth of a personality. In the same study, Larson-Hall (2008) reports on the earlier starters' more positive attitude towards learning languages in general and especially towards learning English. Similarly, Myles (2017) suggests that young children are more enthusiastic and curious about discovering new ways of saying and generally find language learning fun which in the long run adds to the development of their openness and tolerance to multilingual and multicultural communities. Finally, the cognitive advantages reaped from the early exposure to two or more languages on thinking flexibility and cognitive capacity have been also widely acknowledged (cf. Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017).

### **Is language learning a hindrance or a catalyst for learning other subjects?**

Starting with the description of multilingualism as "scientifically controversial" and "politically divisive", Dina Mehmedbegovic and Thomas Bak (2017) formulate three major myths or misconceptions related to language learning and using:

- (a) the "limited resources models" assuming that learning languages has a detrimental effect on learning other subjects,
- (b) the notion that the "normal", "default" state of human brain, mind and society is either monolingualism, or a strong dominance of a "mother tongue" <...> ,
- (c) the belief that the aim of language learning is to reach a "native-like" proficiency and anything that fails to reach this goal has only limited value (p. 150).

According to Mehmedbegovic and Bak (2017), these misconceptions are so deeply rooted in the minds of laypeople that they are taken for granted even without any empirical evidence. To illustrate the first one, the scholars bring forward such accompanying ideas as: language learning takes the valuable time and the brain space from learning more "useful" subjects like maths and sciences and, moreover, language learning depletes one's cognitive resources, namely exhausts "the limited capacity of the brain to cope with acquiring new

knowledge” (p. 153). To support the topicality of such ill-founded reasoning, an angry internet comment shared by Gabrielle Hogan-Brun (2017) in her book on *Linguanomics* could be considered:

I’m very curious how it came to be that teaching students a foreign language has reached the status it has in the US. My oldest daughter is a college freshman, and not only have I paid for her to study Spanish for the last four or more years [in school] but her college is requiring her to study even more! <...> In a day and age where schools at every level are complaining about limited resources, why on earth do we continue to force these kids to study a foreign language that few will ever use, and virtually all do not retain? <...> (p. 85).

The internet commentator crudely reiterates several popular philosophies – from a chauvinist belief that English is enough for L1 English speakers to the idea that learning languages is not worth investing the limited financial resources. To that commentator and the other ones ignorantly adhering to *the limited resources model*, Mehmedbegovic and Bak (2017) offer a well-grounded scientific response. Namely, they propose *the added value model* which is built on the assumption that “knowledge of languages has beneficial effects across different cognitive domains” (p. 155). This assumption is based on the findings in the contemporary neuroscience which underscores neuroplasticity, i.e. “the life-long ability of the brain to reconfigure and adapt” and the connections of the nerve cells which link them “into complex interactive functional network” (ibid.). Moreover, active learning and using languages have been proven to be helpful in sustaining the viable brain functions in older age along with protecting against dementia, or as Mehmedbegovic and Bak contend, form a “healthy linguistic diet” (p. 160).

A discussion of issues in language learning nowadays cannot dispense with considering CLIL, i.e. content and language integrated learning, most often defined as “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 1). Although the now prominent label CLIL was only introduced in 1994, various forms of bilingual education have been used widely across history and geography. The modern conceptualisation of CLIL has singled out four major pillars, named as 4C, in its foundation: *content*,

*communication, culture and cognition* (Coyle et al., 2010). Although later more Cs were added in different theories, these four appear to have successfully captured the added value of CLIL with *content* and *communication* roughly standing for the non-linguistic subject and the language(s), while *culture* and *cognition* adding to the overall synergy effect of the four components.

Given the scepticism and caution that CLIL has invariably caused among the general public, as do all innovations, scholars have made enormous effort to study all possible influences of CLIL on the acquisition of both the language and the content and have found plenty of positive outcomes. On the one hand, CLIL creates the conditions for implicit, or 'natural', language learning as students use the target language to access and talk about the content of the subject; thus, "the brain responds the same way as it does when using the mother tongue" (Surmont et al., 2016, p. 321). Likewise, in an opinion study completed by Vilma Bijeikienė and Daiva Pundziuvienė (2015) in a Lithuanian high school, students have credited CLIL as especially fruitful for enhancing one's spoken skills as well as building on the general, subject specific and academic vocabulary. Piet Van De Craen et al also add "the native-like listening comprehension" to the list of CLIL benefits for linguistic competences (2007, p. 71). On the other hand, Belgian scholars Surmont et al., having completed a longitudinal study on CLIL in classes of mathematics, concluded that CLIL students "indeed outperform their traditionally schooled peers on a mathematics test" (2016, p. 328). The scholars registered positive cognitive effects as early as after three months of CLIL application and emphasised CLIL students' more advanced metacognitive awareness in comparison to their non-CLIL peers or, as Van De Craen et al put it, "CLIL helps in creating 'better' brains" (2007, p. 75) for further learning.

In its pros and cons debate, CLIL is quite often criticised for the detrimental effect on the development of a child's L1 competences. In Bijeikienė and Pundziuvienė (2015), the responses of teacher and student participants from one Lithuanian gymnasium, with broad CLIL application, diverge: most teachers partly agree to the statement that 'CLIL harms the acquisition of Lithuanian', while the majority of student participants express disagreement with the existence of such harm. In his study on the effectiveness of early foreign language learning in the Netherlands, Kees

De Bot (2014) reports on studies in bilingual education where no harm to L1 was uncovered and makes his own conclusion that there are no indications that “more English goes at the expense of the development of the mother tongue” (p. 415). Additionally, participants in Bijeikienė and Pundziuvienė’s (2015) study share other added-value features of CLIL like increased collaboration among students as well as more cooperation between students and teachers. While CLIL teachers sometimes have to step out of their comfort zone, required to use additional language, students, at the same time, may become experts in language, which creates an overall friendly and assistance-driven class atmosphere.

### **Does language learning after formal education become mission impossible?**

This time we have a relatively easy question as the answer is “absolutely no”, but as always it has its own ‘buts’ to be discussed. In respect to the L2 learning success for groups of learners with different initial age, the Barcelona Age Factor Project (BAF<sup>2</sup>) that has been running for over twenty years should be singled out for highly elucidating longitudinal results in the European context. The project included 4 groups of EFL learners (*younger children* with 8 as the initial age of learning, *older children* starting at 11, *adolescents* starting at 14 and *adults* starting at 18 and above), 3 time periods for the comparison of learning achievements (after 200, 416 and 726 hours of formal instruction) and a variety of tests focusing on written and oral productive and receptive skills (Muñoz, 2009, p. 148). The results revealed that older starters outperformed the younger ones in all three periods of measurement with only the listening comprehension test and the phonetic imitation test showing no significant difference. The four age groups showed different learning rate with the adult learners being more cognitively matured and demonstrating more “rapid initial acquisition”, while the youngest showing fastest progress between 416- and 726-hour period (Muñoz, 2009, p. 150).

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<sup>2</sup> BAF project website: <http://www.ripl.uk/key-themes/the-role-of-age/the-effects-of-age-on-foreign-language-learning-the-baf-project/>

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When considering language learning in adulthood, however, it is still fruitful to refer once again to the neuroscientists of the 60s who worked on the critical period in language acquisition. Among other insights, they also made an important link between language acquisition at the early age and the success of language learning further in life: "During higher education it will always be desirable that some students take up new languages at a later period, and there is a good deal of evidence that *he who has learned more than one language as a child has greater facility for the acquisition of additional languages in adult life*" (Penfield & Roberts, 1959, p. 256; emphasis added). Thus, what should be bore in mind is the postulate that even if the door to learning languages in adulthood is definitely not shut, it would be much easier to open it if one had been exposed to learning languages as a child. This is an extremely significant point to note as from a social perspective, the critical period for a person, when the practical needs for foreign language competences emerge, is after his/her formal education when a person enters a job market. It would be a utopia to believe that a secondary school or university student can decide what languages he/she will need in his/her career while at school or university. Therefore, at university it is of utmost importance to gain as much of the cognitive instrumentality and capacity as possible to start learning a new language, if need be, at any stage in one's career and this can only be done through active engagement in language learning, using and exposure.

To illustrate the assumption above, let us consider the study started at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Lithuania by Nemira Mačianskienė and Vilma Bijeikienė (2019). The preliminary results of the study point to a link between experience of learning several languages and the capacity to apply metacognitive knowledge and strategies. Built on the principles of Liberal Arts, VMU has language learning as one of its major pillars; consequently, the participants of this study (N = 77) reported on their rich linguistic repertoire with 100% of them indicating L2, 94% – L3, 59% – L4 and 24% – L5 competences. The participants appear to be confident in their use of three types of metacognitive knowledge (declarative, procedural and conditional) with the majority of the offered statements being evaluated from 50% to 80% of approval. Likewise, in regard to the application of metacognitive strategies,

the participants demonstrate self-assurance in the use of information management strategies, with slightly less confidence in the application of evaluation and planning strategies.

If policy makers and school administrators can decide (sometimes unfortunately) what languages children will learn in different stages at school, for adult learners it is the need and the motivation (cf. Viernes, et al, 2019) that play the major role in choosing the language(s) and making such a decision a success. In both cases yet the decisions are highly influenced by the local context. For instance, the Lithuanian general education requires L2 starting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of primary school and L3 starting in the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade of middle years or pre-gymnasium with an option of L4 in some gymnasiums.<sup>3</sup> The general education is by 99% dominated by English as L2<sup>4</sup>, while the repertoire of the main L3 choices include Russian (77%), German (16%) and French (5%) with a minimal percentage of other languages. That could make quite a beautiful multilingual profile of a secondary school leaver, but the main problem is the L3 turning into an optional subject in the last two years of the secondary education and being usually overtaken by 'more useful' subjects (cf. Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). Consequently, in a Lithuanian context, a secondary school leaver is equipped with quite good (B1–B2 or even C1) competences of English as the *Lingua academica*, *Lingua politica*, *Lingua economica*, etc. (Phillipson, 2018) and otherwise dominant language in the contemporary globalised world and has good basis for building up his/ her plurilingual competences having been exposed to more languages.

Upon the entrance into the job market, the factors of need and motivation take over to determine not only the competences of what languages need to be further developed, but also what new ones need to be embarked on and, most importantly in adulthood, for what goals, tasks and functions those language skills will be used. Missing the latter aspect could cost the adult language learner the loss of motivation and ultimately poor learning outcomes. To continue with the example from the Lithuanian context, Edita Bartnikaitė

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<sup>3</sup> Courses of different languages not offered by secondary schools are organised at the Institute of Foreign Languages of Vytautas Magnus University.

<sup>4</sup> Public statistics of 2018-2019 academic year at <http://svis.emokykla.lt/1-mokykla/>

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and Vilma Bijeikienė (2017) carried out a needs' analysis of general and specific English among legal practitioners attending in-service courses. Study participants, most of whom had had some English in formal education, were most interested in enriching their legal terminology repertoire and improving their oral and written skills to be able to interact with the clients. The shortage of time was indicated as the dominant obstacle, which is an important indicator for language teachers to spot the most specific needs and to offer the most flexible and appealing learning methods for adult language learners.

### **Conclusions**

The present article has aimed at tackling some language learning related questions that keep gaining their topicality in the melting pot of languages and cultures into which the contemporary world has been rapidly turning. The overall value of plurilingualism argued in this article should hardly cause any doubts; however, the major research limitations determined by the chosen methodological perspective have to be admitted. The questions raised throughout the article have by no means been exhausted and highlight the need for further empirical investigation. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the early initial age for language learning is not the panacea and other factors as continuous and substantial input and exposure to the target language prove to be vital. However, the early initial age still plays a paramount role in the development of the child's capacity to successfully start learning another language in later age, i.e. whenever the demand arises. The early initial age is inevitable in extending the overall time of learning a language over more years of formal education and ultimately providing a learner with more input, which eventually can guarantee success. The early initial age is critical in increasing the child's tolerance to difference and otherness, and finally, in enabling the child to better understand his/her L1 and the native environment.

The article has also exposed the cognitive gains of learning and using languages in all periods of a person's life – be it a CLIL class in general education where a child, against all odds of scepticism, develops better competences of the target language as well as of the non-linguistic content and

even his/her own L1 or a stage of seniority where active plurilingualism proves as a therapy against age-related dementia (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). Thus, it has been revealed that learning languages in adulthood and active practice of their use is not only possible, but highly recommendable for preserving a person's mental health (Mehmedbegovic & Bak (2017). The success of learning a language also depends on how carefully it is attuned to the particular needs of language use. Above all, however, to paraphrase Morrison (2016) in his BBC article, a risk which monolinguals bear in this dynamic era of personal, virtual or media-supported communication is to become the world's worst communicators.

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## **DAUGIAKALBYSTĖS REIKŠMĖ: KOKIE FAKTORIAI TURI ĮTAKOS DAUGIAKALBĖS KOMPETENCIJOS PLĖTOJIMUI**

**Santrauka.** Vargu ar yra žmonių, niekada nesimokiusių kitos kalbos. Vieni galėtų pasidalyti liūdna, kiti – džiaugsminga kalbų mokymosi patirtimi, tretį galbūt prisimintų akimirkas, kai iš neviltingos norėjosi „nusigrauzti nagus“, nes dėl reikiamos kalbos žinių trūkumo iš rankų išslydo karjeros galimybė. Daugelis svarsto, ar yra tinkamiausias amžius mokytis naujos kalbos ir ar geriausia mokytis vaikystėje. Atsižvelgiant į šiuos dažnai užduodamus klausimus straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad pradinis kitos kalbos mokymasis ankstyvame amžiuje neabejotinai yra sėkmės garantas įgyti gerų komunikacinių gebėjimų bei suteikia daugybę kitų privalumų, bet brandesnio amžiaus žmonės taip pat gali mokytis kitos kalbos. Mokantis vyresniame amžiuje didelę įtaką turi motyvacija ir pasirinkta metodika, tačiau aktyvi daugiakalbė patirtis neabejotinai yra labai vertinga. Metodologiniu požiūriu šio konceptualaus straipsnio atsiradimą paskatino konferencijos diskusija bei empiriniai duomenys, paremti ankstesnių ilgamečių tyrimų ir tarptautinių projektų. Straipsniu mėginama inicijuoti tolesnes studijas, kurios giliau išanalizuotų veiksnius, turinčius teigiamą poveikį sėkmingam daugiakalbių kompetencijų plėtojimui; kartu tai yra bandymas parodyti visapusišką daugiakalbystės vertę.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** daugiakalbystė; daugiakalbės kompetencijos plėtojimas; kalbų mokymas(is); integruotas dalyko ir kalbos mokymasis (IDKM); kritinio laikotarpio hipotezė (KLH).