

Research in the Grisons

**Language learning at school**

“Learning a language should have a connection to everyday life”



*Children begin their first foreign language with great motivation. Photo credit: D. Rupa*

Italian, German, Romansh, English, French - what memories do you have of foreign language lessons during your school years? A research team from the Graubünden University of Teacher Education (Pädagogische Hochschule Graubünden - PHGR) is investigating this question. The team, led by Vincenzo Todisco, Andreas Imhof and Valeria Manna, collected and evaluated the experiences of 125 PHGR students during their primary school and high school careers. Manna reports, “The project was developed as part of the ‘Fundamentals of Multilingualism’ teaching module. One task of the module is for students to write their own language learning biographies. We noticed that these biographies form a huge wealth of experience that is lying dormant. This led to the idea in 2017 to scientifically evaluate the language learning biographies of a cohort.”

Todisco explains the approach: “The project is part of the large project ‘Center for the Didactics of Italian Language and Literature’, which was already awarded to us in 2016 together with the University of Italian Switzerland (Lugano) and the Department of Formation and Learning of SUPSI (Locarno) by swissuniversities, the umbrella organization of Swiss universities. Our research interest is to find out how students experienced foreign language teaching from a didactic point of view, i.e., the way language is taught in school. Students had one semester to

write their language learning biographies using the guiding questions. To assess the language learning biographies, we decided to use a structuring content analysis. To do this, we coded text passages and assigned them to different categories in a database. Flurina Kaufmann and Ivana Vezzola helped process the 1'000+ pages and the partly multilingual texts. It was also important, because there were five of us involved, to make the respective categories and the assignment of each text passage as objective as possible.”

Todisco summarizes, “Students clearly remember communicative foreign language teaching, but seasoned with an impressive number of structuralist elements, for example, vocabulary and grammar learning. The teaching was greatly influenced by the teaching materials. Another issue was the role of the teacher. If the teacher was engaged and had a good command of the foreign language, the experience was very positive. Children start their first foreign language with great motivation. The teacher’s job is to keep this motivation alive for as long as possible. It is important to know how children perceive foreign language teaching in elementary school: Please, not too formalistic and too much vocabulary without context. It was also expressed that foreign language lessons were always fun when they noticed that what was learned had a connection to everyday life. For example, language exchanges with other classes were very much appreciated. We can use these results very well to further develop our foreign language teaching concept at PHGR.”

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The University of Teacher Education Graubünden (Pädagogische Hochschule Graubünden – PHGR) trains future teachers in a degree program for kindergarten and elementary school that qualifies them for the profession. As a trilingual university, it values its linguistic diversity (German, Romansh and Italian). [www.phgr.ch](http://www.phgr.ch)

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*Daniela Heinen*