

# Plurilingual education in Europe: contexts, initiatives and ongoing challenges

Emilee Moore and Mercè Bernaus

## Introduction

This chapter begins by establishing the authors' understanding of 'best practices' of plurilingualism in the European context. It continues by introducing the notion of the didactics of plurilingualism, before providing examples of how this approach has been developed in different European educational contexts. The chapter concludes by highlighting some challenges for the future of plurilingual education in Europe.

## Defining 'best practices' of plurilingualism in the European context

In the European context, there currently exists consensus, at least at the institutional level, that the teaching of and through languages should follow what is referred to as a *pluralistic approach to languages and cultures*, or a *plurilingual and pluricultural approach*. This pledge is reflected in the policy recommendations produced by the Council of Europe (CoE), an intergovernmental body with 47 EU and non-EU member states, as well as in the resources promoted by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), a CoE affiliate organisation. Such pluralistic approaches aim to develop citizens' *plurilingual and pluricultural competence*, understood in terms of a repertoire of resources for being, communicating and learning that includes, but also extends beyond, standard varieties of named languages and bounded, national cultures (see Lüdi, this volume, chapter 1; Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009). Such pluralistic approaches resonate with what have been referred to as *dynamic approaches* to bilingual education in other parts of the world (e.g. García, 2009 in the USA), and which contrast with the additive and subtractive approaches to bilingual education described in foundational research in this field (Lambert, 1975).

The understanding of 'best practices' of plurilingual education shared by the authors of this chapter, and which we believe to be at the core of the research and educational experiences motivating CoE and ECML initiatives such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, see North, this volume, chapter 17; Rüschoff, this volume, chapter 25) or *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA; Candelier, 2012), is closely related to social justice perspectives on linguistic diversity (Piller, 2016). This approach to plurilingual (and pluricultural) education encompasses educational practices that help to deconstruct linguistic and cultural hierarchies and promote linguistic and cultural diversities in all their manifestations, including the diversities that have long-existed in most parts of Europe and the world, as well as newer diversities resulting from migration and digital forms of communication, among other factors. That is, we understand best practices of plurilingual education to embrace the entirety of what are referred to in CoE documents and in different European education systems as the *languages of schooling*. These include languages/linguistic features (Jørgensen et al., 2011) that are taught as subjects, as well as those that are used in the teaching of other subjects (e.g. art, music, physical education,

maths, science, etc.). Simultaneously, the notion of languages of schooling refers both to languages of nation states, as well as to regional and minority languages/linguistic features present in education systems and known by pupils, which may or not be contemplated by school curricula.

It should be noted, however, that the notion of plurilingual education is also appropriated by different social and political actors in Europe to celebrate people's knowledge or learning of so-called global languages such as English, while disregarding regional minority languages or the languages of migrants (see Flores 2013 for a cautionary discussion of the genealogy of plurilingual approaches in European policy). This non-inclusive understanding of plurilingual education is not supported as a best practice by the authors of this chapter.

In the following sub-sections, we discuss different approaches to plurilingual education, as it is operationalised in European schools and classrooms, all of which we understand to be part of the *didactics of plurilingualism* (e.g. Gajo, 2014; Nussbaum, 2013 ).

## **From the didactics of languages to the didactics of plurilingualism**

The idea of the didactics of plurilingualism, or the teaching and learning of plurilingualism, disrupts that of the didactics of languages, understood in terms of the teaching and learning of Frisian, Polish, Arabic, Norwegian, Catalan, German, Turkish, etc. in isolation. While we use the notion of the didactics of plurilingualism, a term that reflects developments especially in Romance-language European research and educational practice, we also acknowledge that very similar approaches are described in Europe and elsewhere under labels such as *translanguaging pedagogies* (e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Li Wei, 2014; Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012; Moore, Bradley & Simpson, forthcoming) or *multilingual pedagogies* (e.g. Conteh & Meier, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. We further understand the didactics of plurilingualism as encompassing different teaching and learning aims relating to the different languages of schooling: the maintenance of historical forms of multilingualism in different European regions; the teaching and learning of foreign languages and the inclusion of students with migration experiences.

The didactics of plurilingualism, as described by authors including Gajo (2014) or Llompart et al. (2019), operates on three levels: macro, meso and micro (see Figure 1). The *macro* level refers to the way the languages of schooling are distributed in/across subjects at the level of national curricula and school syllabi. While the majority of education systems and schools in Europe plan for the separation of languages across different subjects, others take an explicitly plurilingual approach and encourage the integration of languages at the macro level (Masats & Noguerol, 2016). The *meso* level refers to the ways in which the use and learning of different language is planned for explicitly in programming teaching units. The *micro* level refers to language uses emerging in more *ad hoc* ways in classrooms. At all levels, the didactics of plurilingualism emphasises the integration of languages/linguistic features.

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<sup>1</sup> While translanguaging, multilingual and plurilingual teaching and learning approaches have different histories and nuances, they are often used synonymously by educational researchers and practitioners and offer common aims and strategies. Cenoz (2019) and Vallejo and Dooly (2020) offer clarifying discussions in this regard.

Didactics of plurilingualism	→ Macro level	→ National curricula/school syllabi
	→ Meso level	→ Programming of teaching units
	→ Micro level	→ <i>Ad hoc</i> use in classrooms

Figure 1: The didactics of plurilingualism at the macro, meso and micro levels

In the following sub-sections, we provide best practice examples of how the didactics of plurilingualism operates across these three different levels in different educational contexts in Europe. We focus on the macro level in the first sub-section, where we consider the integration of languages in the curriculum of Andorran schools. In the second sub-section, we discuss a plurilingual approach to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a popular response to the teaching of and through foreign languages in Europe, by considering CLIL implementation at the meso level using the example of materials developed as part of the ECML project ConBaT+. Finally, we discuss the inclusion of newcomers in schools, with a focus on the Erasmus+ project KOINOS and the micro level of the didactics of plurilingualism.

### ***Integrated language teaching in a historically multilingual region***

The Principality of Andorra is located in the eastern Pyrenees and borders Spain (Catalonia) to the south and France to the north. The country offers education following distinct school systems and curricula: Andorran, Spanish or French. Our focus in this section is Andorran schools. While Catalan is the only official language in Andorra, Spanish, French (widely spoken languages by the local population) and English are also curricular languages in the Andorran school system. Many other school systems in historically multilingual regions of Europe (e.g. Luxembourg, Malta, Alsace) follow models in which different societal languages are taught in or as separate subjects (see Hélot & Cavalli, 2017). The model of the Andorran school system, however, is based on a fully *integrated approach* to languages and other curricular areas (see Masats & Noguerol, 2016; Noguerol, 2016).

The backbone of the Andorran model are interdisciplinary learning projects – not different subjects – which desegregate contents from different curricular areas as well as different languages. While the outcomes of the projects might be in one language or variety, the activities and sub-products leading up to the projects’ completion might be in others, requiring careful planning and coordination by different teachers who are involved in guiding students in the process. Complementing these projects, students take part in workshops structured around the more traditional subject areas implicated in the interdisciplinary projects. In these workshops, among other disciplinary aspects, students are guided in the specific language skills needed to complete the projects. Special focus is given to metalinguistic reflection on the similarities and differences between the curricular languages, as well as between these languages and other languages in students’ plurilingual repertoires (see Garbarino et al., this volume, chapter 19, for a discussion on the intercomprehension approach, which shares some similarities with the Andorran model). Noguerol (2016) provides a schematic example of how this curricular approach might be organised, a version of which is reproduced in Figure 2. Note that any combination of languages and subject contents would be valid.

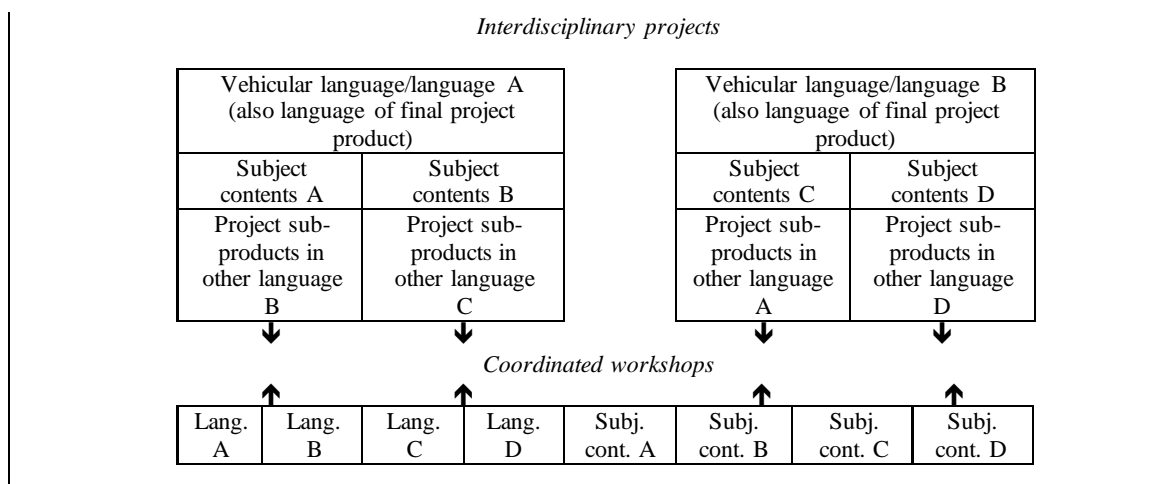


Figure 2: Integrated approach to languages and other curricular areas

The Andorran curricular model is an ambitious one, not immediately transferrable to all contexts, where other approaches to plurilingual education might be explored.

### ***A plurilingual approach to Content and Language Integrated Learning***

Most European education systems have a significant tradition of teaching foreign languages, often from very young ages (pre- or early primary school) and throughout compulsory and post-compulsory education. More recently, programs referred to using acronyms including CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), EMILE (Enseignement d'une matière par l'intégration d'une langue étrangère) or AICLE (Aprendizaje integrado de contenidos y lengua extranjera) have become extremely popular – according to Hélot and Cavalli (2017) they are nowadays the most common form of bilingual education in Europe. CLIL involves teaching a limited number of subjects through a foreign language. Unlike the integrated approach implemented in the Andorran schools, CLIL is not intrinsically a plurilingual didactic model, as while a language and another curricular subject are integrated, other languages and other subjects are not necessarily so (Noguerol, 2016).

The outcomes of the ECML project Content-Based Teaching + Plurilingual/Cultural Awareness (CONBAT+) offer clues as to how plurilingualism (and pluriculturalism) might become essential elements in lesson planning in CLIL programs. The training and content-based didactic units (Bernaus et al., 2011) developed as part of the project offer examples of how other languages and cultures that co-exist in classrooms can be mobilised and enhanced as resources for cross-curricular teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools. The following example (Figure 3) shows how a plurilingual approach to content contributes to the development of language awareness and the strategic skills that learners can develop when confronted with information in different languages. Here, the target language is French and the task involves comparing the same statement in French, Spanish, German, English, Catalan and Italian. Children are encouraged to look for words they can recognise, to consider the word order in each of the sentences and to identify similarities and differences. This activity was conceived for a geography unit.

Observez les phrases suivantes dans les différentes langues ci-dessous :

- Il fait chaud aujourd'hui (français)
- Hace mucho calor hoy (espagnol)
- Es ist warm heute (allemand)
- It is warm today (anglaise)
- Fa calor avui (catalan)
- Fa caldo oggi (italien)

Discute avec ton voisin. De quoi est-il question ?

Reconnais-tu des mots ? Y a-t-il des points communs (mot que tu reconnais, ordre des mots) ?

Des différences ?

Peux-tu traduire cette phrase dans d'autres langues que tu connais ?

Partage ces nouvelles phrases avec le reste de la classe et ajoute-les aux phrases ci-dessus.

Regarde maintenant plus attentivement la construction de toutes ces phrases.

Réflexion en groupe-classe : que pouvez-vous en conclure ?

(From "Notre terre nous nourrit" by Nathalie Auger:

<https://combat.ecml.at/DidacticUnits/Notreterrenousnourrit/tabid/2696/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>)

Figure 3: Plurilingualism in a CLIL unit

In the CONBAT+ materials, plurilingualism becomes a useful instrument for the development of language learning strategies, creates a cognitively enriching experience of the content and is a means of acknowledging the languages of the class that, so often, remain unheard and separate from the shared reality of learners during school hours.

### ***New linguistic diversities and responses to educational inequalities***

Different indicators (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019) suggest that students with migrant backgrounds in Europe are underperforming in comparison with their non-migrant background peers. Cummins (2015) identified different sources of potential educational disadvantage as well as evidence-based didactic responses that could be offered at the micro level of the classroom to support more inclusive educational outcomes, that we believe are relevant to the European context. Some of the sources of school disadvantage listed by Cummins include difficulties following classroom instruction due to home-school language differences, societal discrimination, cultural stereotypes and identity devaluation. Classroom responses to these include scaffolding students' comprehension and production of language across the curriculum, engaging students' plurilingual repertoires for teaching and learning, reinforcing academic language across the curriculum, connecting instruction to students' lives and affirming students' identities.

The results of the European Erasmus+ project KOINOS: European Portfolio of Plurilingual Literacy Practices (see Melo-Pfeifer & Helmchen, 2018) offer insights into how the simplest of classroom actions might act as powerful responses to some of the sources of educational inequalities mentioned in the preceding paragraph. For example, Moore and Palou (2018) describe a classroom scenario in which a primary school teacher at a culturally and linguistically diverse school asks her students at the beginning of the year to write a letter to their grandparents telling them that school had started. This seemingly straightforward task led to many questions being asked by the students and discussed in class: What language should the children use to write to grandparents living in other countries – could they use languages other than the ones taught at school? What should they do if the grandparents could not read – was there anyone who could help

them? This modest didactic strategy allowed the teacher some significant insights into the students' plurilingual repertoires and family literacy practices, which became a basis upon which to develop effective teaching and learning plans.

## Ongoing challenges

In closing this chapter, we would like to highlight two challenges that we believe are fundamental as we continue to consolidate plurilingual education in Europe. The first, already referred to in the previous section, relates to the dire need to alleviate the educational inequalities that negatively affect some of the most plurilingual students – those with migration backgrounds – in our school systems. The second is the re-emergence across Europe of far-right discourses which threaten cultural and linguistic minority groups. We believe that a pluralistic approach to languages and cultures at all levels (macro, meso and micro) and in all classrooms, incorporating some of the best practices identified in this chapter, is essential for defending socially just and linguistically diverse education for current and future generations. Collaboration between members of educational communities (head teachers, teachers, advisers, parents, social workers, government, non-governmental organisations, etc.) to encourage democratic citizenship, social cohesion, mutual understanding and respect is needed, as are national and international networks of educational institutions and organisations aimed at contributing to changes in school organisation, curriculum and teaching practices.

## Further reading

Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

A foundational reference book for developing a general view of bilingual education.

Candelier, M. (ed.) (2012). *FREPA – A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures – Competences and resource*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

FREPA include an extensive set of descriptors of plurilingual competence as well as resources for classrooms and teacher development.

Cenoz, J. y Gorter, D. (2010). The diversity of multilingualism in education. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 205, 37-53.

This article provides a very useful heuristic – the Continua of Multilingual Education – for classifying and comparing different responses to linguistic diversity in schools.

Conteh, J. & Meier, G. (eds.) (2014). *The multilingual turn in languages education: opportunities and challenges*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

This volume includes a significant number of contributions focusing on multilingual education in different European contexts.

Dooly, M. & Vallejo, C. (eds.) (2020). The evolution of language teaching: Towards plurilingualism and translanguaging. *Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 23 (1).

This special issue of the *Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* provides different perspectives on plurilingual, multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies.

Gajo, L. (2014). From normalization to didacticization of multilingualism. European and francophone research at the crossroads between linguistics and didactics. In J. Conteh & G. Meier (eds.), *The multilingual turn in languages education: opportunities and challenges* (pp. 113-131). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

This chapter provides a thorough introduction to the didactics of plurilingualism.

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