

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF LANGUAGES AND TEACHING

*Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe
From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*

Reference Study

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Preface

This text, part of a series published by the *Language Policy Division*, is clearly significant in its own right because it deals with certain influential factors in the organisation and sociolinguistic foundations of language teaching and in the linguistic ideologies at work in problems related to the languages of Europe. It is, however, part of a larger project since it is one element of a collection of publications focused on the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*.

This *Guide* is both a descriptive and programmatic document whose purpose is to demonstrate the complexity of the questions involved in language teaching, often dealt with in a simplistic manner. It aims to describe the processes and conceptual tools needed for the analysis of educational contexts with respect to languages and for the organisation of language learning and teaching according to the principles of the Council of Europe.

There are several versions of this *Guide* for different audiences, but the ‘main version’ deals with a number of complex questions, albeit in a limited framework. It seemed necessary to illustrate these questions with case studies, syntheses and studies of specific sectors of language teaching, dealing in monographic form with questions only touched upon in the *Guide*. These *Reference Studies* provide a context for the *Guide*, showing its theoretical bases, sources of further information, areas of research and the themes which underlie it.

The *Modern Languages Division*, now the *Language Policy Division*, demonstrates through this collection of publications its new phase of activity, which is also a continuation of previous activities. The *Division* disseminated through the *Threshold Levels* of the 1970s, a language teaching methodology more focused upon communication and mobility within Europe. It then developed on the basis of a shared educational culture, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (published in its final version in 2001). This is a document which is not concerned with the nature of the contents of language teaching but rather with the form of curricula and syllabi for language teaching. The *Framework* proposes explicit referential levels for identifying degrees of language competence, and thus provides the basis for differentiated management of courses so that opportunities for the teaching of more languages in schools and in lifelong learning are created. This recognition of the intrinsic value of plurilingualism has simultaneously led to the development of an instrument which allows each learner to become aware of and to describe their language repertoire, namely the *European Language Portfolio*. Versions of this are increasingly being developed in member States and were at the heart of the European Year of Languages (2001).

Plurilingualism has been identified in numerous *Recommendations* of the Council of Europe as the principle and the aim of language education policies, and is valued at the individual level as well as being accepted collectively by

educational institutions. The *Guide* and the *Reference Studies* provide the link between teaching methods and educational issues on the one hand and policy on the other, and have the function of making explicit this political principle and of describing concrete measures for implementation.

In this paper, Véronique Castellotti and Danièle Moore discuss the importance of social representations in language teaching. The shared images that exist in one social group or society about other people and their languages can have significant effects on the attitudes towards those languages and ultimately on the interest of learners. These social representations are a particular manifestation of the general significance of representations in social life and interactions among social groups, and after an explanation of this phenomenon, the authors deal with representations of languages, and of language learning, since potential learners often have images of languages which might prevent them attempting to learn. The authors also point out that representations can be taken into account during the process of language teaching, to overcome stereotypes, for example, or to make the most of the ways in which languages are interrelated. It is thus an important element of language education policy planning to analyse existing representations and how these need to be taken into account in promoting language learning.

This specific aspect of the problems of language education policies in Europe gives a perspective on the general view taken in the *Guide* but nonetheless this text is a part of the fundamental project of the *Language Policy Division*: to create through reflection and exchange of experience and expertise, the consensus necessary for European societies, characterised by their differences and the transcultural currents which create 'globalised nations', not to become lost in the search for the 'perfect' language or languages valued at the expense of others. They should rather recognise the plurality of the languages of Europe and the plurilingualism, actual or potential, of all those who live in this space, as a condition for collective creativity and for development, a component of democratic citizenship through linguistic tolerance, and therefore as a fundamental value of their actions in languages and language teaching.

Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram

Introduction

References to the concept of representation are becoming increasingly common in studies on languages and language learning and teaching. In particular, it is accepted that speakers' representations of languages – including their rules, features and status in relation to other languages – shape the processes and strategies they develop and implement for language learning and use (Dabène 1997).

Research, especially that conducted in the school environment, established a link some time ago between attitudes and representations on the one hand and the desire to learn languages and the success or failure of such learning on the other. Various fields of study and teaching methods seek to explain and analyse representations of languages, with a view to effecting changes conducive to learning. Indeed, it is precisely because representations and images of languages play a central role in language learning processes, and because they are malleable, that they are relevant to linguistic and educational policy.

The cross-disciplinary nature of this concept, however, generates several layers of meaning, necessitating a number of terminological clarifications outlined in the following paragraphs.

1. Some definitions

1.1. Attitudes and representations

Since the 1960s, most studies of speakers' perceptions of languages and their use have dealt with the concept of attitude, relating it to a number of spheres. They explore images of languages in order to explain linguistic behaviour, focusing on the subjective values assigned to languages and their variants, and on the social evaluations speakers derive from them.

The twin concepts of **representation and attitude**, both of which come from social psychology, overlap considerably and are sometimes used interchangeably. Nonetheless, most authors prefer to distinguish between them, generally defining attitude as a predisposition to react favourably or otherwise to a class of objects: “an acquired latent psychological (pre)-disposition to react to an object in a certain way” (Kolde 1981 quoted in Lüdi & Py 1986: 97). The information an individual possesses about a particular subject consequently shapes his or her set of beliefs on that subject. These beliefs may be based either on objective information, or on prejudices and stereotypes. They can be modified, and have the potential to evolve.

Attitudes govern more or less stable conduct and behaviour, but cannot be observed directly. They are usually associated with the behaviour they generate, and evaluated according to it.

1.2. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are normally considered of as a *specific expression of attitudes*; they entail an agreement between members of a single group on certain characteristics, which are accepted as a valid, discriminating means of describing the difference of other groups (the outsider) (Tajfel 1981: 115). Stereotypes consequently reveal how a group perceives its own identity, and demonstrate its cohesion. They provide a framework for interpretation, through comparisons and contrasts with characteristics attributed to other groups. The key is not deciding whether a stereotype is “true”, but being able to recognise it as such and acknowledging its validity for a given group, in terms of its effect on relations between groups and therefore on the learning of languages spoken by those groups (see for example Candelier & Hermann-Brennecke 1993, Muller 1998, Perrefort 1996 and 1997, Mettello de Seixas 2000, etc).

Stereotypes identify stable, decontextualised, simplified, abbreviated images that operate in the common memory and are accepted by certain groups. The degree to which particular groups of speakers or individuals accept them as valid may depend on linguistic and learning behaviour and practices.

1.3. Representations

During the 20th century, a growing number of studies were conducted on the emergence, nature and structure of “social representations”. According to Jodelet (1989), a social representation is “a form of socially developed and shared knowledge, with practical implications, which contributes to the construction of a common reality for a social group”. Representations consequently play a decisive role in the management of social relations, in terms of both behaviour and communication.

The traditional definitions formulated by social psychologists emphasise three inter-dependent aspects characteristic of representations: they are developed in and through communication, they (re)construct reality and they shape the surrounding environment through its organisation:

“Analysing a social representation means attempting to understand and explain the nature of the social bonds between individuals, the social practices they engage in, and relationships within and between groups” (Bonardi & Roussiau 1999: 25).

Moscovici 1961 identified two processes at work in the formation and operation of social representations:

- firstly, *objectivation* is the way an individual selects certain information that he or she finds meaningful, then transforms it into

significant images, which are less informative but more conducive to understanding;

- secondly, *anchoring* is a way of adapting less familiar elements in order to incorporate them into familiar operational categories already available to the subject:

“Anchoring is a way of **attaching something new to something that is already established**, which is therefore shared by individuals belonging to the same group” (Guimelli 1994: 14).

In other words, it is a way of making new or foreign elements intelligible; it improves communication by providing common tools for analysing events.

1.4. Representations and learning

Learning specialists have seized on representations as a fundamental concept. Among others, science educationists have attempted to define and develop this idea from a specifically educational standpoint (see Giordan & De Vecchi 1987).

Several branches of linguistics and language teaching also make reference to the concept of representation in particular. Sociolinguists have conducted numerous studies on subjects' attitudes and representations of, for example, languages and their nature, status or function (see Lafontaine 1986 and Matthey 1997b). In language teaching, learning has a specific purpose: pupils do not simply amass knowledge, but must also take on board a range of functions in different contexts, especially interactive situations. This specific emphasis gives social, economic, ideological or emotional factors an even greater influence; the very heterogeneity of the concept of representation makes it a useful way of acknowledging the multiple sources and references (psychological, emotional, social, cognitive...) connected with the language learning and teaching process.

According to the linguistics of acquisition, representations are a key component in the language learning process. Representations of one's mother tongue, the language being learned and the differences between them are associated with particular learning strategies adopted by learners, who construct a representation of the interlinguistic distance between their own language system and that of the language being learned.

Research on attitudes, which describe a fairly stable position for a speaker or group at a particular moment, has given way to an exploration of interactive dynamics in the construction of linguistic knowledge and skills. Representation is an approximation that defines reality for a given group according to a pre-determined scale of relevance; it omits certain elements deemed irrelevant, but retains those used in discursive or other operations for which the representation is meaningful. From this perspective, it is impossible to say that some representations are better than others. As “digests of experience” (Kayser 1997: 7), however, they provide a framework for utilising knowledge, trigger educated guesses (they allow mutual understanding) and guide behaviour. Py 2000 makes

a distinction between reference representations in the memory, which offer participants a point of reference (regardless of whether or not they accept it), and functional representations, which are open-ended because they are constructed through interaction (Py 2000: 14).

1.5. Influencing representations

Studies of representation agree on two observations:

- firstly, there is evidence (including discursive evidence) of a state of representation and of its evolution in specific contexts. Representations are flexible and changing, and can therefore be changed;
- secondly, representations are closely connected with learning processes, which they either enhance or hinder.

Representation is consequently dual in nature, both static and dynamic.

The study of representations is therefore extremely important in order to enable educators to understand certain language learning phenomena and to implement appropriate teaching activities.

2. Representations in language teaching

2.1. Social representations of languages

2.1.1. Representations of countries and speakers

Many studies of representations of languages and language learning illustrate the crucial role played by learners' images of those languages, the people who speak them and the countries in which they are spoken (*inter alia*, see Zarate 1993, Candelier & Hermann-Brennecke 1993, Cain & De Pietro 1997, Berger 1998, Muller 1998, Matthey ed. 1997b, Paganini 1998). These highly stereotyped images have the power either to enhance or to inhibit learning itself. They emerge, and are perpetuated, in society through various channels (such as the media, literature, tourism brochures and occupational manuals).

Some studies (such as Perrefort 1997 and Muller 1998) reveal a strong correlation between a learner's image of a country and the representations he or she constructs of his or her own learning of that country's language. For instance, a negative image of Germany (an example commonly encountered in France and French-speaking Switzerland) reflects the view that learning German is difficult and unsatisfying, an idea sometimes transmitted by teachers themselves (see below). Muller 1998 explores representations of the German language among French-speaking Swiss students, and how these relate to their representations of Germany, which are in turn linked to their representations of German-speaking Switzerland and its inhabitants. After describing these various spheres of representation as a series of interlocking loops, the author focuses on representations of learning the German language strictly speaking, on the basis of information about the learning process itself:

“Starting from a desire to speak German, which implies a certain unity with their German-speaking neighbours, together the participants manage to establish a distance between French-speakers and German-speakers (based on the latter’s language – awful and worthless – and mentality), before eventually constructing an image of a universal mentality in which (young) French- and German-speaking Swiss are finally reconciled.” (Muller 1998: 87).

In connection with other languages, such as English, Berger 1998 notes that French secondary school pupils have a fairly ambivalent attitude to Great Britain, and that their representations change when they undertake a trip affording genuine contact with native speakers of the target language. Candelier & Hermann-Brennecke 1993, who compare the languages selected by French and German pupils, show more generally that classroom contact with the language studied tends to have a positive influence on representations of that language and its target speakers. However, such changes may depend on how relevant pupils think the language is to their real or imagined position in society (for instance, in terms of its potential use in a future occupation: “English isn’t for electricians” (p. 103). The authors also demonstrate a shift from ethnocentric attitudes to exclusive identification with the only other foreign language and culture selected, based on values at variance with other possible languages.

Byram & Zarate 1996 state that travel alone does not necessarily guarantee a positive shift in representations, any more than the knowledge one acquires about a given culture is necessarily proportional to the length of one’s stay (p. 9).

Cain & de Pietro 1997 stress that relationships in this area are extremely complex. On the basis of a cross-disciplinary study of secondary school pupils learning German, English and French in several European countries, they note that greater knowledge or geographical proximity “are by no means sufficient grounds for them to make less stereotyped, more positive value judgements”. They point out, however, that the language in question and pupils’ experience of learning it (particularly in the classroom) are significant factors in the set of representations they construct; the authors consequently establish a link between assessments of difficulty and success in learning a language and value judgements about the country in question.

Along the same lines, Muller & de Pietro 2001 draw on their observations of German classes in French-speaking Switzerland to show that the language taught is subject to debate as well as learning. They identify the development of representations constructed or re-constructed interactively in such classes by means of “routines and communication contracts, on the basis of implicit understandings that are more or less shared” (Muller & de Pietro 2001: 55). They also note a tendency among some teachers to reinforce the stereotypes behind such representations.

It is clear, therefore, that representations are developed in complex interactions involving several participants and a number of parameters.

2.1.2. Representations of languages in interaction: bilingualism and plurilingualism

Various studies on social representations of languages and of bi- and plurilingualism conducted in several European countries, in particular in educational circles, reveal a number of features inherent in such representations. These include specific patterns associated with the speakers' personal status and their perception of the social value of languages, in conjunction with the language and education policies promoted in different situations. Cavalli & Coletta 2002 identify a number of salient contextual features relating to bi- and plurilingual education in the classroom: these include how the language is seen, language learning, linguistic competence, phenomena associated with interactions between languages, the emphasis placed on prescriptive rules, and perceptions of the relationship between school and society, among others (Cavalli & Coletta 2002: 28).

To a greater or lesser extent, all of these studies illustrate the central role played in such representations by the learners' source language and culture, which serve as a kind of yardstick for assessing other languages and cultures.

Representations are usually established by means of a process where that which is already known, familiar and reassuring serves as a point of reference and comparison. It is consequently worth exploring how subjects develop concepts of **interaction** between languages and construct, individually or collectively, representations of linguistic plurality.

2.1.3. Linguistic representations of languages

Within the framework made up of subjects' images of interactions between languages, the countries in which they are spoken and the speakers who use them, representations are also constructed in relation to linguistic systems, their respective operation, probable similarities and differences and possible relationships between them.

Most teachers and learners appear to have a very narrow understanding of what constitutes a language. According to Eddy Roulet,

“One finds that teachers, like students, confine themselves to a narrowly linguistic representation of discourse as text, that is, as a series of sentences, without taking account of extra-linguistic information (knowledge of the world or the interactive situation, etc.) which is implied by the text and is necessary in order to interpret it” (Roulet 1999: 5).

These observations are borne out in studies that we have conducted with children and adolescents: the latter see languages as collections to be listed, catalogues to be consulted as necessary or jigsaw puzzles to be completed (Castellotti & Moore 1999).

Even among children used to encountering new languages, their attempts at representation remain anchored in the known, the familiar and the reassuring. Most young observers who have no contact with other languages themselves imagine bilingual competence to be achieved by adding together two languages, which can potentially be superimposed upon one another: the speaker has two supplies of identical words in each language, and moves between them by copying the operation of one in order to construct statements in the other. This systematic movement to and fro is seriously jeopardised when speakers have to handle more than two languages.

2.1.4. Bi-plurilingualism: adding monolingualisms together

Primary school children asked to draw “what goes on in the head of someone who speaks more than one language” usually portray plurilinguists by contrasting them with monolinguals, who remain the yardstick for what is normal.

Children imagine plurilingual operations in the brain as a very complex arrangement of machinery. They consequently produce “technical” drawings, “cross-sections” worthy of a biology lesson or language maps with very clear boundaries. Children use their existing knowledge, acquired mainly at school: they go to a dictionary to copy out flags, look for illustrations of the human brain or skeleton and find technical vocabulary, or draw on recent science lessons (Castellotti & Moore 1999, and Moore & Castellotti 2001).

Their drawings are made up of compartments, with each language occupying a specific area that is distinct from the others; plurilingualism appears to be constructed through juxtaposition rather than complementarity. The association of one language with each country is an even clearer indication of the monolingual nature of these representations of plurilingualism.

2.1.5. A plurilingual cacophony

Children tend to have very complicated images of how languages are organised in the brain. At the same time, the way in which they divide the brain’s language system into compartments conflicts with their ideas about plurilingual production:

- well, because he knows so many languages/ he or she knows so many languages that everything gets muddled up
- oh, why does she mix up the flags
- because she doesn’t recognise her languages any more
(extract from Castellotti and Moore 1999: 38)

Plurilingualism is often associated with confusion, forgetfulness and muddle. Plurilingual speakers are thought to be confused primarily about lexical decisions and language selection. Their difficulties appear to stem from failings in automatic processes: they “look for” their words, and have to think, try things out, have a go, start again: “no it’s not that language” (Castellotti and Moore 1999).

This view is borne out in statements made by secondary school pupils who were asked, in another study, to describe “what goes on in their heads when they try to speak another language”. They too say that “*languages can get muddled up*” and that a degree of proficiency in several languages does not mean that they can “automatically sort” through them during verbal production (“It’s a muddle, I’m at a loss or I’m mixing up words”) (See Castellotti 1997).

Even in specialised language teaching circles, adults generally appear to share the same kinds of assumptions about the organisation of languages among plurilinguists. These include the idea of separate competences and the fear that knowing more than one language will heighten difficulties stemming from complexity:

“well, myself, I imagine (...) I imagine a head full of little boxes, little boxes / drawers you pull out the one you want whenever you want it”; “I do/maybe like a network isn’t it/ a network that’d probably be simpler for a monolingualist/ with connections which are more, I mean, which would finish earlier/ and a person who’s in contact with more than one code has a much more complicated (...) network.” (Marquilló-Larruy 2000: 134-135, trans.)

2.2. Representations of language learning in the classroom

2.2.1. A solitary learning process

Children still tend to see language learning as very academic, with little interaction (Moore & Castellotti 2001). Pupils imagine themselves learning a language on their own (or sitting next to someone else); front-on, they draw themselves alone in the middle of a big white page, surrounded by various classroom items (table, chair, pencil-case), busy reading (textbooks and exercise books play a major role in such drawings) or listening (shown by several tape recorders and people with big ears). The only perceptible productions are repetitions, for the listener – where there is one – is usually the tape recorder.

These representations of a learning process in which the speaker of the other language does not exist as such are stronger among children who have had no contact with speakers of other languages (through travel, intercultural encounters, etc.). Indeed, children – and adults – seem to show a certain blindness and deafness to otherness unless it is specifically addressed, particularly in the classroom (see Allemann-Ghionda 1997, Candelier & Herman-Brennecke 1993, Cain & de Pietro 1997).

2.2.2. What are the learning objectives?

Classroom studies frequently point to the existence of classroom communication cultures (Beacco 2001), shaped by school routines and habits and based partly on representations that are more or less shared by pupils and teachers of one another’s roles, discursive and other operations and learning objectives, particularly as regards the linguistic competence targeted in the languages being

learned. For instance, a study conducted among L2 French teachers and pupils in German-speaking Switzerland (see Pekarek 1997) shows that they place great emphasis on producing strictly accurate statements, in both oral and written contexts, according to models which remain based on that of an ideal, native monolingual. Both the teachers' assessments and the pupils' self-evaluations of their performance consequently conclude that they have failed, prompting them to express inhibitions, especially about speaking in class:

“In particular, such impressions can have a significant impact on the meaning pupils assign to learning French, and may even make them question the social value of the skills acquired. Above all, such impressions may fundamentally affect the way pupils participate in different social situations – both inside and outside the classroom” (Pekarek 1997: 208).

Comments about language learning and teaching made by teachers and others in the education sector reflect representations that may therefore be described as “monolingual” (Matthey & Moore 1997).

Language teaching is still seen primarily in terms of mutual ignorance, if not strict separation; this view is reinforced by the institutional structure of most European education systems, which operate according to the principle of disciplinary compartmentalisation. Just look at the model speakers generally presented in language textbooks: they tend to represent monolingual speakers of the target languages, while the dialogue exercises involve flawless mutual comprehension, failing to reflect the misunderstandings, mutual adjustments, rewordings, simplifications and use of supports observed in natural exchanges between native and non-native speakers. Nonetheless, special efforts have been made over the last few years to ensure that textbooks include plurilingual protagonists who interact with native speakers of the target language, or for whom the target language serves as a means of dialogue. Such attempts are patchy, however, and vary considerably depending on the country in question and the languages being learned¹.

2.2.3. The first language: a lifeline for learning

Aside from generic approaches to language acquisition situations, representations of language learning all seem – irrespective of the context and group concerned – to be permeated by the subject's relationship to his or her first language and its role in gaining access to other languages, which is usually seen as crucial.

However, the relationship to one's first language still appears to be perceived as an obstacle, or at the very least a problem. Some teachers

¹ We may also note the widespread practice of “changing” pupils' first names into English or German. Teachers usually give two reasons for doing this: firstly, a desire not to “break up” the rhythm and phonic structure of utterances in the foreign language, and an attempt to get the students into performance mode, “playing a role” when they speak another language

say they always try to “*get pupils to think directly in the foreign language*”, while others believe pupils’ competence in foreign languages depends to a great extent on how well they master their first language.

It is also worth noting the contrast between representations expressed by children who have little or no experience of learning foreign languages and those of secondary school students and teachers who speak, teach and/or learn one or more languages.

Such a comparison reveals a number of constants. For example, while children have no hesitation about drawing on the “matrix” of their first language, adolescents and adults admit using it as if they are talking about a shameful disease rather than a helpful support (“You try to translate what you think in French. That’s why you make some mistakes, but it’s very hard not to”), or describe it as an expressly taboo practice (“I never try to translate, otherwise my sentence will be wrong”). (Castellotti 1997).

Although returning to one’s first-language matrix is the strategy most commonly used by most pupils, irrespective of their age and level of contact with the target language, it is only effective if they manage to shift their focus sufficiently to establish new operating assumptions.

In studies where young pupils are confronted with unfamiliar languages and asked to construct meaning (Moore and Castellotti 2001), they identify parallels and divergences according to frameworks based on the attested or represented model of their mother tongue. The latter provides matrices for both terminological (letters and syllables) and structural elements (lexical and syntactical calques). This model may or may not be helpful, depending on whether the subjects can distance themselves from it in order to envisage other ways of operating. Two kinds of behaviour may be observed:

- the first derives closely from a system of representations within which different foreign languages are in the end merely transcriptions (through various scripts and sounds) of the first language; consequently, it does not enable subjects to distance themselves sufficiently from their first language to acknowledge the intrinsic identity of the new language;
- the second, although initially also following a system of divisions inherited from the first language, eventually leads – through observation and manipulation in different contexts – to a shift in focus that enables subjects to grasp the distinctive features of the new system, the validity of which they try to test.

Both of these approaches rely on strategies such as anchoring, support and transitions between languages; they are implemented in different ways, however, according to the subject’s ability to acknowledge the distance between his or own system and other systems, and, more specifically, his or her ability to cope with that distance and to use appropriate resources to reduce it or make use of it.

2.2.4. Transition languages

Regardless of the subjects' level of proficiency, representations of languages consequently concentrate on the imagined distance between them, depending on the subjects' first language. Several examples demonstrate that subjects' **perception** of the distance or proximity between languages is far more important than the objective similarities or differences between them. One such example, drawn from upper primary school children, shows that English – the only language of which most children have any actual understanding – then becomes the prototype for the “foreign language” category, while some pupils perceive it as being the closest language to their own (Moore & Castellotti 2001, see also Castellotti, Coste & Moore 2001).

More generally, it is possible to identify common metastrategies among different kinds of learners: the first step is normally to probe the unknown for any familiar elements. Dabène (1996: 397) notes that “the mother tongue does not merely enable subjects to rely on certain lexical anchors, but provides them with a number of metalinguistic heuristic tools that they can use throughout the decoding process”. In addition to the first language, other languages may emerge as alternative points of reference, either because of a perceived relationship with the subject's first language or because of an imagined proximity to the languages encountered. Such languages – especially English, which, as we have seen, plays a special role in some subjects' representations – then acquires the status of a facilitator, intermediary or mediator (see also Coste 2001).

3. Teaching approaches based on representations

Many teachers and educationists are aware of the concepts outlined above, and try in various ways to identify teaching and learning behaviours that incorporate the perspectives of both teachers and learners (see Zarate 1993: 79; see also Cain & Briane 1996; Porcher & al 1986; Muller 1998). The textbook market now includes books that seek to ascertain learners' initial representations, encouraging them to question the construction of those representations and the experiences through which they have been internalised, both individually and collectively. Some authors see this activity as part of a “reflective approach”, the content and teaching methods of which are based on mental operations designed to deconstruct and restructure automatic processes in the thought-speech relationship. This approach takes up certain ideas, promoted in previous Council of Europe studies, that pave the way more generally for intercultural education:

“Attitudes to cultural difference are closely related to the process of affirming one's identity. Consequently, teachers cannot treat them as attitudes that must be eradicated. (...) trainers who adopt a receptive approach to others find themselves in a contradictory position: teaching pupils what makes them members of a given community, and thus describing others through the social representations circulating in that community; and teaching pupils to distance themselves from the values of their community in order to discover a value system that is

potentially different from, or even in conflict with, the one in which they have been socialised.” (Byram & Zarate 1996: 9).

3.1. Comparative approaches

Various methods used in France and other countries are based on comparisons between two or more languages (such as source and target languages, see Cain & Briane 1996; Luc 1992), with which pupils may or may not be familiar (see Dabène 1994; Hawkins 1987, etc). These methods are implemented in conjunction with awareness-raising activities designed to help teachers and learners to reflect on their experiences, their representations of languages and their learning culture (Grandcolas & Vasseur 1999). They enable pupils to distance themselves from their mother-tongue system, and to relativise its position vis-à-vis the foreign system (Cain & Briane 1996). Multiple exposure to a range of language systems teaches pupils to establish relationships between them through trial and error, encouraging them to form hypotheses and giving them an effective tool for gaining access to certain operations in target systems. The challenge is to create such relationships in order to support and enhance the learning process.

Comparative approaches deliver complex descriptions based on the representations of both native speakers and foreigners, resulting in descriptive models that juxtapose social representations and establish a relationship between them:

“Understanding a foreign reality means explaining the categories specific to each group and identifying the principles that distinguish one group from another” (Zarate 1993: 37).

3.2. Making the most of similarities between languages

Other approaches are more resolutely plurilingual. These include activities on intercomprehension of related languages, which are designed to open up a linguistic area (such as Romance languages) to speakers, enabling them to read any other Romance language. Studies by the Galatea team² (ELA 104, 1996) and the EuRom4 team (*Le Français dans le Monde* 1997) focus on how similarities between related languages are recognised and processed, in order to explore ways of promoting intercomprehension of Romance languages, particularly through the development of translanguistic tools and instruments.

Teaching methods based on similarities between languages should enhance learners’ understanding by giving them opportunities to use their linguistic skills, and to test their intuitions about language and ways in which those skills can be

² The research emphasises the relationships between languages (in this case, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) in order to improve the way in which they are learned and used. Similarly, it is possible to explore other families of languages, such as Germanic or African languages (for example, see Thsiala, L. & V. Hutter, in Creole 5, 2001).

transferred from one setting to another. The aim is to promote and develop cross-curricular skills, which may be re-activated irrespective of the language being learned.

Teachers using these new strategies should ensure that the fostering of communication and mother tongue acquisition, or of other languages of mediation (such as English) should be part of their pedagogy.

3.3. Plurilingualism as a springboard for learning

A plurilingual approach developed in England in the 1970s (Hawkins 1987; James & Garrett 1991) is now attracting fresh interest in Europe, and recently gave rise to a Socrates-Lingua project, 42137-CP-3-1999-1-FR-Lingua (see Candelier 1998 and Candelier ed., *not yet published*), known as EVLANG³. Evlang activities resurrect and refine the initial teaching strategy – known as *Awareness of language* – and push for schools to offer *language education*, a strategy that teaches learners about languages by putting linguistic operations into perspective through comparisons between several different languages.

Language education aims to help pupils achieve a shift in focus by exposing them to various languages, and to prepare them better for language learning by providing them with techniques and methods for understanding linguistic phenomena (de Pietro 1995). Work on attitudes and representations is an integral part of such attempts to foster broad-mindedness and a shift in focus.

These approaches, which deal with the formation of representations of languages and their speakers and relationships between groups, comprise three dimensions (James & Garrett 1991; de Pietro 1995):

- *a sociolinguistic dimension*, which validates linguistic diversity;
- *a psycholinguistic dimension*, which fosters a shift in focus by enabling pupils to leave behind their “mother” tongue and culture;
- *a linguistic and cognitive dimension*, which promotes better understanding of the mechanics of the classroom language and other languages.

The various approaches to language and culture explore different languages, cultures and ways of learning them through activities designed to help pupils discover and manipulate facts about language. This work of discovery and construction, in familiar or unfamiliar languages, encourages pupils to develop hypotheses about linguistic operations, and to test those hypotheses in a range of settings.

Part of the task is to give learners comparative information about the operation of several languages and cultures, with exercises designed to foster metacommunicative reasoning processes. The implementation of such activities

³ This European project brings together teams from France, Reunion Island, Italy, Austria, Spain and Switzerland. Its aims include identifying specific attitudes and skills conducive to language learning, which language awareness activities can help pupils to develop.

must re-activate previously acquired knowledge (knowledge about the world or facts learned at school) so as to enable pupils to analyse and interpret new linguistic environments. This metalinguistic background knowledge is formed translinguistically by presenting a number of languages or groups of languages in a logical sequence; the aim is to build learners' competences that transcend the framework of any given language, and help them move between different learning processes.

In order to achieve this degree of flexibility, it is essential to involve speakers of various languages, including parents, especially those who speak a different language at home from that used at school.

Given that these methods have the advantage of not separating representations from skills (especially cross-curricular skills), they work particularly well as part of a wider-ranging, interdisciplinary teaching strategy that incorporates multicultural and plurilingual dimensions.

4. Conclusion

Representations play a crucial role in constructing identity, relationships with others and knowledge. They are neither right nor wrong, and nor are they permanent; rather, they enable individuals and groups to categorise themselves and to decide which features they consider relevant in constructing their identity in relation to others. Representations should therefore be seen as an inherent part of learning, which needs to be incorporated into linguistic policies and teaching methods. These methods must reconcile *a priori* apparent conflicts between the need for a self-centred focus and a grounding in the familiar, on the one hand, and the broad-mindedness that is essential in order to learn languages, on the other.

We shall now consider the role of strategies that are not based solely on representations, but also take a cross-disciplinary approach to learning; in particular, teacher training should include more in-depth analysis of the nature of plurilingual competence, as observed among ordinary plurilingual speakers and as described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*:

“Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw”. (Council of Europe 2001: 260; see also Coste, Moore & Zarate 1997: 12; Coste 2002).

It should be noted that representations vary according to learning *macro-contexts*, which include language teaching curriculum options, teaching orientations and relationships between languages both in society at large and in

the classroom, and *micro-contexts*, which relate directly to classroom activities and the attitudinal and learning dynamics they set up.

Representations can therefore be encouraged to evolve by means of strategies that combine educational macro- and micro-contexts, for example by welcoming speakers of various languages into the classroom in order to afford pupils greater actual contact with the language and improve their understanding of the wide range of individual plurilingual situations, particularly as regards the different skills that are appropriate for specific communication needs.

The relationship between linguistic policies and teaching strategies also depends on representations, which shape decisions, practices and learning processes.

Language policies designed to implement the Council of Europe guidelines by teaching a wider range of languages and building plurilingual competence must:

- acknowledge society's representations of languages and language teaching and learning so as to develop appropriate curriculum structures and teaching methods;
- include proposals aimed at encouraging these representations to evolve towards the promotion of multilingualism.

Teaching languages means helping pupils to develop a plurilingual repertoire, a repertoire that includes practices as well as representations.

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