# Building the Plurilingual Competence in the English Language Class

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**Résumé:** La compétence plurilingue est une compétence-cadre que tout processus d'enseignement respectivement d'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère se doit d'intégrer. Dans cette perspective, l'acquisition d'une langue étrangère ne se fait pas d'une manière isolée, mais d'une manière qui englobe les composantes linguistiques, sociolinguistiques et pragmatiques de la compétence à communiquer langagièrement déjà assimilés dans la langue maternelle et dans les autres langues étrangères connues.

**Mots-clé:** compétence plurilingue, déduction, personal experience, savoir, savoir-faire, savoir-être, savoir-apprendre.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is believed that the principal aim of language learning in school is to develop skills for international communication in life after school. Yet, languages contribute to broader educational aims such as recognizing the linguistic and cultural plurality of the environment, giving visibility to these dimensions and placing value on them. Furthermore, language education can contribute to a deeper level of perceiving this plurality, by encouraging acceptance of difference and tolerance, enhancing social inclusion and cohesion.

## 2. Ways to Enhance the Plurilingual Competence

The teaching and learning of any language should also be examined "in conjunction with the provision for other languages in the education system and the paths which learners might choose to follow in the



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long term in their efforts to develop a variety of language skills" [2, p. 169]. However, considerations and measures relating to curricula should not just refer to a "a curriculum for each language taken in isolation" [2, p.169]. Also, the languages chosen to be taught should be "approached in terms of their role in a general language education, in which linguistic knowledge *(savoir)* and skills *(savoir-faire)*, along with the ability to learn *(savoir-apprendre)*, play not only a specific role in a given language but also a transferable role across languages" [2, p.169].

Here are extracted the basic competences from *Framework of Reference for pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* that should be of help both to learners and teachers of foreign languages alike in order to develop the plurilingual competence. This is essential knowledge to any language teacher because they illustrate the right perspective teachers should adopt when dealing with languages in general. For instance, *K 6. Knows that there are similarities and differences between languages* from section VI, entitled *Similarities and differences between languages,* suggests the very above-mentioned idea. All the language teachers should know and teach their languages in the awareness of the contrast or similarity between languages in terms of structure, discourse, or pragmatic rules. This involves that the teacher himself/herself should master at least two or three foreign languages and more importantly be open to learn other languages, be inquisitive about it, ask students to find out or tell the difference with other languages they study at school or in private. Moving forward in the same line, the teacher should always bear in mind and explain to the teacher that each language has a specific way of representing reality. When we think of the simple sound of the dog, that we all hear in the same way, it can be surprising to find out that it is rendered onomatopoeically different in so many languages:

English*: bow wow, arf, woof, ruff ruff*
French*: ouah ouah*
German*: wau wau, wuff wuff*
Russian*: gav-gav*
Croatian*: vau-vau*
Romanian*: ham-ham, hau-hau*.

This is a way of showing that each language illustrates the same onomatopoeic reality in different ways. Moreover, it leads to the idea that each country is "culturally determined" (FREPA: K 6.2.1). This is the reason why the attitude adopted towards language teaching should be more interested, receptive and respectful of the other languages and cultures. The teachers together with the students should be sensitive and motivated to discover other languages and cultures by eagerly engaging in drawing



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comparisons when studying the way different languages function in terms of their structures, vocabulary and phonetic systems. Once these questioning attitudes, and inherently sometimes critical ones are activated, the preconceived opinions can disappear. Most importantly, they may erase any unjustified judgement related to stereotypes. On this path to developing plurilingualism, the willingness to adapt one's behaviour in communicating and interacting with other people who are linguistically and culturally different is extremely important because it leads to flexibility in the approach to foreign languages and the readiness to experience new cultures. In the end, this process can only bring tolerance towards the other, helping to see oneself in a different light or it may even enrich new means of expressing oneself.

Speaking form my own experience as a foreign language speaker, I have found myself in the situation where I could not find a satisfying synonym in my own language for certain English or French words, these languages being at one point practised by me more than my own mother tongue. At the same time, the more you know a language, the more you can notice the subtleties in it and see the difference in its means of expression. For instance, from an early age I took notice of the fact that the Ukrainian language uses a lot of diminutives, mild ways of naming things, in spite of the fact that the sounds of the language may lead you to think that it is rather a tough-sounding one. The same situation is for the French *mignon* that again cannot find its perfect counterpart in Romanian with *dragut*. The Romanian equivalent cannot seize the whole meaning of *mignon*. By being proficient in foreign languages and speaking with persons of your nationality in your mother tongue, who in their turn know the foreign languages in question, you can resort to linguistic material from these ones, inexistent in your own one, and thus communicate more subtle nuances in meaning, having the guarantee that you are duly understood.

The skills that are needed in order to notice the linguistic and cultural features and their similarities and differences may help you overcome a possible scene as the following one that occurred to an acquaintance of ours:

We all know that hotel is an international word to indicate a place of accommodation. However, the French word *Hotel de Ville* means town hall. This misled a foreigner who saw the name at the entrance and thought the building was a hotel. She got in the town hall in the afternoon when the building had to be closed. Not knowing where she was, she decided to visit the premises first and then to check in. When she got back, she realised that there was no reception and that she was locked in an



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unknown building. She had to spend the night in the townhall in Paris, just because she did not know the French *Hotel de Ville*.

Quite on the contrary, another example of international words such as *taxi* saved a former student of mine from an embarrassing situation of not being able to communicate in any language when he was in an airport in an Arabic country. Just simply saying the word *taxi*, helped him to find his way out. However, a competent plurilingual person can make use of knowledge from one language to help him communicate in other language and to express himself in it. Everyone uses English wherever you go on your travelling or it is the meeting language for business. Yet, in cases English is not known to both speakers that interact for example, they can make use of other languages they might know. I, for one, happen to know Ukrainian, due to the time spent with my grandparents in a community that used Ukrainian as the main language. I learnt it orally, this is the reason why I have never been able to write or read in this language. Nevertheless, every time I met someone from Russia or Bulgaria, I could make myself understood and I was able to understand their message because Ukrainian, Russian and Bulgarian are all Slavic languages and knowing one of them I could make a linguistic transfer regarding certain similarities between these languages and this inter-language transfer was efficient enough to help us establish a minimum level of communication.

## 3. Conclusion

All in all, having a plurilingual competence developed is a must in our present society and schools should support it while making extensive use of it.

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