



FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BOZEN
LIBERA UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLZANO
FREE UNIVERSITY OF BOZEN · BOLZANO

Liberà Università di Bolzano

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As a contribution to the investigation of multilingualism in higher education settings within the DYLAN project, UNIBZ research team offers a case study of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (FUB), a young institution founded in 1997 as a trilingual site for tertiary education and research. By analyzing various types of institutional communication (such as pedagogical events like lectures and seminars, service encounters at the university Infopoint and the Library) and informal peer-interaction, and relating them with the FUB official language policies, the team sought first of all to gain a comprehensive picture of how institutional trilingualism is translated into practice. Furthermore, analysis of social actors' representations and reported practices, as well as consideration of the broader context of the university –namely South Tyrol, an Italian autonomous province characterized by the legal protection of the German and Ladin speaking minorities - allowed to explore the interplay between practices, policies, representations and context as outlined within the DYLAN theoretical framework.

In general terms, investigations carried out in a time-span of five years document the key role attributed by the FUB to multilingualism. The institutional goal of enhancing students' cultural and linguistic skills and leading them to be competitive on the international marketplace is linked to the trilingual organization of studies on the one hand and to language classes offer on the other. Two models of multilingual education emerge from analysis. On the one hand, modules (lectures and seminars) held in one official language (Italian, German, English, with a varied distribution across faculties according to the specific orientations of studies), which show limited use of further languages and which are viewed by teachers and

students as possible L2 learning contexts; on the other hand, seminars with a strong applicative orientation, as those observed at the Faculty of Design and Art, which are managed by more tutors in different languages and which are characterized by constant language alternation, fostering students' active participation both in their L1s and L2s. Against the background of general institutional language policies, which have recently established higher entry language proficiency levels and final testing proving acquired language competences, and which design pedagogical activities in terms of additive multilingualism (classes offered in one language only, avoiding duplication and thus forcing students to engage with subject-matter instruction in a second language), specific faculties' profiles and organization of pedagogical activities can thus provide conditions which allow a fruitful exploitation of linguistic diversity in the classroom towards a joint construction of new knowledge.

While in these latter contexts students use both their L1s and their L2s depending on the task at hand and the contextual development of interaction, in further contexts within the institution such as service encounters at the University InfoPoint and at the Library they can pursue their communicative goals – receiving information or documents related to their university career- in their preferred language, thanks to clerks' multilingual competence (German and Italian knowledge is required to permanent administrative staff) and language convergence strategies, which allow for efficient and fair communicative exchanges.

Analysis of students' informal peer-interaction, on its side, documents both multilingual and monolingual patterns of communication, highlighting the role of social networks for the development of plurilingual repertoires, as well as and the importance of foreign students as bridges among distant and somehow divergent social, cultural and linguistic worlds.

As a result of these investigations, a number of possible guidelines for language management arise, which affect both the institutional orientation of bi- and trilingual universities, and concrete measures to foster multilingualism in such contexts. A first measure pertains the visibility of students' language competence upon study completion, which could take the form of a diploma supplement or a portfolio stating progresses achieved in the institution's official languages during studies. Even more importantly, the notion of "multilingual competence" should be taken into account in outgoing language certifications, capturing the flexibility in changing languages, the adaptability to interlocutors and the ability to understand cultural

implications in language use, which are not considered when knowledge of single languages is tested.

A second measure regards teaching staff's sensitivity towards language diversity: if participation in the classroom can be enhanced by multilingual communication, as mentioned above, such potential of linguistic diversity can be profited from only under the condition that teaching staff is skilled in the languages of the institution and views multilingual communication as beneficial both for pedagogical interaction and for students' future professional life. In the development of human resources, therefore, not only linguistic support such as language classes and courses focussing on presentation skills in L2 – as those currently offered by the FUB - should be provided to teachers, but also sensitivity to diversity and diversity management should be included; a particular focus on functional multilingualism, as opposed to an idealized representation of “perfect bilingualism” still pervasive in society, could be thereby pursued. Furthermore, a thorough reflection on the design of instructional activities is needed, in order to find a better balance between alternative – and to a certain extent contrasting – ways of putting institutional multilingualism into practice.

Efforts towards internationalism in the teaching staff and the student body should be reinforced, this way enhancing sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity as reflected in different disciplinary traditions and teaching styles, and promoting intercultural communication in formal as well as in informal settings.

Finally, detailed investigations of how individuals' social networks are established and evolve across time are advisable, especially with reference to students', so that institutions can develop specific measures for promoting their expansion within the university but also, and even more importantly, in the larger societal context.

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