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# Multilingual Families: A Sociolinguistic Model for Retaining Language Ability and Cultural Heritage

## **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** To propose a model for the creation of selected language practice games that will allow for multilingual families to engage in common activities in order to retain the multiculturalism factor amongst parents and their children.

**Methodology:** Ontological considerations based on sociolinguistic models in accordance with TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) and SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) Models.

**Findings:** The preservation of this heritage among both children and adults can be achieved by allowing them to engage in various activities, allowing them to acquire multiple languages simultaneously and thus create a sense of national identity.

**Value Added:** The presented methodological considerations are to be used as the basis for the creation of output results in an Erasmus+ financed project carried out at the University

of Social Sciences (along with other European partners) entitled Multilingual Families Clubs: Promoting Linguistic and Cultural Heritage of Europe.

**Recommendations:** activities for Polish multilingual speakers need to include those in the following languages: German, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian.

**Key words:** Cultural Heritage, Multilingualism, National Identity, 21st Century Skills, Linguistic Identity

**JEL codes:** Z000, Z130

The question of what is meant by culture was once explored by Berry and Laponce (1994). According to them, the term was first used by Tylor (1871) to refer to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society" (Berry & Laponce, 1994, p. 5). The authors claim that further research carried out by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified approximately two hundred definitions of the term at hand. Hudson (1980) writes that "culture is something that everybody has" and involves some "property of a community, especially that which might distinguish it from other communities" (Hudson 1980, p. 73). Furthermore, it may be defined as "the kind of knowledge which we learn from other people, either by direct instruction or by watching their behavior" (Hudson, 1980, p. 81). When outlining the basic assumptions of modern discourse, Schiffrin (1987) states that language always occurs and is context sensitive. She implies that one's world knowledge background is a key factor to understanding linguistic elements and assumes that:

...language always occurs in some kind of context, including cognitive contexts, in which in which past experience and knowledge is stored and drawn upon, cultural contexts consisting of shared meanings and world views, and social contexts through which both self and others draw upon institutional and interactional orders to construct definitions of situation and action" (Schiffrin, 1987, pp. 3–4).

A crucial element to mention here is the concept of emotions, which fall under the general cultural scheme. Linguists have argued for conceptual categories of cognition, emphasizing that meaning emerges from socially and culturally shared practice and norms, implicating that interpretation has social origin. Recent investigations suggest, that within the cross-cultural framework, processing emotions remains the same (Schrauf & Sanchez, 2004). Lutz's (1986) study demonstrated the cultural component in emotion manifestation, with the phenomena being grounded in socio-cultural contexts and representative of our own cognitive typologies. Consequently, interpretation, or perception of events is conditioned by emotions and other affective phenomena, along with a set of culturally and socially interpretative schemas, which arise due to a set of manipulative patterns. As a result, in a relatively closed social system in which communication among members is unrestricted, the system as a whole will tend to *converge* over time toward a state of greater cultural *uniformity*.

## The Question of Identity

Researchers across disciplines have often pointed to a link between language and the sense of belonging to a national group. In many cases there is just one spoken national standard, which allows speakers to come together under the same national identity. This may not be as simple as it sounds, due to various social and regional aspects culminating in various degrees of speech communities. However, there exists a quite powerful two way relation between language and social organization; thus linguistic resources are a means which allow the establishment of social and national identity. According to Machin and Thornborrow (2003) the notion of identity on all its levels could be described as something that we are constantly building and negotiating via our interaction with other members of society. Kroskrity (2000) puts emphasis on identities not as given but produced. In other words, either conscious – through strategic manipulation, or through lack of awareness practices. There may also be

various political and economic influences on the process of identity making as these are part of our daily lives (Kroskrity, 2000, pp. 111–114).

In linguistics, the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, also known as the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*, puts forward the idea that there exists a systematic relationship between the grammatical categories of a spoken language and the perception of the world. In simpler words, it is our thinking that is determined by language and that in turn shapes our reality. According to Schlesinger (1991), Whorf's basic assumption was that "grammar is more resistant to change than culture", therefore "the influence from language to culture is predominant" (Schlesinger, 1991, p. 17). As an axiom, it is assumed that the language user, if bilingual, will therefore be bicultural. Of course, this is a relative term, as there is no such thing as absolute bicultural competence. Knowledge about the target culture is acquired slowly and gradually. The hypothesis has never been proven nor disproved, however, it has had influence on the understanding of the subsequent stages of linguistics development.

This has lead researchers in the field of sociolinguistics to propose the concept of speech communities and having national and linguistic identity as not opposing, but complimentary aspects. Classic theorists have argued over time concerning their defining concepts; Fishman (1972) claims that "any reasonably complex speech community contains various speech networks that vary with respect to the nature and ranges of their speech repertoires" (Fishman, 1972, p. 288). Lyons (1970) sees that it involves "all the people who use a given language (or dialect)" (Lyons, 1970, p. 326), thus he does not take into account the necessity for "cultural and social unity" (Hudson, 1980, p. 27). Hockett (1958) talks of "the whole set of people who communicate with each other, either directly or indirectly, via the common language (Hockett, 1958, p. 8), while Labov (1972) claims that it "is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms" (Labov, 1972, p. 120).

Currently, following Blommaert (2013), "language is one of the most immediate and sensitive indexes of diversity. Small differences in accent and

speaking betray someone's regional, social class, ethnic, and/or gender backgrounds". Nicholas (2011) postulates that there exists a direct link between linguistic competence and cultural identity, while Perez-Milans (2015) concludes that:

Linguistic and cultural practices are no longer examined against the background of abstract standard languages, uniform views of speakers and stable group identities. Rather, such practices are investigated with reference to the fragmented repertoires that people acquire, construct and mobilize by positioning themselves and others in ways that have consequences for their distinct degrees of control over access to different social spaces (Perez-Milans, 2015, p. 132).

The author thus concludes that a passport does not determine who an individual is. One needs to realize that language reinforces cultural patterns and, therefore, meaning does not reside in a text but arises in its interpretation, and interpretation is shaped by socio-cultural contexts. The author of this paper follows Hofstede's (1994) assumptions of *collective programming of the mind* which distinguishes the members of one group or category from another. This will allow the speaker to consciously choose one's identity through the linguistic code and its cognitive perception of self identity and culture. Expanding Hofstede's model for *dimensions of culture and programming the mind*, one discovers ever increasing layers that go beyond classic understanding of social, regional, organizational or gender distinction (Hofstede, 2001, pp. 24–29). Having observed the evolution of human social construction, now spanning towards digital and cross cultural (as opposed to *intercultural*) relations, each marked layer then undergoes further sub-categorization.

## The Model

The entire purpose of the *Multilingual Families Clubs*<sup>1</sup> project is to preserve languages and culture of immigrants living in the EU and promote multilingualism; to make them aware of their heritage and allow them to continue with their mixed parentage. Yet the very concept of bilingualism is a difficult one to grasp under one clear definition. In general, *bilingualism* is the ability to use two different languages as mother tongues, which most often results from the ethnic diversity of the area in which it occurs. Yet there are different types of bilinguals and they are systematically divided on the basis of several factors including temporal and cognitive. Thus we have sequential or simultaneous bilingualism and balanced or dominating, among others. Much of this phenomena is grounded in Lenneberg's *Critical Period Hypothesis*. Lenneberg claimed that if language acquisition does not take place before puberty it will never be possible to acquire; as a result one will never make use of the language in a fully functional form. The Lenneberg hypothesis is referred to by Noam Chomsky, who claims that language acquisition is possible thanks to the *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD) – an active lobe in the critical period, containing the principles of universal grammar. According to the scholar, the principles of universal grammar are present in all the languages of the world and because they are innate, children acquiring a language do not have to learn them. However, after the critical period, the mechanism of language acquisition disappears and it is virtually impossible to acquire a language without its help.

A concept close to the one at hand is that of biculturalism, or accepting elements of a foreign culture as a result of linguistic and cultural contacts. The author's main methodological goal is to go along with the premise that *multiple language families should aim for retaining bilingualism and multilingualism among their children so as to foster the retention of their parents*

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1. "Multilingual Families Clubs – Promoting Linguistic & Cultural Treasure of Europe" is a project co-funded by the European Commission, within the Erasmus+ programme, <http://www.multilingualclubs.eu/>.

*culture through language*. This, the author believes, will give them an advantage in a globalized world.

'*Executive functions*' is a collective term that refers to a set of skills which allow individuals to select an action that is proper in a particular situation, inhibit improper behavior and concentrate or maintain attention in the presence of distractions. This includes solving novel problems, modifying behavior in the light of new information, generating strategies or sequencing complex actions, planning and self-monitoring. Executive processes and problem solving skills are largely improved in the middle childhood. Several research studies (Costa et al., 2008; Soveri et al., 2011; Parr-Modrzejewska, 2015) have shown bilingual advantage in executive functions, especially in the area of inhibiting irrelevant information. Additionally, bilinguals proved to excel monolinguals in working memory performance.

Bialystok (1999, 2001) has suggested that bilingual children might develop improved cognitive control systems compared to monolingual children as a result of switching and attentional control demands from early age. Bilingual children have the capacity to become exceptionally proficient at "switching", not only between languages but between different cognitive tasks. The bilingual advantage seems to be related to the attention control while information processing. Since users of two language codes need to constantly monitor their performance as to its appropriateness in terms of the choice of language items available in the bilingual mental lexicon, their executive control is constantly in use. The activities will thus be designed for parents and children at different ages, meant to develop and support multilingualism, and provide families with tools to work with language and cultural patterns. However one must first consider methods for sub-categorization of the proposed activities.

Taking all presented above into consideration, the main category for choosing activities should be age based. Separate categories should be created for the (0–6) and the (6–10) group. The idea behind this is that the younger group will be focused on the development of their cognitive skills, while the

older age group will focus on the development of soft skills. The choice for choosing activities should also be based on their *culture supporting effectiveness*. This approach should consider the development of sensorimotor reactions and preoperational reasoning. In this case, roleplaying has always been an excellent method for exercising critical thinking. It involves inhabiting another persona and its characteristics, as well as navigating *various* cultural *contexts* and critical engagement with their cultural heritage. Furthermore, activities need to focus on an individual's awareness of the sound structure and involve real-time interaction and instructions proposed to the user, or via experience sharing or group gaming.

A further element for the proposed model will be to focus on the development of *so-called* 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. This requires an innovative approach centering on the increase of the previously mentioned soft skills through a methodology that makes it possible to use available tools used in everyday life (internet, portable devices) and create an environment for teaching skills that will be necessary in the future. It is somehow, acquiring knowledge and not learning pure facts. In the words of Markham (2011), this approach:

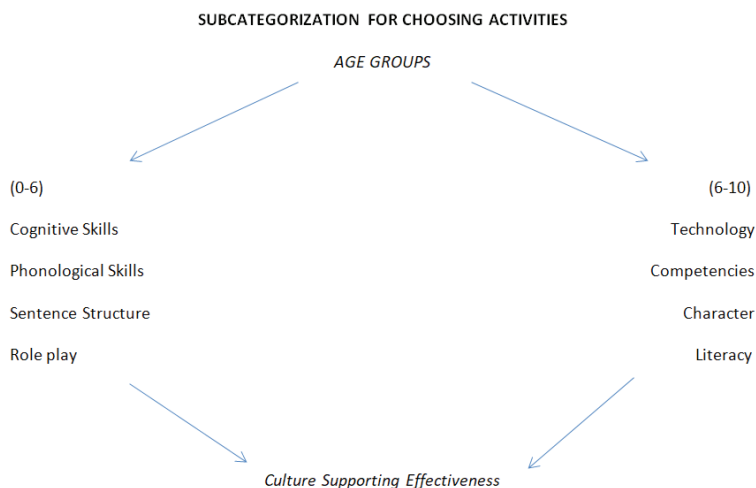
...integrates knowing and doing. Students learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum, but also apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce results that matter. PBL students take advantage of digital tools to produce high quality, collaborative products. PBL refocuses education on the student, not the curriculum (Markham, 2011, p. 40).

We therefore considered this approach as equally important in the construction of activities proposed to multilingual families with focus on the use of technology in accordance with the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) and SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) Models. These incorporate game-based learning, learning with mobile and handheld devices, created media like podcasts, videos, or slideshows; yet when choosing activities one needs to consider differences in age and ability. These activities need to focus on building character qualities, devel-



oping competencies and increasing literacy. The presented methodological considerations are presented in the image below. Please refer to the following:

**Figure 1. Subcategorization for choosing activities for Multilingual Families Clubs.**



Source: as proposed by the Author and presented during the meeting with strategic partners in Brno, Czech Republic, 2017.

## Template Proposal

The information provided in this part of the paper presents the proposed template for activity preparation. It is critical that it should present the parent/child with the overall themes of the exercise, present recommendations and clearly determine to whom the exercise is directed towards. For the purpose of this paper, the proposed template is then followed by and real-time example activity. The author suggests the following:

- **ACTIVITY TITLE**
- **TARGET GROUP:** Provide an age group: 0–6/6–10/both
- **THEME:** main focus of the activity
- **SKILLS:** List the type of skills that are to be developed

- **LANGUAGES:** Please describe whether the exercise can be carried out in multiple languages
- **TO DO LIST:** list of all materials needed for the activity
- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** Provide additional instructions that will help the participants correctly carry out the exercise.

The following is thus an example activity directed towards both parents and children:

- **ACTIVITY TITLE:** Let's cook something up! Recipe writing
- **TARGET GROUP:** 6–10
- **THEME:** Food as cultural heritage
- **SKILLS:** Listening, speaking, writing
- **LANGUAGES :** Multilingual
- **TO DO LIST:** Computer with Internet access, Youtube videos, pen and paper
- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** Talk to your child first and make him/her aware of how much food is a part of national heritage.

Each activity needs to have a precise description in order to guide the participants through each stage of the activity. Please note the following:

- **PURPOSE**

*State all the aims of the activity. Focus on identity and the cultural heritage aspect.*

- **PREPARATION FOR THE ACTIVITY**

*Describe what needs to be done before the start of the activity.*

- **INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE PARTICIPANT**

*Describe the procedure of the activity step by step. Make sure to provide key details.*

- **BENEFIT**

*State the benefits of the activity in terms of multilingualism with special focus on cultural heritage and linguistic/national identity.*

As before, presented below is a sample activity. Please refer to the following:

- **PURPOSE**

*The purpose of the exercise is to use two languages in reference to preparing a recipe for a dish that belongs to the cultural heritage of one of the parents.*

- **PREPARATION FOR THE ACTIVITY**

*Make sure you have proper internet connection. First talk to your child about what type of food you ate as a child. Make him/her aware of how food is a part of a culture. Show him a cooking book so they know how a recipe looks like.*

- **INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE PARTICIPANT**

- 1) Watch a Youtube video on how to cook the dish
- 2) Watch it with subtitles in the language spoken (if necessary)
- 3) Ask your child to write up the recipe of the food he/she saw cooking on Youtube

- **BENEFIT**

*Your child will begin to understand that not only language but also the food you eat is part of a culture. He/she will find out new words for various ingredients.*

The final decisions concerning the template had been made during a partner meeting scheduled for late December 2017.

## Final Remarks

The *Multilingual Families Clubs* project aims at focusing on the preparation of activities that will be addressed on the basis of the needs of the two predominant minorities in the country of their residence (this will be done by all partners), based on the most recent national census data. The data needs to cross-referenced between the overall percentage of individuals listed. As an example the Polish National Census shows 97,09% of Polish nationals; 2,26% declare two national identities, while 1,55% are classified as foreign. The following criteria need to be taken into account:

- 1) The overall number of individuals declaring their nationality as foreign, yet residing with the nationality of the partner country in question (Polish 2,6% declaring mixed heritage)
- 2) The overall number of individuals declaring their nationality as foreign (Polish 1,55% foreign population).
- 3) Recent immigration data including work relocation and refugees.

Based on data obtained from [udsc.gov.pl](http://udsc.gov.pl) the language minority situation in Poland needs to include the following:

- **Mixed heritage** (individuals ): German (147 814), Ukrainian (51 001), Belarussian (46 787),
- **Foreign born residing as foreign in Poland:** German (44 549), Ukrainian (27 630), Belarussian (30195),
- **Immigrant data:** Residents of the former Soviet Union represent the largest migrant group (Ukrainian – 513 000, Belarussian 28 000).

As a result, the activities for Poland need to include those in the following languages: German, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian. Whereas both Belarussians and Ukrainians speak Russian, one may conclude that Poland needs German and Russian versions of the project output.

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