

THE CEFR COMPANION VOLUME: A KEY RESOURCE FOR INCLUSIVE PLURILINGUAL EDUCATION

2021 Webinar Series

Webinar 4: June 4th, 16.00 CET

Developing plurilingualism in the classroom: From reflection to action

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Background reading

To be read before or after the webinar.

There are three short recommended readings in this document:

- Section 2.3 from the CEFR Companion Volume on plurilingualism (2 pages)
- A chapter from my guide for teachers on the action-oriented approach (3 pages)
- A more theoretical text on plurilingualism (2 pages)

2.3. PLURILINGUAL AND PLURICULTURAL COMPETENCE

The CEFR distinguishes between multilingualism (the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level) and plurilingualism (the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner). Plurilingualism is presented in the CEFR as an uneven and changing competence, in which the user/learner's resources in one language or variety may be very different in nature from their resources in another. However, the fundamental point is that plurilinguals have a *single*, interrelated, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks (CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.2).

Plurilingual competence as explained in the CEFR 2001 Section 1.3 involves the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to:

- switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another;
- express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another;
- call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text;
- recognise words from a common international store in a new guise;
- mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even if possessing only a slight knowledge oneself;
- bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression;
- exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.).

The linked concepts of plurilingualism/pluriculturalism and partial competences were introduced to language education for the first time in the second provisional version of the CEFR in 1996. They were developed as a form of dynamic, creative process of "languaging" across the boundaries of language varieties, as a methodology and as language policy aims. The background to this development was a series of studies in bilingualism in the early 1990s at the research centre CREDIF (*Centre de recherche et d'étude pour la diffusion du français*) in Paris. The curriculum examples given in CEFR 2001 Chapter 8 consciously promoted the concepts of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. These two concepts appeared in a more elaborated form in 1997 in the paper "[Plurilingual and pluricultural competence](#)".

Mediation between individuals with no common language is one of the activities in the list above. Because of the plurilingual nature of such mediation, descriptors were also developed and validated for the other points in the above list during the 2014-17 project to develop descriptors for mediation. This was successful except in respect of the last point (paralinguistics): unfortunately, informants could not agree on its relevance or interpret descriptors consistently. At the time that the CEFR 2001 was published, the concepts discussed in this section, especially the idea of a holistic, interrelated plurilingual repertoire, were innovative. However, that idea has since been supported by psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research in relation to both people who learn an additional language early in life and those who learn later, with stronger integration

By a curious coincidence, 1996 was also the year in which the term “translanguaging” was first recorded (in relation to bilingual teaching in Wales). Translanguaging is an action undertaken by plurilingual persons, where more than one language may be involved. A host of similar expressions now exist, but all are encompassed by the term plurilingualism.

Plurilingualism can in fact be considered from various perspectives: as a sociological or historical fact, as a personal characteristic or ambition, as an educational philosophy or approach, or – fundamentally – as the sociopolitical aim of preserving linguistic diversity. All these perspectives are increasingly common across Europe.

for the former. Plurilingualism has also been shown to result in a number of cognitive advantages, due to an enhanced executive control system in the brain (that is the ability to divert attention from distractors in task performance).

Most of the references to plurilingualism in the CEFR are to “plurilingual and pluricultural competence”. This is because the two aspects usually go hand-in-hand. Having said that, one form of unevenness may actually be that one aspect (for example, pluricultural competence) is much stronger than the other (for example, plurilingual competence; see CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.1).

One of the reasons for promoting the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism is that experience of them:

- “exploits pre-existing *sociolinguistic* and *pragmatic competences* which in turn develops them further;
- leads to a better perception of what is general and what is specific concerning the linguistic organisation of different languages (form of metalinguistic, interlinguistic or so to speak “hyperlinguistic” awareness);
- by its nature refines knowledge of how to learn and the capacity to enter into relations with others and new situations. It may, therefore, to some degree accelerate subsequent learning in the linguistic and cultural areas.” (CEFR 2001 Section 6.1.3.3)

Neither pluriculturalism nor the notion of intercultural competence – referred to briefly in CEFR 2001 Sections 5.1.1.3 and 5.1.2.2 – is highly developed in the CEFR book. The implications of plurilingualism and intercultural competence for curriculum design in relation to the CEFR are outlined in the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education*. In addition, a detailed taxonomy of aspects of plurilingual and pluricultural competence relevant to pluralistic approaches is available in the ECML’s *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures (FREPA/CARAP)*.



**From
Communicative
to Action-Oriented:
A RESEARCH PATHWAY**

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Chapter 6. Language Diversity, Linguistic Profiles, and Plurilingualism

The vision of the learner as a social agent, which is at the centre of both the action-oriented approach and the CEFR, has brought with it a radically new understanding of language teaching. As we have seen, the nature and role of the task have been redefined; the vision of competences is at once richer and more diverse; and the function and typology of communicative activities have far greater specificity.

Beyond these changes, however, there is a profound new understanding of the function of languages and how we learn them.

[...] the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. (CEFR, p. 5)

The learner is seen as a social agent acting in and upon his or her environment and is, in turn, influenced by this environment.

Language learning does not happen in a vacuum; it always happens in relation to a context that each individual perceives differently, based on his or her own life experience, expectations, prior knowledge, and disposition.

In today’s society, this context is increasingly characterized by diversity in terms of both language and culture.

The CEFR makes a distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism. Multilingualism does not take into account the relationship between languages; consequently, it is used to describe “the **coexistence** of different languages in a given society” (CEFR, p. 4). Plurilingualism, on the other hand, emphasizes the relationship between languages; it emphasizes their interdependence and the fact that, for the learner, they are in a dynamic relationship. Indeed,

[...] the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a **communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact**. (CEFR, p. 4; our emphasis added)

It is important to point out that “acquiring competences in another language and in another culture is not made to the detriment — or even independently — of a student’s own language. It is not about two separate languages and cultures. On the contrary, each language modifies the other (or several others) and this contributes to developing plurilingual competence and intercultural awareness” (Piccardo et al., 2011, p. 21).

The learner/social agent is not an empty vessel; he or she has a mental context, which can be seen as a network with multiple connections in which the mother tongue is (or mother tongues are) ever present. The learner/social agent’s learning experience is structured on the basis of his or her interactions with the context, with others, with institutions, and with texts. Making mistakes is part of the journey, and rather than having a negative connotation, they are seen as a necessary part of learning and as opportunities for transfer. The path of learning is one of reflection and self-examination, and the learner’s growing awareness of his or her successes, failures, strengths, and weaknesses enables him or her to advance along that path.

At one time, it was believed that a learner could (and should) keep each language separate, in order to avoid any mingling or cross-contamination: an idealized “native fluency” was seen as the aim of language learning.



It is now believed — more authentically and realistically — that “the aim is “to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place” (CEFR, p. 5). For the CEFR, bilingualism is but one example of plurilingualism.

The myth of perfect bilingualism and balanced mastery of two languages has been replaced by the notion of language competence as something that evolves over time.

The notion of evolving competence includes, for example, the understanding that one learner may be better at reception (written or oral or both) than at production or interaction, while another may be better at written activities (comprehension or production) than at oral activities.

Language ...

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2

Language ...

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2

It is also important to understand that these competence profiles change over time: they document specific moments in time along a learner’s path and may vary based on the circumstances of exposure to the language at school and outside of school. In other words, they evolve. Not only will different learners have different profiles, but each learner will have different profiles at different points in time in the various languages with which he or she comes into contact or that he or she learns formally or informally.

In addition to language profiles, there are cultural profiles. Sometimes the two are superimposable or overlap substantially; however, sometimes they are quite different. An individual may master a language yet have little awareness of the culture(s) of the communities that speak it. Conversely, he or she may be quite familiar with the culture(s) of the communities, yet have little knowledge of the language.

This vision is a far better fit with the new reality of the classroom and the linguistic and cultural diversity of its students. As students now understand that they are not starting from scratch and that they will be using their prior knowledge of various languages to learn a new language, they feel acknowledged and supported in what they can do and in what they have the potential to accomplish. Instead of being seen as additional obstacles, the other languages that learners bring to their learning experiences are now seen as potential resources.

Furthermore, the awareness that languages are not stored in discrete parts of the brain, but rather that languages interact, reframes the learner’s errors as efforts at transfer and hypotheses about the new language rather than as deviations from the norm.

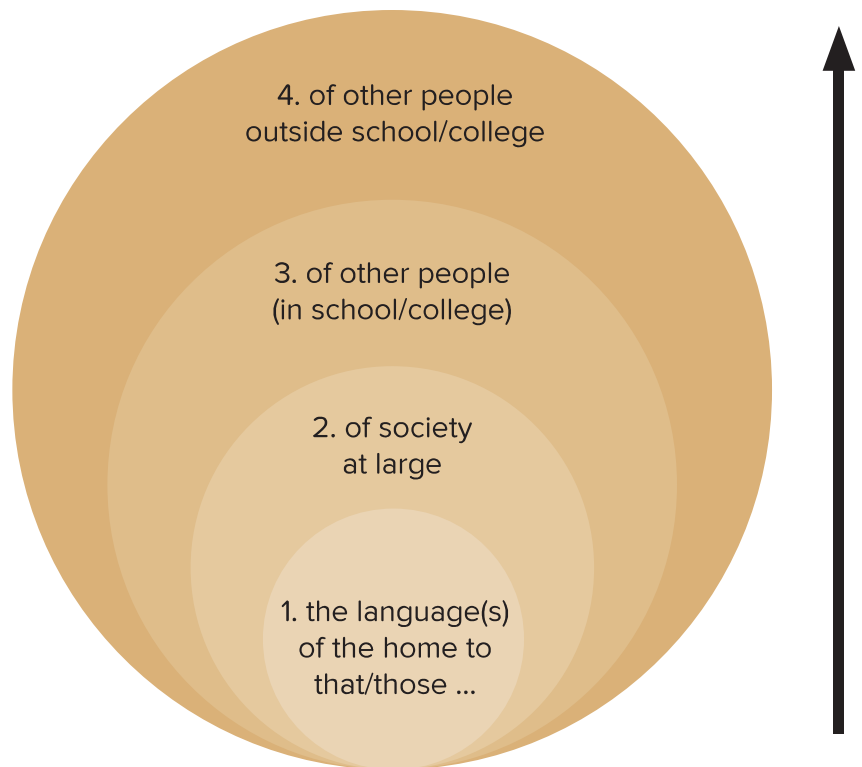


Swain & Lapkin, 2013

Once again, the awareness that trying to maintain strict boundaries between languages is unrealistic and counterproductive makes it possible to work from a perspective of comparison and commonality, rather than distinction and separation. As far as vocabulary is concerned, for example, cognates or words that are similar in both languages, also referred to as ‘true friends,’¹ can be a boon to learning. Where syntax is concerned, awareness of similarities and differences can also be a powerful tool for learning.

Finally, when it comes to task accomplishment, the use of the language of schooling (i.e., English in an English-language school or French in a French-language school) or of a language shared by students instead of the target language in group work does not mean that less learning is taking place; on the contrary, this allows for more in-depth discussion and sharing, with a view to better performance in the target language. This has been demonstrated in the research

To sum up, plurilingualism, the notion of evolving competence, and the notion of dynamic profiles are part of a vision that offers language learners far more reassurance and support than was available to them in previous visions. This is a vision that values the learner, seeing him or her as an individual capable of thinking, reflecting, making decisions, and questioning the wisdom of his or her own choices. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is a vision that supports and fosters strategic learning.



An individual's language experience...



Note

1. In fact, often there is too much emphasis on 'false friends,' i.e., words that have a similar form in two languages but very different meanings.



Plurilingualism¹

Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism stress the dynamic use of multiple languages/varieties and cultural knowledge, awareness and/or experience in social situations. Plurilingualism/pluriculturalism is not at all a new phenomenon; it has been a feature of very many societies since ancient and probably prehistoric times. It has been present throughout history in Africa, South America and Polynesia (Canagarajah 2009) as well as in South Asia (Rabbi and Canagarajah, forthcoming). It was a planned characteristic of many ancient empires (e.g. Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian, Persian) and more recently was common in the Austro-Hungarian empire (Dacrema 2012) and central Europe more generally (Schröder 2018).

Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism aim to capture the holistic and dynamic nature of the individual language user/learner's linguistic and cultural repertoire as it develops through life: "Plurilingual and pluricultural competence ... is not the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, ... but rather the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw." (Council of Europe 2001: 168). "Plurilinguals have a *single*, inter-related repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks" (Council of Europe 2020: 30). This plurilingual repertoire reflects the user/learner's ongoing lived experience (Busch 2017), their biography of intercultural encounter (Byram et al. 2009).

Thus plurilingualism is "an *uneven and changing competence* (Council of Europe 2001: 133, emphasis added), in which the user/learner's resources in one language or variety may be only partial and very different in nature to those in another. "The plurilingualism sought is not that of an exceptional polyglot but rather that of ordinary individuals with a varied linguistic capital in which partial competences have their place. What is expected is not maximum proficiency but a range of language skills and receptiveness to cultural diversity" (Coste 2014: 22). In this action-oriented perspective, users/learners seen as social agents draw upon all sorts of resources in their linguistic and cultural repertoires and further develop these resources in their trajectories. Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism focus on interconnectedness of different languages and cultures rather than on their differences and stress the importance of evolving profiles that value even the most partial competences in and awareness of languages and cultures. The theoretical and pedagogic implications of plurilingualism are well summarised as follows:

"Plurilingual competence is defined as the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, and enrich that repertoire while doing so. The repertoire consists of resources which individual learners have acquired in all the languages they know or have learned, and which also relate to the cultures associated with those languages... The plurilingual perspective centres on learners and the development of their individual plurilingual repertoire, and not each specific language to be learnt". (Beacco et al, 2016: 20)

The distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism and between multiculturalism and pluriculturalism was introduced to language education in the CEFR (Council of Europe 1996, 2001, 2020) and an accompanying study (Coste, et al. [1997] 2009)². This distinction aims to facilitate understanding of two very different views of linguistic and cultural diversity. Multilingualism / multiculturalism considers languages and cultures as separate and somehow static entities that co-exist in societies or individuals. The prefix 'multi' suggests the addition of a series of different elements, like with a multiplication table, or with a multitude of people. Multiculturalism often manifests itself as different communities living in adjacent areas of cities who may not have much contact with, or interest for, each other. The prefix 'pluri,' on the other hand, emphasises plurality, suggesting a network of dynamic interrelationships between the linguistic and cultural elements that build individuals' trajectories and the tapestries of increasingly diverse communities (Piccardo 2018, 2019). Plurilingualism brings to the fore a more holistic way to consider how languages – and cultures – constantly

¹ This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press). Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume. Chapter 1 in B. North, E. Piccardo, T. Goodier, D. Fasoglio, R. Margonis and B. Rüschoff (Eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume, examples from practice*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

² The term plurilingualism itself appears in earlier publications (e.g. Coste and Hébrard 1991; Di Mauro, 1977) but its conceptualization has developed from the distinction made in relation to multilingualism in the CEFR project in 1996/1997.

interact at the cognitive, emotional and social level. In relation to classrooms, a multilingual classroom suggests a classroom in which children have different mother tongues – perhaps being given heritage language classes after school – whereas a plurilingual classroom is one in which the linguistic diversity present is embraced and exploited in order to leverage communication, subject learning, plurilingual/pluricultural awareness, and the learning of new languages.

Not all applied linguists have adopted this useful distinction. However, in order to emulate the flexible, creative, holistic characteristic of an individual's plurilingual repertoire, those who have not adopted the term tend to modulate 'multilingualism' with adjectives to achieve a similar effect, in for example: a *dynamic model of multilingualism* (Herdina and Jessner 2002) a *holistic approach to multilingualism* (Cenoz 2013; Cenoz and Gorter (2011), an *inclusive multilingualism* (Backus et al. 2013), an *active multilingualism* (Cummins 2017) or an *integrated multilingual model* (MacSwan 2017).

Since the introduction of the term plurilingualism in the CEFR, a number of scholars have also invented other terms to capture creative translanguaging practices. Piccardo and North relate these terms to the description of the characteristics of plurilingualism used to introduce the term in the CEFR in 2001 and in 2020.

Plurilingual competence involves the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire in order to:

- a) switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another; [related to: code switching, code alternation, flexible bilingualism; translanguaging];
 - b) express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another; [related to lingua receptiva; intercomprehension];
 - c) call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text; [related to translanguaging as a pedagogic scaffolding technique in a language or CLIL class];
 - d) intercomprehension; [related to lingua receptiva].
 - e) recognise words from a common international store in a new guise; [also related to intercomprehension; lingua receptiva];
 - f) mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even with only a slight knowledge oneself; [= cross-linguistic mediation];
 - g) bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression in different languages or dialects, exploiting paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.) and radically simplifying their use of language; [related to translanguaging; code crossing; code mixing; code meshing; polylingualism; metrolingualism].
- (Council of Europe 2001: 4-6; 2020: 30; Piccardo and North 2020: 284)

The new CEFR descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competence come in three descriptor scales, which were developed principally in relation to the points listed above: 'Building on pluricultural repertoire,' 'Plurilingual comprehension; and 'Building on plurilingual repertoire'. To these could also be added the scale placed under mediating communication 'Facilitating pluricultural space.' Indeed, as suggested in the previous subsection, mediation is at the core of all the descriptors of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Embracing a mediational perspective allows us to move from *language* as an entity to language as a process (*linguaging*) (Piccardo forthcoming). Plurilingualism manifests itself in the dynamic, creative process of languaging across the boundaries of language varieties.

In terms of mediation and languaging, in the scale 'Building on plurilingual repertoire,' for example, the learner/social agent mobilizes their repertoire in different languages:

- for a purpose, to explain a problem or ask for clarification (A2);
- to facilitate comprehension with between third parties (B2), acting as a linguistic and cultural mediator;
- to create the conditions for others to use different languages (B2), that is role modelling openness to linguistic plurality.
- to facilitate communication by using all their agency in a multilingual context, in which they alternate between languages and also employ different forms of linguistic/textual mediation (C1)

Both mediation and plurilingualism are also very present in online, digital interaction, as we shall see in the subsection that follows.

The concept of plurilingualism has become increasingly popular over the last decade, particularly since the so-called multi-/plurilingual turn in English-medium literature (Conteh and Meier 2014; May 2014; Taylor and Snoddon, 2013). There is an increasing amount of experimentation with plurilingual methodologies (e.g. Bernaus et al. 2011; Candelier et al. 2013; Choi and Ollerhead, 2019; Lau and van Viegen, 2020; Prasad 2015; Prasad and Lory 2018; Spinelli 2019). A forthcoming *Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (Piccardo et al. forthcoming) gives a detailed account of the theoretical inputs and the way the concept has further developed as well as an overview of current practices.

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