

PLURILINGUAL
EDUCATION IN THE
CLASSROOM
– the contribution
of the European
Centre for Modern
Languages

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Introduction

In this article I will try to explain a number of different aspects of plurilingual education, to describe the contribution of the Council of Europe and the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML)¹ to its development and to provide some ideas on how these resources can be used in the classroom.

The ECML is an institution of the Council of Europe whose mission is to encourage excellence and innovation in language learning and teaching. In its four-year programmes, there are projects which carry out research and development and produce practical resources which helps schools, teachers and teacher educators carry out the language policies of the Council of Europe

¹ For information about the ECML and links to all the resources it provides for language education, visit the website www.ecml.at

An example from the European Centre for Modern Languages

This is an extract from a bank of sample lesson plans in a project which encourages plurilingual approaches to language teaching

Talking about fairy tales in different languages

1. The first section is named 'Working with the five senses and collecting descriptive adjectives using pictures and images'. The teacher tells a story about a troll s/he met in Norway. The pupils are asked to continue the story and find out about which adjectives were used to describe it. Then they are asked whether they know about something similar in Sweden or other cultures they know and create their own troll in groups. Afterwards, every group describes their troll with words in many different languages. The words should be adjectives related to the five senses. The pupils are then asked to look for similarities between the words in different languages. For homework, they prepare a presentation of the characters of their own favourite fairy. They make the presentation in their L1.

2. After the presentations, the pupils write down their fairy tales in their own language and in English. Herewith, they create a book with fairy tales in different languages and from different cultures with a list of words and descriptions of them.

3. In the following section, the pupils work with the nature and setting of fairy tales. The homework consists of asking the parents for pictures of their home country's nature. They should describe the picture in their L1 and in English using the five senses.

4. The last section provides guidelines for writing fairy tales and for presenting them. The pupils are now invited to write their own fairy tale. The teacher presents them with a list of strategies that are useful for writing a fairy tale. Examples are provided in Norwegian and Swedish. At last, the pupils evaluate the activity by answering questions about what they learnt and what they liked.

This plurilingual comparison of fairy tales combining work in a number of languages, demanding creative input from the learners, and involving parents in the work is one of the many classroom activities contained in the resources developed by the ECML. It is from FREPA, a Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches.² In the next section I will explain the educational and pedagogical justification for this kind of activity, in which several languages are used and the learners are encouraged explicitly to compare languages. It contrasts with some of the traditional approaches to foreign language learning, where the use of the mother tongue is discouraged.

² www.ecml.at/carap

Why is plurilingual education important?

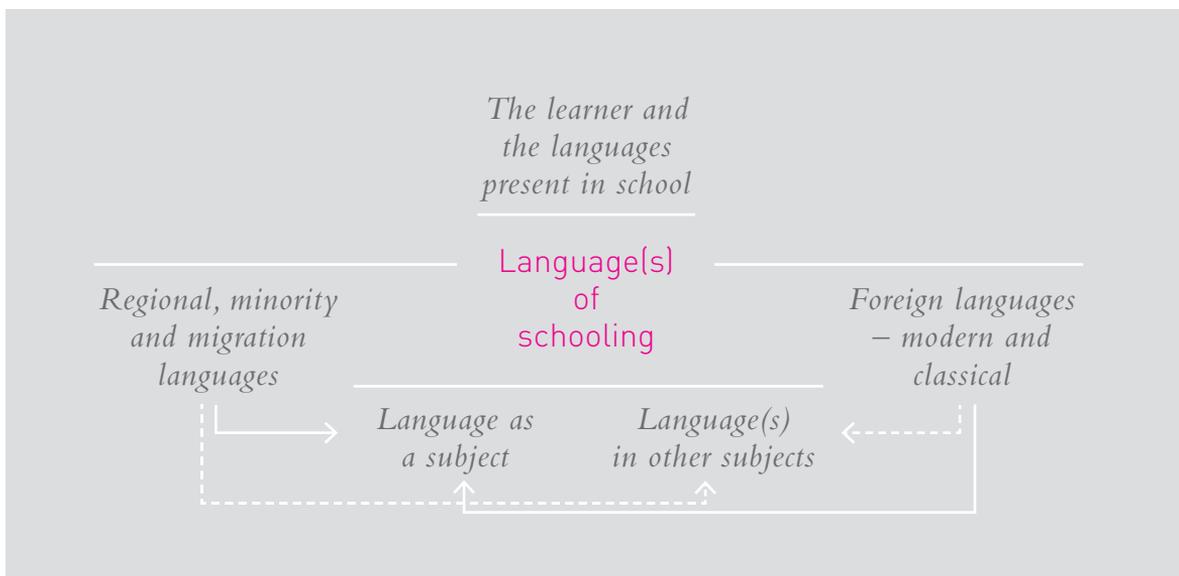
At the base of the movement for plurilingual education are a number of political aims and convictions. These include a commitment to preserving Europe's **linguistic diversity**. This commitment was not a foregone conclusion; it would have been possible (and cheaper) to decide to use one language (say English) as a lingua franca, but the defence of all Europe's languages, including regional and minority languages, is an essential part of keeping and creating a distinct European culture. Various decisions of the Councils of Ministers have fixed the objective of a European citizen having a minimum of *L1 plus 2* – their own language, a widely spoken European language – English, French, Spanish, German or Russian – plus a less widely spoken one, perhaps that of a neighbouring country.

In 2007 a document from the Council of Europe's Policy Unit stated that *“**Plurilingual education** (is)... not necessarily restricted to language teaching, which aims to raise awareness of each individual's language repertoire, to emphasise its worth and to extend this repertoire by teaching lesser used or unfamiliar languages. Plurilingual education also aims to increase understanding of the social and cultural value of linguistic diversity in order to ensure linguistic goodwill and to develop intercultural competence.”*

The presence of large numbers of migrants and refugees in many European countries means that in our classrooms there is much more linguistic diversity than in previous times, and it is important for **social cohesion** that the languages of all the children should be valued and not excluded.

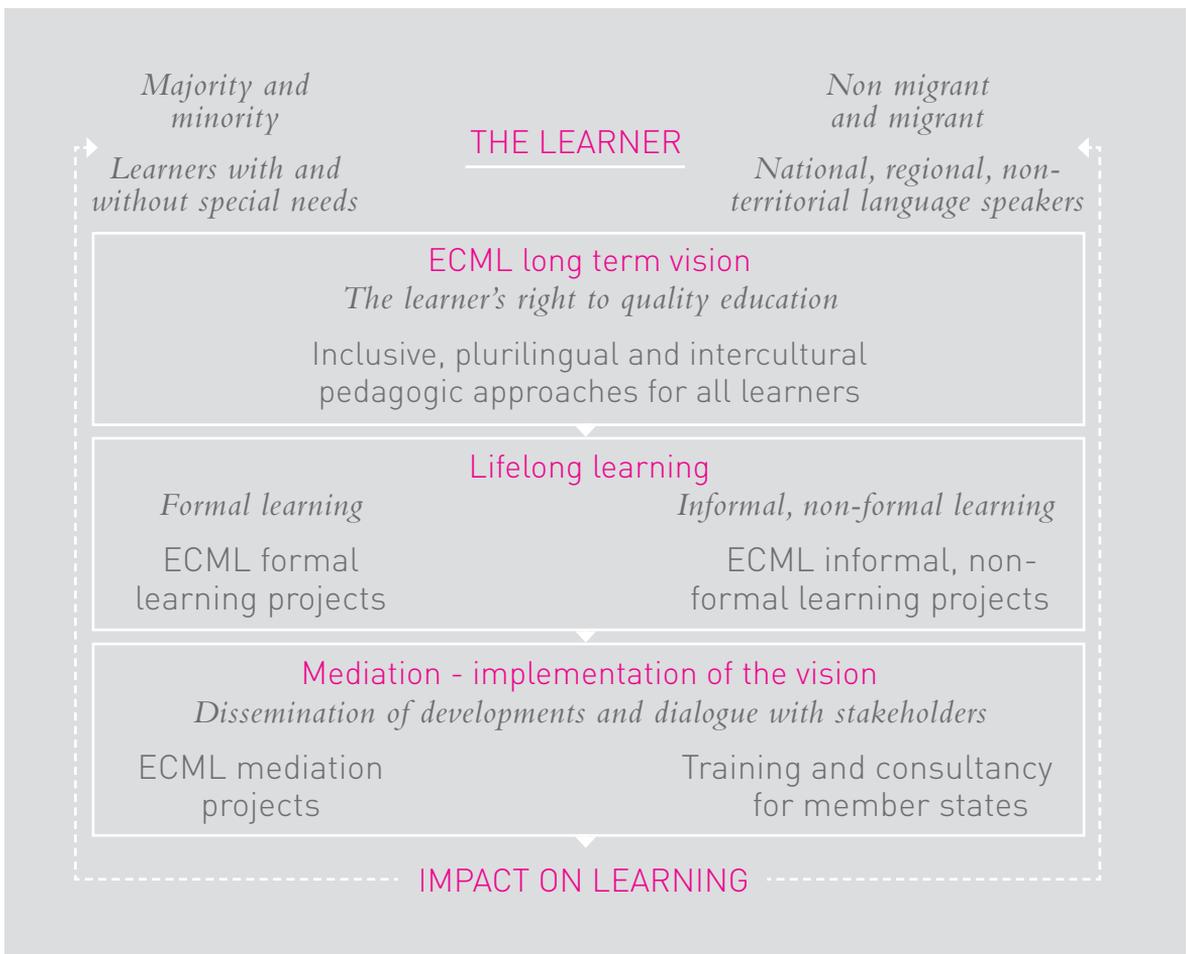
The development and practice of plurilingual education is one of the Council of Europe’s and the ECML’s most important priorities. Europe is **multilingual**³ and in order to fulfil its social and cultural aims, it seeks to provide education adapted to the needs of **plurilingual** citizens. It does so in order to promote and support access to quality education for all.

The Council of Europe has a **holistic** approach to language education and considers that language education is concerned with **all** the languages present in the school. The diagram below shows how they are all interlinked:



³ The Council of Europe distinguishes **multilingual** – describing a situation where two or more languages are present (« Switzerland is a **multilingual** country ») and **plurilingual** – denoting a person’s use or ability in several languages (« she’s **plurilingual**, and speaks French, Russian and Polish »)

A second chart shows how these languages fit into a coherent policy for the development of language education:



What do we mean by plurilingual education?

How are these political aims put into practice? Plurilingual education has two major aspects – education **for** plurilingualism and education **through** plurilingualism. Understanding and experiencing the diversity of languages and cultures is both an aim of and a resource for quality education.

Its practice is based on a number of key concepts:

- A holistic view of languages in education – rather than considering each language as a separate entity, each in its own compartment, there is a global approach to all the languages present in learning environments. They include the « language of schooling » which is usually the national language of the country or region; languages spoken at home by the learners, which are frequently not the same; foreign languages learnt as subjects in the school and in some cases classical languages like Latin and Greek as well as the languages used to teach different subject areas in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approaches. Common strategies and plural complementary approaches can result in more effective language learning.
- Linguistic repertoires and partial competences – individual learners develop their own « repertoires » of the different languages they know and use. The competences acquired in one language can be of use in learning another one and there is complementarity and interplay among the languages known. Our competence in a language is always « partial » and our

repertoires consist of a number of partial competences in different languages. The individual languages are not isolated skills – each language we know influences the way we use the others.

- Bi- and plurilingualism are « normal » and achievable by all – more than half the population of the world is bi- or plurilingual, so establishing education systems which promote it is a feasible aim.
- Cognitive benefits of plurilingual education – there is strong research evidence of the cognitive benefits in being plurilingual and from plurilingual approaches to education, particularly where tasks requiring intellectual flexibility are concerned.
- Plurilingual approaches contribute to social integration – acknowledging and valuing the home languages and cultures of migrants help their integration into schools and society; and plural approaches encourage the development of openness, respect and intercultural competences in all learners. This in turn can contribute to more harmony in our schools and our society.
- Plurilingual competences are empowering for all learners – they are better prepared for employment, for further study, for effective additional language learning and for citizenship.

These key concepts are at different levels of generality and complexity. Some relate to the educational outcomes, others to the educational process itself. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) points out that the implementation of plurilingual education has a profound impact on language education by moving away from the ideal of “mastering” a foreign language to the perspective of developing each learner’s unique

individual linguistic abilities and competences, with different degrees of proficiency and adapted to different contexts (home, school, public, private, professional, etc.).

How ECML projects contribute to plurilingual education

Theoretical frameworks

The FREPA project⁴ A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures provides a comprehensive description of the knowledge, attitudes and skills which constitute plurilingual and pluricultural competences. Like the Common European Framework, it describes the skills in « can do » statements – « can identify / compare / analyse etc. » and breaks new ground in the descriptors of attitudes – as « will / disposition / determination ».

Here is an example of skill descriptors which show how language knowledge can be transferred from one language to another:

Skill 5 Can use knowledge and skills already mastered in one language in activities of comprehension or production in another language

Skill 5.1 Can construct a set of hypotheses or a “hypothetical grammar” about affinities or differences between languages

⁴ www.ecml.at/carap

Skill 5.3 Can make interlingual transfers from a known language to an unfamiliar one e.g.

- transfers of recognition (i.e. which establish a link between an identified feature of a known language and a feature one seeks to identify in an unfamiliar language)
- transfers of production (i.e. an activity of language production in an unfamiliar language)

In the teaching learning materials which are part of FREPA there are activities (to be found in a data bank in the project website) allowing learners to acquire and practise these skills. FREPA also describes three key didactic approaches to plurilingual education:

- Integrated didactics – in which the teaching of different foreign languages complement each other, by using links and similarities between them in an explicit way to help learning. An earlier ECML publication *Learning more than one language efficiently: Tertiary language teaching and learning in Europe*⁵ exemplifies this approach, especially on how the learning of German can be helped by using previous study of English as a springboard.
- Awakening to languages – this approach is designed to raise learners', especially young learners' awareness of the diversity of languages in their homes, schools and societies. In this approach several languages are introduced in order to encourage thinking about language and to give value to the different languages present in the school.

⁵ <http://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLPublications/tabid/277/Author/Hufeisen/OrderBy/Published%20DESC/PageSize/20/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

- Intercomprehension between related languages is based on developing comprehension within families of languages. For example, courses have been devised where students work in parallel on several Romance, Slav, Germanic or Scandinavian languages. These courses tend to concentrate on learning receptive skills.

In order to help teachers put these approaches into practice, the FREPA project team has created a bank of resources and teaching materials in a data base linked to the descriptors in the frame of reference.

There are theoretical frameworks for other aspects of plurilingual education too, such as the Framework for CLIL⁶

Specific domains of plurilingual education

The Language of Schooling

Two projects (called *Marille* and *Maledive*⁷) have addressed the issue of how plurilingual education can have an impact on the teaching of the language of schooling (French as a school subject in French-speaking countries and regions, Danish in Denmark etc.). Although the language is the national or regional language, in most classes in Europe there are students for whom it is not the first language or mother tongue. The projects explore ways in which plurilingual and intercultural approaches can contribute to enriching the appreciation of the national/regional language and literature and to the integration of all the learners in the class.

⁶ <http://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLPublications/tabid/277/Title/Framework%20CLIL/OrderBy/Published%20DESC/PageSize/20/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

⁷ <http://www.ecml.at/maledive>

The Marille project developed a questionnaire to prompt teachers of the language of schooling (i.e. French as a school subject in France) to reflect on their approach to plurilingual teaching:

- Do I have a plurilingual class? Which languages are spoken in my class? What are the first languages (mother tongues), heritage languages, home languages, additional languages or varieties/dialects?
- If none are present, how can I encourage the learners to look around and find out which languages or language forms are spoken in their environment?
- What do I know about those languages and cultures? How can I learn more about them? Do I have personal resources such as a language repertoire that I can exploit for promoting plurilingualism?
- Am I aware of my learners' emotional and social backgrounds? Can I establish co-operative networks with social workers and guidance teachers/psychological counsellors?
- What skills do I need in order to bring learners' language repertoires into the classroom? How can I acquire them?
- What do I know about teaching languages, bilingualism, plurilingualism or intercultural education? How can I improve my knowledge? (Language teachers)
- What methods and strategies are available for my subject in order for me to bring the learners' language repertoires into the classroom? How can I find out about them? (Subject teachers)
- Who else in the school is interested in implementing plurilingual education in the majority language? Are there possibilities for co-operation/team work/cross-curricular projects?

- Is there any teaching material and how can I find out about it and get it? Do I have to produce my own material? Can anybody help with producing materials?
- How am I going to evaluate what I have achieved? Is it possible to focus on the learners' learning process instead of learning outcomes/products? Do I act as a „reflective practitioner“ and can I cooperate with universities or other training/research institutions to establish action research activities?

Learners from migrant backgrounds need particular support in developing academic literacy to be able to cope with cognitive tasks in different subject areas. A further project on the language of schooling, the Language Descriptors project⁸ has produced can do statements for the specific skills used by those studying history or mathematics in a second language. Here is an example of how language skills are important in mathematics:

To illustrate the potential role of language in mathematics, let us consider an example from the mathematics classroom. If students are expected to read a graph and communicate the key information included in this graph, teachers need to equip their learners with the linguistic tools necessary to perform this function (for example, “This graph tells me that 60 percent of girls prefer basketball”; “I can see in this graph that 10 percent of boys prefer hockey”).

Being cognisant of the language required to express certain ideas reminds content teachers to provide language models for learners to follow.

⁸ www.ecml.at/language-descriptors

Content and Language in Language Education (CLIL)

In more and more countries, especially at secondary levels, students study a number of subjects in a second or foreign language using CLIL approaches. A number of ECML projects have produced guides for implementing CLIL in language education. They include “CLIL-LOTE-START Content and language integrated learning through languages other than English”⁹ a practical guide to getting started with CLIL programmes and for their further development a further publication in French “*Enseigner une discipline dans une autre langue – Méthodologie et pratiques professionnelles*”¹⁰ where the methodological skills needed by CLIL teachers are described and illustrated.

A further project, A pluriliteracy approach to the learning of languages¹¹ links plurilingual approaches and the development of literacy. Here is a short description of the principles behind the approach:

A pluriliteracies approach acknowledges that learning a subject is about so much more than “simply” learning content. It is based on the idea that education is a developmental activity. Therefore, learning a subject is not about reciting facts but about deepening our learners’ conceptual understanding which may eventually lead to the development of transferable skills and to new ways of thinking.

We know now that language is the key to developing and increasing conceptual understanding. It is this focus on language that will ultimately lead to deeper learning which can be defined as the ability to take what was learned in one situation and apply it to another situation. Through deeper learning (which often involves shared learning and interactions with others in a learning community), learners develop expertise in a particular subject and master its unique ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

⁹ <http://clil-lote-start.ecml.at/>

¹⁰ <http://clil-lote-go.ecml.at/>

¹¹ <http://pluriliteracies.ecml.at/en-us/>

Helping our students become pluriliterate (= acquiring subject literacy in more than one language) will empower them to construct and communicate knowledge purposefully and successfully across languages and cultures and prepare them for living and working in the Knowledge Age.

The development of whole school approaches to language education is another important factor in promoting plurilingual education; creating synergies between the teaching and learning of the national/regional language, the different foreign languages and the other languages present in schools, raises awareness of plurilingualism and practical opportunities for students to develop their plurilingual repertoires. The *PlurCur* project¹² explores different ways in which this can be achieved – at school, department and regional levels.

A further element in the promotion of plurilingual education and linguistic diversity relates to the encouragement of the learning of regional and local languages. An ECML project, *Minority languages, collateral languages and bi-/plurilingual education (EBP-ICI)*¹³ describes a number of approaches to doing this for a variety of languages – among them Provençal French, Scots and Catalan.

Resources for plurilingual education

A number of different ECML projects provide ideas and resources for plurilingual and intercultural teaching activities. In addition to the *CARAP/ FREPA* data bank mentioned above, other resources include *Conbat – Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in content-based teaching: A training kit*¹⁴ which offers a bank of teaching materials for teaching

¹² <http://clil-lote-start.ecml.at/>

¹³ <http://ebp-ici.ecml.at/>

¹⁴ <http://clil-lote-go.ecml.at/>

activities which encourage the use of the different languages and culture present in classrooms with large numbers of migrant children, together with a training kit and guidance on how to use the materials. It places a special emphasis on intercultural understanding as an essential feature of plurilingual teaching and learning. Here is an example of an activity which can be used with both teachers and learners:

Culture awareness and development of pluricultural competence

Activity 1: the definition of culture

Duration: one hour

Materials required: paper and pins

Prepare a poster with your own definition of culture. Do not look it up in any book.

Hang each poster on the wall so that everyone can read and compare them. Look for similarities and differences.

In pairs, first, and then in small groups (four-six people), build a “shared” folk definition of culture.

Finally, try to write a large group definition.

With that group definition in mind, check if these statements are included in your definition:

- culture is a way of life;
- culture comprises traditions and customs;
- culture is the behaviour of a group;
- culture comprises the main features of a society;
- culture is the knowledge one must learn to belong to a society.

Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education of the Council of Europe

The work of the ECML in the area of plurilingual and intercultural education complements a major initiative of the Council of Europe concerned with the language of schooling and provides many documents concerned with plurilingual approaches.¹⁵

The Platform is “an instrument to enhance coherence and transparency in reflection and decision making on policies and standards, at both national and at European level. It addresses aims, outcomes, contents, methods and approaches to evaluation of the language of schooling, taking into account the needs of all students in compulsory education, including disadvantaged learners and migrant children.” It contains of the theoretical studies which underpin plurilingual education and a series of studies of the language characteristics of subject areas.

Conclusion

In this brief paper I have tried to give you an idea of the issues involved in applying plurilingual approaches to language education and at the same time to show how the resources developed by the ECML can help you to put them into practice in the classroom and in your professional development.

¹⁵ <http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/lea/results/>

List of links to websites for the projects mentioned in the article

All the sites can be reached through the main ECML Internet link:

www.ecml.at

FREPA, a Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches

www.ecml.at/carap

Tertiary language teaching and learning in Europe

<http://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLPublications/tabid/277/Author/Hufeisen/OrderBy/Published%20DESC/PageSize/20/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

Framework for CLIL

<http://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLPublications/tabid/277/Title/FRamework%20CLIL/OrderBy/Published%20DESC/PageSize/20/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

The Language Descriptors project

www.ecml.at/language-descriptors

Enseigner une discipline dans une autre langue – Méthodologie et pratiques professionnelles

<http://clil-lote-go.ecml.at/>

A pluriliteracy approach to the learning of languages

<http://pluriliteracies.ecml.at/en-us/>

The PlurCur project

www.ecml.at/plurcur

CLIL-LOTE-START – Content and language integrated learning through languages other than English

<http://clil-lote-start.ecml.at/>

Minority languages, collateral languages and bi-/plurilingual education (EBP-ICI)
<http://ebp-ici.ecml.at/>

Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in content-based teaching: A training kit
<http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/lea/results/>

Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education
of the Council of Europe
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Schoollang_EN.asp