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TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH MULTILINGUAL SCAFFOLDING: LEARNER LANGUAGE, TRANSFER, AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES AMONG EAST SLAVIC-SPEAKING BEGINNERS IN POLAND

Teaching English to beginner learners in multilingual migrant-background contexts requires a more precise methodology than traditional monolingual EFL instruction. In Poland, this issue has become especially relevant due to the growing number of learners whose linguistic repertoires include Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and English. Such learners cannot be adequately described as “beginners” in a general linguistic sense. They may be beginners in English, but they are already experienced users of several languages. Therefore, the central pedagogical question is not whether their other languages should be ignored, but how to use these languages responsibly to support English learning.

The present paper focuses on multilingual scaffolding as a pedagogical strategy for teaching English to beginner learners of East Slavic languages in Poland. The term East Slavic-speaking learners is used here to refer to learners whose linguistic repertoires include Ukrainian, Belarusian and/or Russian. However, this category should not be understood as homogeneous. Some learners may use Ukrainian as a language of identity, Russian as a home language, Belarusian as a family or heritage language, Polish as a language of everyday communication, and English as a target foreign language. This multilingual configuration makes English learning more complex, but also creates additional resources for explanation, comparison and metalinguistic awareness.

The theoretical foundation of the study is based on four interconnected concepts: plurilingual competence, translanguaging, scaffolding, and cross-linguistic influence. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume emphasises that plurilingual competence is not a set of isolated language systems, but a single, interconnected and unevenly developed repertoire [3]. This idea is essential for the present study because East Slavic-speaking learners in Poland often use several languages for different communicative purposes. Their Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian and Polish resources may interact with English learning in both productive and problematic ways.

Translanguaging theory also offers an important perspective for this topic. García and Wei describe translanguaging as the flexible use of multilingual resources in meaning-making and communication [8]. In language education, however, translanguaging should not mean uncontrolled switching between languages. Cenoz and Gorter argue for pedagogical translanguaging, that is, the planned use of learners’ multilingual resources for language learning [2]. Daniel, Jiménez, Pray, and Pacheco further stress that translanguaging needs to be scaffolded to become a classroom norm rather than merely a spontaneous survival strategy [5]. These arguments are especially relevant for beginner EFL learners, who often need temporary support before they can produce English independently.

Scaffolding is understood in this paper as temporary, adaptive and gradually removable support. It is rooted in sociocultural theory and Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, which holds that learning develops through the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can do with support [11]. Wood, Bruner and Ross define scaffolding as support that allows learners to complete tasks they would not yet be able to perform alone [13]. In language education, Walqui emphasises that scaffolding for English language learners should be purposeful, interactional and connected to the development of learner independence [12]. Therefore, multilingual scaffolding does not mean replacing English with other languages. Its purpose is to help learners move from understanding through support to controlled practice and then to independent English production.

The empirical focus of the study is learner language produced by East Slavic-speaking beginner EFL learners in a non-formal educational setting in Poland. The research design includes a language background questionnaire, a diagnostic English test, a written production task, a translation or mediation task, a learner feedback questionnaire, and teaching materials used for multilingual scaffolding. This combination of instruments is important because any single type of data would be insufficient. Questionnaires can describe learners' repertoires, but they cannot show how learners actually produce English. Diagnostic tests can identify areas of difficulty, but they do not explain the source of errors. Written and mediation tasks provide more direct evidence of learner language, transfer patterns and areas where scaffolding may be needed.

The analysis of learner language is based on the assumption that learner errors are not simply failures. Corder's classic view of learners' errors shows that errors are significant because they reveal how learners construct the target language system [4]. Ellis and Barkhuizen also argue that learner language analysis can help researchers understand interlanguage development and the processes behind second language learning [6]. In this study, errors are therefore treated as evidence of learning processes rather than signs of linguistic deficiency.

One of the main analytical categories is cross-linguistic influence. Odlin defines transfer as influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any previously acquired language [10]. Jarvis and Pavlenko further show that cross-linguistic influence in multilingual learners cannot be reduced to the influence of a single native language [9]. This is crucial in the Polish context. A learner's English may reflect influence from Ukrainian, Belarusian or Russian, but it may also reflect influence from Polish as a language of school, work or daily life. For this reason, the study avoids simplistic explanations such as "the error comes from L1". Instead, errors are interpreted cautiously as possible effects of a multilingual repertoire.

Several areas of English grammar and vocabulary are particularly relevant for East Slavic-speaking beginner learners. The first is the use of the verb to be in nominal predicates. In Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian, present-tense copular structures are often expressed differently from those in English. Therefore, beginner learners may produce forms such as "I student" instead of "I am a student". The second area is article use. Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian and Polish do not have an article system equivalent to English, which may lead to article omission or inconsistent article use. The third area is auxiliary do in questions and negatives. Since do-support has no direct equivalent in East Slavic languages, learners may produce forms such as You like English? instead of Do you like English? The fourth area is word order. English has a more fixed SVO structure than East Slavic languages, where word

order is often more flexible. This may result in sentence patterns such as Very like I English instead of I really like English.

Prepositions and collocations also require attention. English prepositional patterns often do not correspond directly to Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian or Polish structures. Learners may therefore produce forms such as listen music instead of listen to music, depend from instead of depend on, or live on Poland instead of live in Poland. These examples illustrate why multilingual scaffolding should not be limited to word translation. Learners need phrase-level and sentence-level support because English is learned not only through isolated vocabulary items but also through patterns of use.

The translation or mediation task is particularly useful for identifying transfer. Mediation is recognised in the CEFR Companion Volume as an important communicative activity in which a language user conveys meaning across languages, texts, situations or participants [3]. In beginner EFL learning, translation and mediation tasks can show how learners build English sentences when they rely on already known linguistic structures. Literal translation may help learners understand meaning at an early stage, but it may also lead to non-target-like English structures. For example, a learner influenced by Polish or East Slavic expressions of age may produce “I have twenty years” instead of “I am twenty years old”. Such examples are pedagogically useful because they show where contrastive explanation is needed.

The study also focuses on support strategies used in multilingual scaffolding. The first strategy is home-language clarification. This involves the short, purposeful use of a language known to learners to explain task instructions, key vocabulary, or difficult grammar. This strategy is especially important at the beginner level, where failure to complete a task may result from misunderstanding the instructions rather than from a lack of English proficiency. The second strategy is an explanation of contrastive grammar. Here, the teacher compares English structures with Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, or Polish structures to help learners notice differences. For example, the teacher may explain why English requires am in I am a student, even if the equivalent sentence in a learner’s stronger language does not use an overt copula.

The third strategy is multilingual vocabulary support. This may include multilingual word banks, visual vocabulary cards, thematic word lists and phrase-based examples. However, vocabulary support should not consist only of translation. A beginner learner needs to see how a word functions in a sentence. For example, the word work should be taught through patterns such as I work in..., I work as..., I go to work, rather than as an isolated lexical item. The fourth strategy is visual and contextual scaffolding. Images, sentence frames, colour-coded word-order models, and simple communicative contexts can reduce cognitive load and help learners associate English structures with meaning rather than with translation alone.

The fifth strategy is peer support. In multilingual groups, learners may help each other understand instructions, compare languages or check simple answers. However, peer support must be carefully structured. Stronger learners should not become permanent translators for the group, and a single support language should not dominate the classroom. The teacher needs to preserve the main direction of learning: from multilingual support toward English production.

Learner feedback is also important in this study. Some learners may perceive multilingual scaffolding as useful because it helps them understand grammar, remember vocabulary or feel less anxious. Back, Han and Weng show that translanguaging may provide emotional scaffolding for emergent multilingual learners [1]. This emotional dimension matters in beginner-level EFL learning because anxiety, fear of making errors, and low confidence may

prevent learners from participating even when they understand the material. At the same time, learner feedback may also show that some students prefer more English-only practice. This would not weaken the argument for multilingual scaffolding. On the contrary, it would confirm that multilingual support must be balanced, purposeful and gradually reduced.

A key methodological point is that multilingual scaffolding should not be treated as a soft or simplified teaching method. It is not a lowering of standards. It requires strong teacher awareness of English structures, learner repertoires, transfer risks and pedagogical sequencing. Poorly designed multilingual scaffolding can become a random translation and may reduce English exposure. Good multilingual scaffolding, however, creates a structured route from comprehension to production. It helps learners understand why English works differently and gives them tools to move beyond literal translation.

The study, therefore, contributes to applied linguistics and English language teaching in three ways. First, it links multilingual scaffolding with actual learner language, rather than discussing multilingualism only as an abstract principle. Second, it treats transfer as a multilingual phenomenon involving East Slavic languages and Polish, rather than as a simple one-directional influence from a single native language. Third, it offers practical support strategies for teaching beginner English in migrant-background educational contexts.

In conclusion, East Slavic-speaking beginner EFL learners in Poland bring complex linguistic repertoires into the English classroom. These repertoires may generate errors, but they can also support learning when used pedagogically. Multilingual scaffolding allows the teacher to leverage learners' existing languages as temporary support for English grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, and communicative confidence. The main challenge is balance: learners' known languages should support English learning without replacing English practice. If used carefully, multilingual scaffolding can help beginner learners move from dependence on stronger languages toward more independent and accurate English production.

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