CHALLENGES OF TEACHING MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

ВИКЛИКИ У ПРОЦЕСІ НАВЧАННЯ БАГАТОМОВНИХ ЗДОБУВАЧІВ У СИСТЕМІ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ

Ilona HUSZTI[1], & Ilona LECHNER[2]

[1] *Ph.D. in Language Pedagogy, Associate Professor, Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, Berehove, Ukraine.*

✉ E-Mail: *huszti.ilona@kmf.org.ua*

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1900-8112

[2] *Ph.D. in Cognitive Linguistics, Associate Professor, Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, Berehove, Ukraine.*

✉ E-Mail: *lechner.ilona@kmf.org.ua*

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1900-8112

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. *This study investigates the challenges faced by teachers of multilingual learners at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Ukraine. The college serves a diverse student population, including native Ukrainian speakers and Hungarian speakers, as well as speakers of*

Мета. *У статті досліджено проблеми, з якими стикаються викладачі під час навчання багатомовних студентів у Закарпатському угорському інституті ім. Ференца Ракоці II. Інститут навчає студентів різної національності, включаючи носіїв української, угорської та інших мов і створюючи складне та*

other languages, creating a complex and dynamic multilingual learning environment. This research aims to understand the specific challenges faced by teachers in navigating this linguistic diversity to support all students' academic success.

Methodology. *A mixed-methods approach was employed for this research. Document analysis was conducted to examine the college's institutional language policies and their implications for teaching and learning. This included an analysis of official documents, such as the college charter and curriculum guidelines. Observational data was collected from multilingual classrooms simultaneously, to understand real-time language practices.*

Results. *The findings reveal several key challenges. Firstly, addressing varying levels of proficiency in Ukrainian, Hungarian, and English within the same classroom presents significant pedagogical demands. Providing individualized support, including extra tutoring and language support services, was also identified as crucial for ensuring all students can engage effectively with the learning material. Secondly, the successful use of intermediary languages, such as English, in facilitating instruction across different language backgrounds proved to be a crucial consideration.*

Conclusions. *The study underscores the complexities of teaching in a multilingual environment. It highlights the importance of teacher training and professional development in areas such as multilingual pedagogy, intercultural communication, and the development and utilization of appropriate language-learning resources. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers in multilingual contexts, emphasizing the need for flexible and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning that address the unique linguistic and cultural needs of all students.*

Keywords: *language courses, language use inside and outside the classroom, learning management system, multilingual context, tertiary education, Transcarpathia.*

динамічне багатомовне навчальне середовище. Метою дослідження є з'ясування конкретних проблем, з якими стикаються викладачі в умовах цього мовного різноманіття, щоб забезпечити успішність навчання студентів.

Методологія. *У дослідженні застосовується змішаний метод. Було проведено дослідження нормативно-правової документації, якою регулюється мовна політика закладу вищої освіти та процес навчання та викладання. Це включало аналіз офіційних документів, таких як статут інституту та навчальні програми. Водночас був проведений збір і аналіз даних про багатомовні аудиторії з метою розуміння мовного становища у реальному часі.*

Результати. *За результатами дослідження виявлено кілька ключових проблем. По-перше, врахування різного рівня володіння українською, угорською та англійською мовами в одній групі вимагає специфічних педагогічних підходів. Було визначено, що надання індивідуальної підтримки та мовні курси, також є важливими для забезпечення ефективної успішності студентів в опануванні навчального матеріалу. По-друге, для полегшення навчання в різних мовних середовищах важливим фактором є ефективне використання мови-посередника, як наприклад, англійської.*

Висновки. *Наголошено на складності викладання в багатомовному середовищі, на важливості підготовки викладачів та їх професійного розвитку в таких галузях, як багатомовна педагогіка, міжкультурна комунікація та розробка і використання відповідних методів навчання. Результати дослідження дають цінні знання для педагогів, які працюють у багатомовному середовищі, підкреслюючи необхідність гнучких та інклюзивних підходів до викладання, які враховують унікальні мовні та культурні потреби студентів.*

Ключові слова: *багатомовний контекст, використання мови в аудиторії та поза нею, вища освіта, Закарпаття, мовні курси, система управління навчанням.*

INTRODUCTION

To understand the challenges faced by teachers of multilingual learners, it is necessary to talk about the multilingual environment of Transcarpathia. Transcarpathia ("Закарпатська область" in Ukrainian) is one of the western territories of Ukraine. It

shares a border with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania (see red area on the map, Figure 1). Over the past few centuries, several nationalities and linguistic and cultural communities have coexisted in this area of the country (Bartelheimer et al., 2019).

There are around 135,000 inhabitants of Hungarian ethnicity in Transcarpathia. This population resides in a multicultural and multilingual environment, with a dynamically changing environment, both linguistically and ethnically. This has an unquestionable impact not only on the daily lives of the speakers, but also on the use of the various languages.

The main languages spoken in Transcarpathia are Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, German, Romani, Slovak, and Ruthenian. Hungarian is the third largest minority language in Ukraine and is spoken by 0.3% of the total population. Transcarpathia is home to 98.2% of the Hungarian-speaking population in Ukraine (Berehsasi et al., 2020).

In fact, about 60% of Hungarians live in communities where they form the overall majority of the population. In these communities, most of the kindergartens and schools use Hungarian as the language of instruction. The languages spoken in Transcarpathia, as well as their speakers, are in regular and active contact with one another. Furthermore, their influence on each other is mutual and inherent. With regard to the use of vocabulary, for instance, the impact is evident in the use of the minority language(s) through loanwords and lexical borrowings.

Figure 1
The Study of Hungarian Language Use in Transcarpathia. Map showing the location of Transcarpathia, Ukraine. Source: https://diaocthongthai.com/en/map-of-transcarpathia-oblast-ukr/
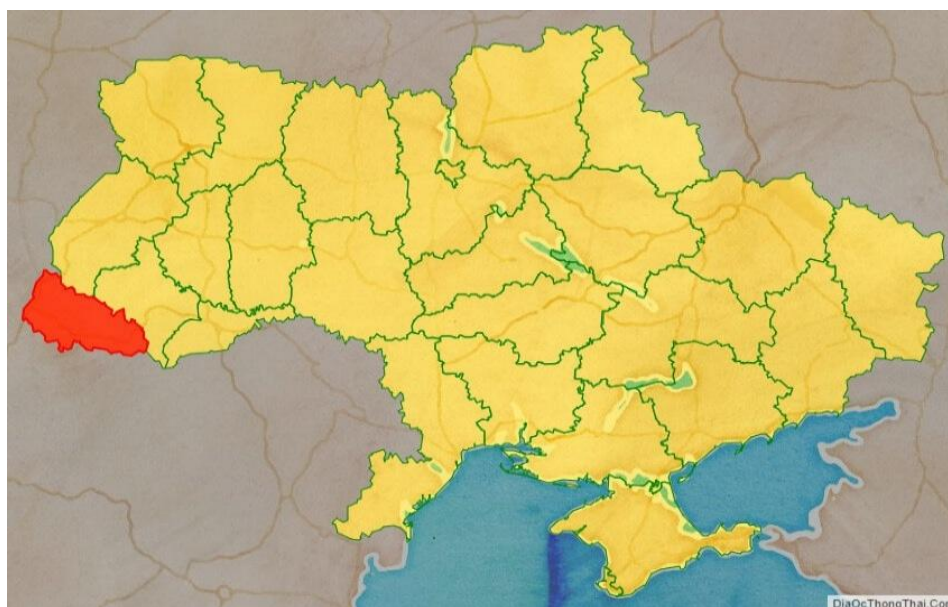
The Antal Hodinka Linguistic Research Centre (https://hodinkaintezet.uz.ua/), a renowned institute in Berehove, Transcarpathia, has been at the forefront of investigating linguistic practices within the Transcarpathian region since the early 21st century (Beregszászi et al., 2003). Their extensive research covers various subfields of linguistics, including dialectology and dialect variation, the social and cultural dimensions of language use, the psychology of language, and how languages interact and influence each other across speakers (cognitive and translingual aspects).

A core focus of the centre's work is the bilingual reality experienced by the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. This comprises exploring the intricate link between educational background and language choice, the use of language in public and official settings, and the relationship between language use, identity, and attitudes towards different languages (Csernicskó, 2017).

The centre has shed light on the fascinating phenomenon of bilingualism in Transcarpathia, examining how speakers integrate elements of both languages, such as the use of loanwords, borrowed vocabulary, and the act of mid-conversation switching between languages (code-switching) (Jessner, 2006). Researchers at the centre have explored several domains in which language use unfolds, including both the public and private spheres (Sütő, 2015), as well as the ever-growing influence of the internet and social media platforms (Márku & Bartha, 2015).

One of the most important takeaways of the research conducted at the centre is to recognize that language choice and use in diverse contexts (private conversations, official matters, doctor's appointments, workplaces, etc.) are influenced not only by legal frameworks but also by the perceived prestige of both the minority and majority languages, along with their significance on a global and regional scale (Csernicskó & Kontra, 2018).

Thus, the primary **purposes** of the present study are to describe the multilingual context in Transcarpathia and understand the specific problems and challenges teachers face when dealing with diverse languages, in order to help all students achieve academic success.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we report on the findings of a study into the challenges that teachers face when teaching multilingual groups of students at a higher educational establishment in Transcarpathia. General research methods (e.g. analysis) were applied.

The mixed-method approach included document analysis and self-observation by teachers. Document analysis was implemented to understand the institutional language policies and their impact on the educational environment. Teacher self-observation was also conducted, particularly in multilingual study groups, to understand language practices in real-time educational settings. These teachers focused on the use of language in different academic disciplines, the role of intermediary languages, and instances of code-switching between Ukrainian, Hungarian, English, and German.

RESULTS

The Ferenc Rakóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education (Figure 2) is a state-recognized private higher education institution in Ukraine with a third degree of accreditation. It was founded in 1996 by the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association and is licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Currently, both full-time and distance learning is offered at all qualification levels. The college offers teaching qualifications as well as degrees in other fields (e.g. accounting and taxation, tourism, translation and interpreting, etc.). The 2024/2025 academic year includes 19 bachelor's degree programs and 11 master's degree programs (https://kmf.uz.ua/uk/).

Figure 2

Main building of Ferenc Rakóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in the centre of Berehove

The college maintains close relations with foreign and Ukrainian higher education institutions and scientific centres. Cooperation agreements have been signed between the college and such establishments as V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", Vadym Hetman Kyiv National Economic University, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, etc. in Ukraine.

It also has contacts and agreements with Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Capital City of Budapest Archives, St. Athanasius Greek-Catholic Theological Institute, Nyíregyháza, Hungarian Museum of Natural History, Budapest, etc. in Hungary, University of Presov, Slovakia, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania, University of Life Sciences, Poznan, Poland, as well as others.

Students[2] successfully participate in so-called dual-degree programs with universities in Hungary, where they obtain both a Ukrainian diploma and an international diploma issued by an EU member state on completion of their studies. Another popular option amongst students is the participation in Erasmus+ exchange programs, where they can apply for scholarships and spend a full semester at a top university in Hungary, Slovakia or Romania.

Institutional Language Policy at the Rákóczi College of Higher Education

As stated in the Charter of Rákóczi College (2022), the languages of instruction are Ukrainian, Hungarian and English. Freedom of choice in the language of instruction is determined by the Law of Ukraine on Higher Education, as set forth in paragraph 4 of Article 48.

This states the following: "Privately owned institutions of higher education have the right to freely choose the language of instruction, which is an official language of the European Union (teaching one, several, or all disciplines, performing individual tasks and

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[2] The term 'students' refers to all those who study at the college. A recent term for people desiring to obtain a degree in Ukrainian Tertiary education is 'education seekers'. In the present article, the two terms are used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people.

conducting control measures), while ensuring study by persons studying at such institutions, the state language as a separate educational discipline" (Pro vyshchu osvitu, 2014; On higher education, 2014).

Thus, the Ukrainian language is on the curriculum for seven semesters for every education seeker (https://kmf.uz.ua/uk/osvitni-programi/):

- a practical Ukrainian language course is taught to first- and second-year students (2 hours per week);

- a professional Ukrainian language course, specific to the degree program, is taught to third-year students (4 hours per week);

- "Ukrainian language for professional communication" is taught to fourth-year students in the first semester (4 hours per week).

Among the education seekers at the college, there are students with Hungarian or Ukrainian as their mother tongue. These students attended schools with either Hungarian (in Transcarpathia) (cf. Negre, 2015) or Ukrainian (including regions of Ukraine such as Lviv, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Dnipro, etc.) as the language of instruction. For this reason, parallel groups for studying general subjects in Hungarian as well as Ukrainian are organized at the college (for example, "Pedagogy", "Psychology", "History of Ukraine", etc.).

The following teaching system is practised: if lectures are held in one language, the practical classes are held in the other language and vice versa. This system promotes a deeper acquisition of the teaching material and mastery of the relevant terminology in the official state language, or Hungarian language.

All students are offered the opportunity to learn Ukrainian (as well as other languages such as English, German, Hungarian, Slovak and French) in courses organized by the college, which are free of charge for both students and teachers. In addition, students whose native language is Ukrainian are given the opportunity to learn Hungarian as a foreign language. They can also participate in intensive programs at summer schools held at the University of Debrecen and Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) in Hungary to study Hungarian language and culture. All programs are free of charge.

Education seekers whose native language is Ukrainian have the right to write tests, examination papers, seminar papers, bachelor's and master's theses in the language of their choice for the duration of their studies. They may also take exams and tests in their native language. In addition, they are allowed to write assignments or reports in their native language during practical, seminar or laboratory classes. This does not pose a challenge for tutors at the college, as all staff members are bi- or multilingual.

Presentation of the Department of Philology (English Language and Literature Section)

The college has seven departments, one of which is the Department of Philology. This department comprises three sub-departments: English Language and Literature, Hungarian Language and Literature and Ukrainian Language and Literature.

Students can choose between six bachelor's degrees: Teacher of English/Hungarian/Ukrainian Language and Literature or Translator and Interpreter of English-Hungarian, English-German and Ukrainian-Hungarian. At postgraduate level,

there are three master's programs: English Studies, Hungarian Studies and Ukrainian Studies, each with different specializations.

The past two or three years have seen an increase in the number of multilingual students with Ukrainian as their native language who have enrolled in a study program offered by this department. We consider that this growth can be explained by factors directly and indirectly impacting applicants' choices of an educational program. The former corresponds to the launch of three new translation and interpreting programs, while the latter is a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war itself: young people have been forced to move from the east of the country, to the west, e.g. to Transcarpathia, because it is relatively more peaceful than any other region of the country at present.

The key disciplines taught at the English Language and Literature sub-department of the Department of Philology in English (Huszti et al., 2021) are the following:

– Practical English

– Developing writing skills

– Morphology and syntax of English

– Phonetics and phonology of the English language

– History of the English language

– British and American literature

– British and American country studies

– Methodology of teaching English language and literature

– Introduction to translation studies, etc.

DISCUSSION

Challenges and tasks in teaching students in multilingual study groups

Contemporary higher education, especially in regions with a diversity of languages, poses unique teaching challenges for educators. This study examines the complexities of teaching students from different linguistic backgrounds at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Ukraine. Located in a region with multiple languages, the college has a student body consisting of native Ukrainian speakers, Hungarian speakers, and individuals from other linguistic and cultural groups, creating a dynamic and multifaceted learning environment.

Our teaching has been significantly influenced by the events of the past years. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact, necessitating a rapid and unforeseen transition to online learning modalities from classroom-based teaching, in order to prevent the rapid spread of the disease, which presented numerous challenges for both faculty members and students (Huszti et al., 2022; Lechner et al., 2022).

While these challenges were not exclusive to our institution and broader context (Bacsa-Bán, 2022; Boyko et al., 2021; Tanasijević & Janković, 2021; Tankó, 2021), they underscored the need for pedagogical innovation, the development of robust online learning platforms, and the provision of adequate technological support for both teachers and education seekers (Opanasenko & Novikova, 2022). The abrupt shift to remote learning

highlighted the importance of digital literacy and the effective utilization of online learning tools, such as learning management systems, video conferencing platforms, and online collaborative tools, to maintain the continuity of the educational process.

Then came February 2024 2022, a dark day that changed our daily lives indefinitely. Once again, the teaching process moved online, but this time for a couple of months only, at our college. Due to the relative geographical safety of Transcarpathia (the region has not witnessed direct participation in hostilities to date), traditional face-to-face teaching was resumed in September, 2022 and has continued up to the present. While this return to face-to-face instruction mitigated the logistical and technological limitations of online learning, it also presented new challenges, such as ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of students and faculty members amidst the ongoing conflict.

However, a recent study by Holubnycha, Shchokina & Soroka (2024) made the teaching and research community contemplate the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face versus online teaching. Their research emphasizes the potential benefits of online learning modalities in terms of student learning outcomes and the quality of the educational experience.

The research findings suggest that online or digital learning has far more benefits for students in terms of learning outcomes and the quality of teaching and learning than offline or face-to-face teaching. Their results prove that the benefits of online teaching outweigh those of offline teaching. However, they advise caution, and acknowledge that further investigation of the problem analysis is needed to definitively determine which educational format is of higher and better quality.

Within the Department of Philology (English Language and Literature sub-department) at our college, core English language courses are conducted primarily in English. However, in recognition of the linguistic diversity of the student body, instructors frequently incorporate explanations and clarifications in Hungarian and/or Ukrainian, particularly when addressing complex grammatical concepts or introducing new vocabulary. This multilingual approach aims to enhance student comprehension, facilitate deeper engagement with the subject matter, and create a more inclusive learning environment for every student.

 A key pedagogical objective within the department is to cultivate multilingual competence among students by fostering proficiency in the terminology of their particular disciplines in English, Hungarian, and Ukrainian. Each student should be familiar with the relevant terms in their field of interest, in all three languages.

This trilingual approach is not merely a linguistic exercise, but a calculated strategy to enhance the employability of graduates in the increasingly globalized and interconnected job market. Developing proficiency in multiple languages is believed to grant students a competitive advantage in the professional world, enabling them to communicate more effectively with diverse stakeholders, access a wider range of information resources, and navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected global society.

In the first years of study, instructors frequently utilize students' native languages to facilitate understanding and ensure effective knowledge transfer. As students' progress through the curriculum and develop advanced English language proficiency, the

reliance on native language support gradually diminishes. Nevertheless, teaching multilingual students presents a unique set of pedagogical challenges that require careful attention and proactive planning. These include differentiated instruction, language of instruction, using intermediary languages, cultural sensitivity, resource availability, etc. (Amin et al., 2024).

To ensure varying levels of proficiency in Ukrainian, Hungarian, and English within the same classroom can be demanding. Teachers need to find the means to present information in multiple ways (visuals, hands-on activities, etc.) and provide individualized support. While the officially taught languages at the college are Ukrainian, Hungarian, and English, effectively communicating and ensuring comprehension across these languages can be challenging.

Determining the most appropriate and effective intermediary language for instruction (e.g., English for German instruction) can vary depending on student background and the specific subject matter. Recognizing and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of students is crucial. This includes understanding how cultural norms and values might influence learning styles and communication. The limited access to appropriate learning materials, such as textbooks and online resources, in all the relevant languages can also cause further problems for educators and education seekers.

Intermediary language(s) in foreign language teaching

− Students frequently code-switch in our classrooms. It is a natural linguistic phenomenon as described in the study of a similar multilingual context to our own (Tódor, 201). Therefore, awareness of the mother tongue and precise knowledge of the systems of the students' mother tongues is a significant advantage for teachers working with students with different native languages. This can be beneficial for both parties as it can foster understanding between them and mitigate misunderstandings, as instructors can very often anticipate potential areas of difficulty and provide targeted support.

− With regard to grammatical terminology, the language of instruction at school plays a decisive role. Our experience demonstrates that education seekers tend to grasp grammatical concepts more readily when they are presented in the language in which they were initially introduced.

− When learning German as a second foreign language, English often serves as an effective intermediary language because it can save time. English major students can understand and assimilate a German structure if it is compared to a similar grammatical phenomenon in English. For example, instructors can explain the concept of grammatical gender in German by drawing parallels with the concept of gender in English nouns.

− Knowledge of several languages is an advantage – instructors choose the explanation based on the language that is most similar to the linguistic phenomenon in question (e.g. German-Ukrainian: grammatical gender; English-German: use of the verbs 'have' and 'be', English-Hungarian: the use of articles, etc.).

Thus, it is of utmost importance that the teaching staff master several languages at a high level in order to ensure effective and inclusive instruction in this diverse learning environment.

Language use outside the class: Digital communication tools

1. The college utilizes a comprehensive email system for communication between faculty members and students. Google Classroom serves as the primary learning management system, facilitating the dissemination of course materials, the submission of assignments, and the facilitation of student-teacher interaction.

    However, students also have the option of contacting instructors directly via their official email addresses for personal or academic matters. The choice of language in these written communication channels varies depending on individual student preferences and language proficiency. Students typically opt to communicate in English when they feel confident in their abilities. Otherwise, they tend to choose the language in which they feel most comfortable writing.

2. On Google Classroom discussion boards, where all members can view and respond to each other's comments, students are encouraged to express their ideas in English whenever possible. This encourages them to practise their English language skills in a collaborative and supportive environment.

3. In oral communication, students generally demonstrate respect for the instructors' native languages, often choosing to communicate in the instructor's preferred language if they possess proficiency in that language. However, in written communication, the same students tend to address teachers in either Ukrainian or English.

In conclusion, teaching in a multilingual environment presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Adopting a student-centred approach, cultivating a culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environment, and effectively utilizing diverse pedagogical strategies, such as the strategic use of intermediary languages and digital communication tools, can help educators create a dynamic and enriching learning experience for all students.

CONCLUSIONS

Transcarpathia, a region renowned for its vibrant linguistic and cultural diversity, exemplifies the multifaceted nature of human communication where people commonly use multiple languages in their everyday life. The Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education serves as a dynamic hub, providing an enriching environment that fosters the acquisition and utilization of multiple languages within its student body.

The college's unique approach to education, characterized by its inherent multilingualism, not only cultivates linguistic proficiency but also promotes a deep appreciation for diversity and a spirit of mutual understanding amongst students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The strategic integration of intermediary languages within the foreign language curriculum underscores the intricate interconnectedness of languages and emphasizes the paramount importance of multilingual competence amongst the teaching faculty.

This study offers invaluable insights into the intricate interplay between language, culture, and individual identity within a multifaceted and multicultural context. The diverse student body, comprising individuals of various nationalities, organically fosters

a vibrant and inclusive community where students learn in cooperation with one another, cultivating a profound respect for the unique perspectives and experiences of their peers. This harmonious coexistence serves to strengthen the bonds of mutual tolerance and understanding.

The teaching staff, being multilingual themselves, is uniquely positioned to effectively address the diverse linguistic needs of the student body. Moreover, they have established a commendable objective to equip and inspire future educators to effectively benefit from their own linguistic repertoire, thereby providing invaluable support to their students in their individual process of foreign language acquisition.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

FUNDING

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