

# A NEW TRAINING MODEL FOR NATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHERS: THE CHALLENGE OF MATE ERASMUS+ PROJECT

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In recent years, the presence of foreign students in all levels and types of European school systems has confirmed the statistical forecasts recording an exponential increase and thus becoming a generalised and consolidated reality (Eurostat, 2021). Although we may consider this a form of enrichment, it is undeniable that we are faced with a situation that requires – in addition to robust actions on the political, economic and social front by the relevant institutions – a more in-depth reflection by school operators (primarily teachers), in order to understand more effectively what it means to work in a multicultural context, working within an intercultural perspective and what the implications may be, as a consequence, on a pedagogical and educational level

(Portera, 2020; Milani 2017, 2015). One of the greatest risks for intercultural education is actually the likelihood of it being perceived and interpreted merely in terms of an emergency response to particular problems of pupils who have a different language, ethnicity and culture, when in reality the integration of these pupils should be an opportunity for diversifying teaching strategies and broadening cultural and linguistic horizons that cannot be missed. As regards this last point, Italy – like most European countries – is indeed characterised by multilingualism (MIUR, 2022). In addition to the national language, in fact, there are three other 'linguistic hubs': the 12 languages of the so-called 'historical' minorities, the Italian sign language, the dialect varieties, which characterise regions and territories, the languages linked to immigration with varying quantitative consistency and status (heritage languages, vehicular languages and colonial languages). However, this reality does not always lead to a corresponding widespread awareness of

the (intercultural) value of languages and consequent specific attention to the linguistic diversity in classes. Alongside a generic representation of bilingualism as an opportunity and enrichment – when referring to languages that enjoy ‘social prestige’ – there is often denial or removal of situations of real multilingualism, i.e. referring to those who speak the native languages of immigrant families (EU, 2017). For this reason, over the years, there has been an increasing conviction that initial and continuous teacher training are absolutely essential initial and continuing teacher training in order to ensure that teaching staff have the necessary competences to teach students who don’t speak the language of schooling and may be multilingual (European Commission, 2016). The Centre for Intercultural Studies of the University of Verona, Italy, together with Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey (coordinator), VisMedNet Association, Malta, Management, Accounting and Education Research Association (MAERA), Portugal, Norges Teknisk - Naturvitenskapelige Universitet Ntnu, Norway, and Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu I Nauk O Zdrowiu, Poland, has been carrying out since 2019 an Erasmus+ project called ‘Mapping Teacher Education’ (MATE), whose final goal is actually creating a more inclusive HE systems, connected to surrounding communities, by increasing fairness in access and the participation and completion rates of immigrant students. In particular, the specific objectives are to: 1) create a panorama of the obtaining training offer for native language teachers (NLTs) in HE institutions and other professional training providers especially those teaching the native language of the receiving country as a second language for immigrant students and/or in multilingual classrooms; 2) find out how teaching practice of NLTs is organized, monitored, mentored and assessed; 3) map pedagogical innovations, technologies and trends in teaching and learning in language teaching but also in general, and to assess how these can be tapped to transform the native language class dynamics in so far as classroom management, teacher-students relationship, delivery, flexibility, personalization and mobile learning are concerned; 4) create instruments to keep NLTs up to date and upskill them with the latest pedagogical innovations, technologies and trends and therefore increasing their competences to operate at global level, as the world has radically changed and migration is no longer a prerequisite for coming into contact with other ethnic groups (Bauman & Portera, 2021; Bauman, 2016; Barrett, 2013). The target groups are: academic staff in faculties of education, including those responsible for the design of initial or continuing teacher training; present and future NLTs; and local native language speakers and immigrant students learning the native language of the receiving country, who are definitely the final beneficiaries of the project.

The approach used is one of a mix between micro intervention and macro vision. As for the micro approach, the main activities of MaTE has led to the understanding and showcasing how NLTs are being equipped to handle new dynamics and challenges in their classroom, with the idea, then, to recommend a teacher training model that upskills present and future NLTs to help them be proactive in respect of their challenges in the multilingual, multicultural and multilevel student population. The project partners started

by investigating on the training offer by different Faculties of Education and providers of teacher education, in order to map areas of potential innovation and avenues for change/lacunae in the training provision that takes into account the different drivers of change in the native language classroom. The collected data covered 21 EU countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Austria, Croatia, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany) as well as Norway, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK. In general, what emerged from the analysis of national curricula – albeit with the appropriate nuances between the various nations and with virtuous exceptions (such as the case of Austria) – is a landscape in which intercultural education<sup>1</sup> is largely associated with communication channels ‘to translate’ cultural diversity. In fact, the intercultural approach is poorly implemented with the frequent aim of addressing issues of teaching listening, reading, and writing skills, as if learning a language could be reduced to the verbal component (symbolic-conventional or digital) without taking analogical communication into account, which includes a wide range of communication variables capable of transmitting meanings that are difficult to interpret if separated from their specific cultural context (Chen, 2017; Bennett, 2002). Therefore, the learners will not be able to understand the hidden dimension of communication, which is made up of rules for gestures and interpersonal distance, and of symbols of status and hierarchy. Therefore, there is an early indication of the need to embed the intercultural perspective into programs, revising the disciplinary system in intercultural terms.

Conversely, the macro approach is the result of the mapping activity that looked at new trends, technologies and methodologies in language teaching but also about the practical aspects and methodology of mentoring and validation of teaching practice, with the idea to then offer a new model program for NLTs in the context of the changing dynamics in today’s classrooms. The new model – will give special attention to the needs of different learners in the multilingual native language classroom and will keep NLTs up to date and upskill them with the latest pedagogical innovations, technologies and trends. It will be designed within a book, which will present a recommended training path in initial and continuous teacher education in the area of native language teachers specially in the context of multicultural classrooms. The MaTE training model will cover different areas: intercultural communication and competence, culturally sensitive teaching methodologies (classroom, distance learning, virtual environments), leadership, and social inclusion.

The final goal is to build more inclusive classrooms and education in general by increasing fairness in access and the participation and completion rates of immigrant students and it will help Higher Education systems be better connected to their respective communities. In this sense, MaTE project represents a great potential for the native

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<sup>1</sup> Intercultural education is conceived as an approach placed between universalism and relativism, taking into consideration both opportunities and limitations, but transcending them and building up a new synthesis, with chances of dialogue, exchange and interaction. For further insights see Portera & Grant, 2017, and Grant & Portera, 2011.

language classroom, which becomes a platform for social integration and social cohesion in the school and in the whole community.

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