Plurilingualism and language learner autonomy

David Little

Trinity College Dublin

In a nutshell

- The Council of Europe's plurilingual approach aims to develop integrated language repertoires: an old-established goal expressed in new terms

- Pedagogical approaches most apt to develop integrated plurilingual repertoires are *dialogic*
  - They give learners equal rights to participate in classroom discourse
  - This means giving them autonomy as users/learners of the target language

- Such approaches have been successfully applied at school level

- What about language learning and teaching at university?

Overview

- The Council of Europe's plurilingual approach
- Five propositions and their pedagogical consequences
- Two examples
    1. Young Danish teenagers learning English as a foreign language
    2. Pupils developing plurilingual repertoires in an Irish primary school
- Conclusion: recapitulation and some questions for you

The Council of Europe's plurilingual approach

The plurilingual approach

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment
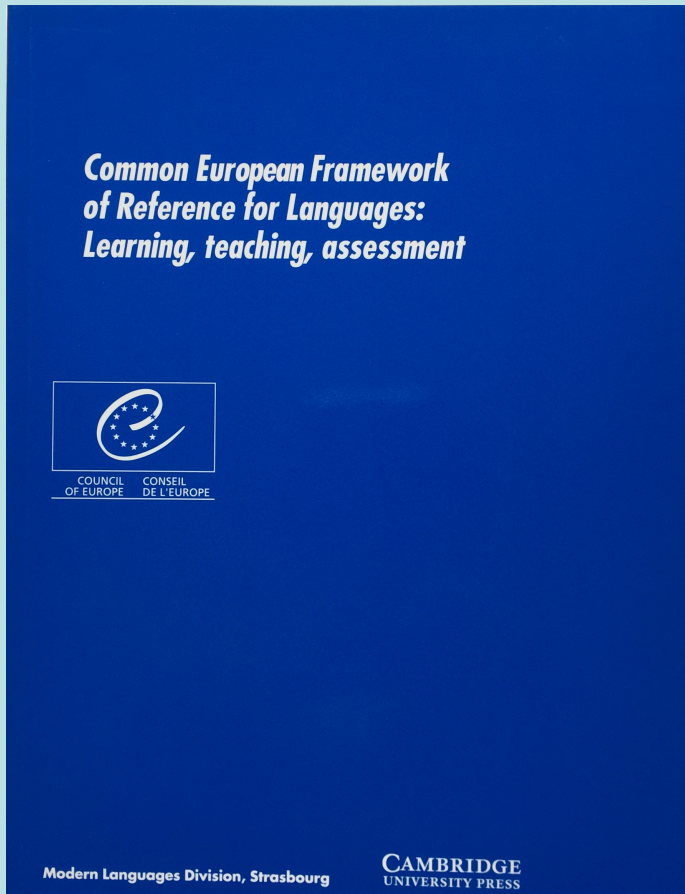
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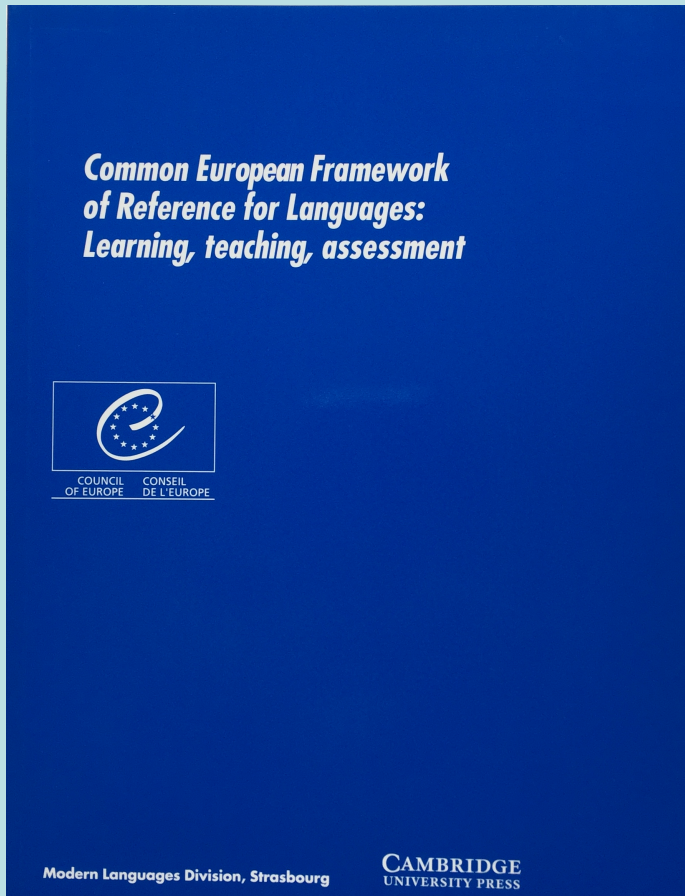Modern Languages Division, Strasbourg

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"Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. … the plurilingual approach emphasises 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 those languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of languages contributes, and in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe 2001: 4)

The plurilingual approach

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Languages taught and learnt in isolation

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment

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The plurilingual approach

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment

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"Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in [Languages taught and learnt in isolation] plurilingual a[pproach emphasises] 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 o[ther peoples ... at scho]ol or c[ollege ... he] [Dynamic integration of languages in the mind (cf. Cook's [1991] definition of linguistic multicompetence)] or she d[oes not keep these languages and] cultures in strictly separated menta[l co]mpartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of languages contributes, and in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe 2001: 4)

Two examples (García 2017: 18)

Christine (36)

- born in France to educated middle-class parents
- has spoken French since birth
- learned English and then Spanish at school
- considers French her L1, English her L2, and Spanish her L3
- secure in her identity as a francophone – uses French personally and professionally in her daily life
- seldom speaks English, but often reads reports in English for work
- says that she likes Spanish better than English but uses it only to sing songs
- considers only French as her own language – English and Spanish are "gifts" which she borrows

Carlos (43)

- born and grew up in Peru
- spoke Spanish and Quechua at home
- taught through Spanish at school, though Quechua was frequently used
- when living in Peru, belonged to a musical group that sang songs in Quechua and Spanish
- considered himself a bilingual Peruvian, with neither language identified as L1 or L2
- migrated to Germany at the age of 38
- married a German-speaking woman two years later
- now uses German both at home and at the Peruvian restaurant where he works and sings in Spanish and Quechua
- German is not his L2 or L3; it has become his own (although not his sole) *everyday lived language*

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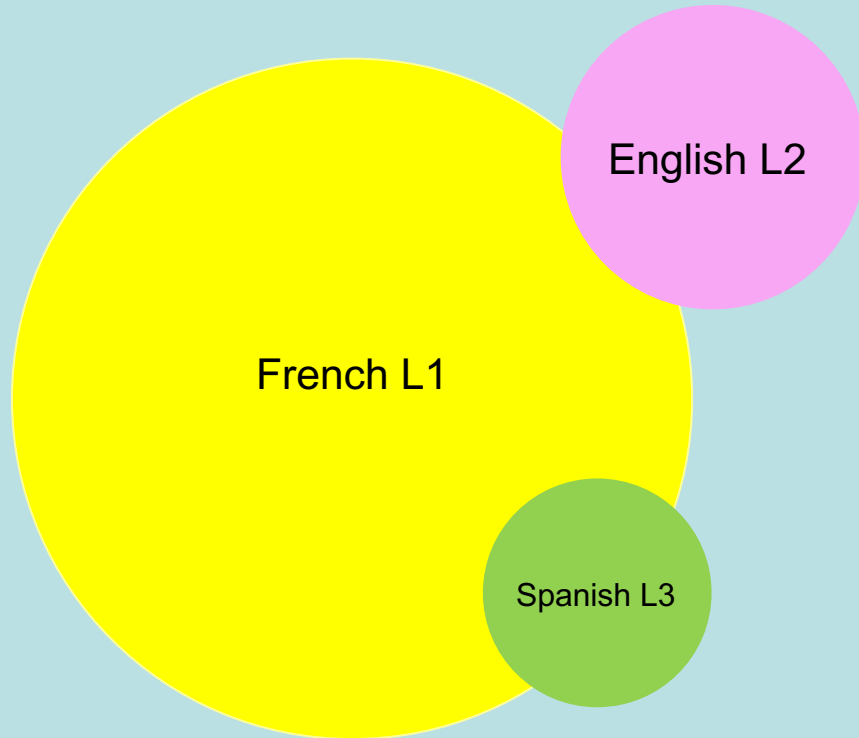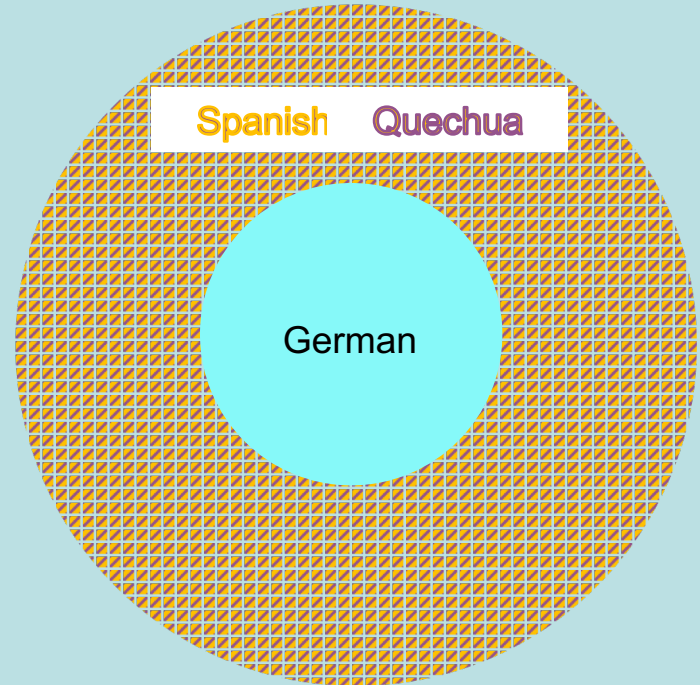
Multilingual

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Plurilingual

Christine

French L1

English L2

Spanish L3

Carlos

Spanish Quechua

German

- In the CEFR's definition there is a clear *qualitative* difference between "multilingualism" and "plurilingualism"
- How do we get from Christine to Carlos?
- How do we ensure that languages taught and learnt in formal educational contexts become part of learners' *everyday lived language*, an integral part of what they are, a channel of their agency?

- By promoting pedagogical approaches that are grounded in language use, engage learners' identities and agency, and exploit their existing linguistic repertoires while extending them
- Learners' identities and agency are engaged by involving them in language use that is *dialogic*: that allows them equal rights of participation
- This is the starting point of all pedagogies that aim to develop language learner autonomy

Five propositions and their pedagogical consequences

Proposition 1

The languages in an individual's plurilingual repertoire are likely to exist at different levels of proficiency, but by definition they are all equally available for immediate, spontaneous use in appropriate contexts

Pedagogical consequences

- Target language use should play a central role in L2 teaching/learning (something on which all theories of L2 acquisition agree)
- Learners should be supported in target language use from the very beginning so that the TL is part of their *everyday lived language*

Proposition 2

Language use that is part of *everyday lived language* is
- *spontaneous*: in the case of the classroom, shaped by the ebb and flow of teaching and learning activities
- *authentic*: arising from the interests, preoccupations and immediate concerns of the user

Pedagogical consequences

- The discourse of language teaching and learning should allow learners access to all available discourse roles, initiating as well as responding
- This implies a discourse dynamic that is radically different from traditional classroom discourse because it grants a high degree of communicative autonomy to individual learners
- Autonomous learning is *dialogic* learning

Proposition 3

The plurilingual approach entails that language learning draws on **all** the linguistic resources at each learner's disposal, which means engaging **all** dimensions of her/his linguistic identity

Pedagogical consequences

Because learners and contexts of learning are infinitely various, there is no single way of doing this, but teachers need to be aware that
- whatever language is being learnt or used, learners cannot help drawing **cognitively** on all the languages in an integrated repertoire
- learners' use of their plurilingual resources may be explicit or implicit, deliberate or involuntary

Proposition 4

Languages are discrete: however they are learnt, used in the mind and stored in the brain, they are distinct from one another in their cultural, academic and official functions

Pedagogical consequences

Within the constraints of time and context, teachers should push their learners to develop the highest possible levels of literate proficiency in the languages they learn
- To fail to do so is to sell learners short
- To decline to do so on the ground that "standard languages" are somehow "racist" (e.g. Flores and Rosa 2015) is a strange way of righting the wrongs of colonialism

Proposition 5

When the development of plurilingual repertoires is an explicit educational goal, it entails reflective processes that add a metalinguistic/metacognitive dimension to learners' communicative proficiency
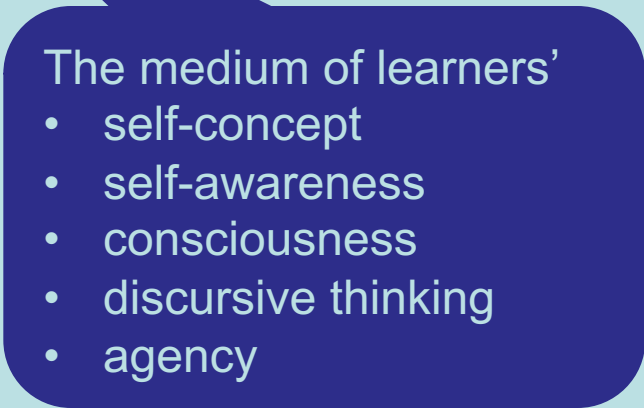
Pedagogical consequences

Learners' reflective capacity
- cannot be taken for granted – it has to be developed
- grows out of **dialogic** oral interaction that is questioning and evaluative
- is supported by the use of writing to document and evaluate the learning process and its outcomes

Example 1: Young Danish teenagers learning English as a foreign language
(With thanks to Leni Dam)

The starting point

Danish
home language / language
of schooling

English
first foreign
language

The medium of learners'
- self-concept
- self-awareness
- consciousness
- discursive thinking
- agency

The goal of the plurilingual approach

To help learners to develop a proficiency in English that
- becomes part of their self-concept
- informs their self-awareness
- invades their consciousness
- is a channel of their agency
- in other words, extends their identity – their communicative, cognitive and cultural range

Danish
home language / language of schooling

English
first foreign language

Makes sure her learners understand curriculum demands

Manages the work cycle and monitors progress (curriculum)

Uses TL from the beginning

What the teacher does

Engages learners in metacognitive talk/ evaluation in TL

Translates L1 words, phrases, etc. on request

Requires learners to select learning activities

Scaffolds learners' attempts to speak and write in TL

Tools

Learner logbooks −
record of learning
- Content of lessons
- Words etc. to be memorized
- Plans for homework
- Evaluation of own progress
- Especially in the early stages, the texts they compose
- As far as possible in TL

Posters −
stimulate, guide and record learning of class
- Words and phrases
- Ideas for learning activities and homework
- Results of brainstorming (teacher translates from L1)

In due course learners make their own posters

Learner-created learning materials
- Word cards →
- Dominoes →
- Picture lotto →
- Board games

Learner-generated texts
- About myself →
- Picture + text →
- Plays, stories, poems
- Projects

Example 2: Pupils developing plurilingual profiles in an Irish primary school
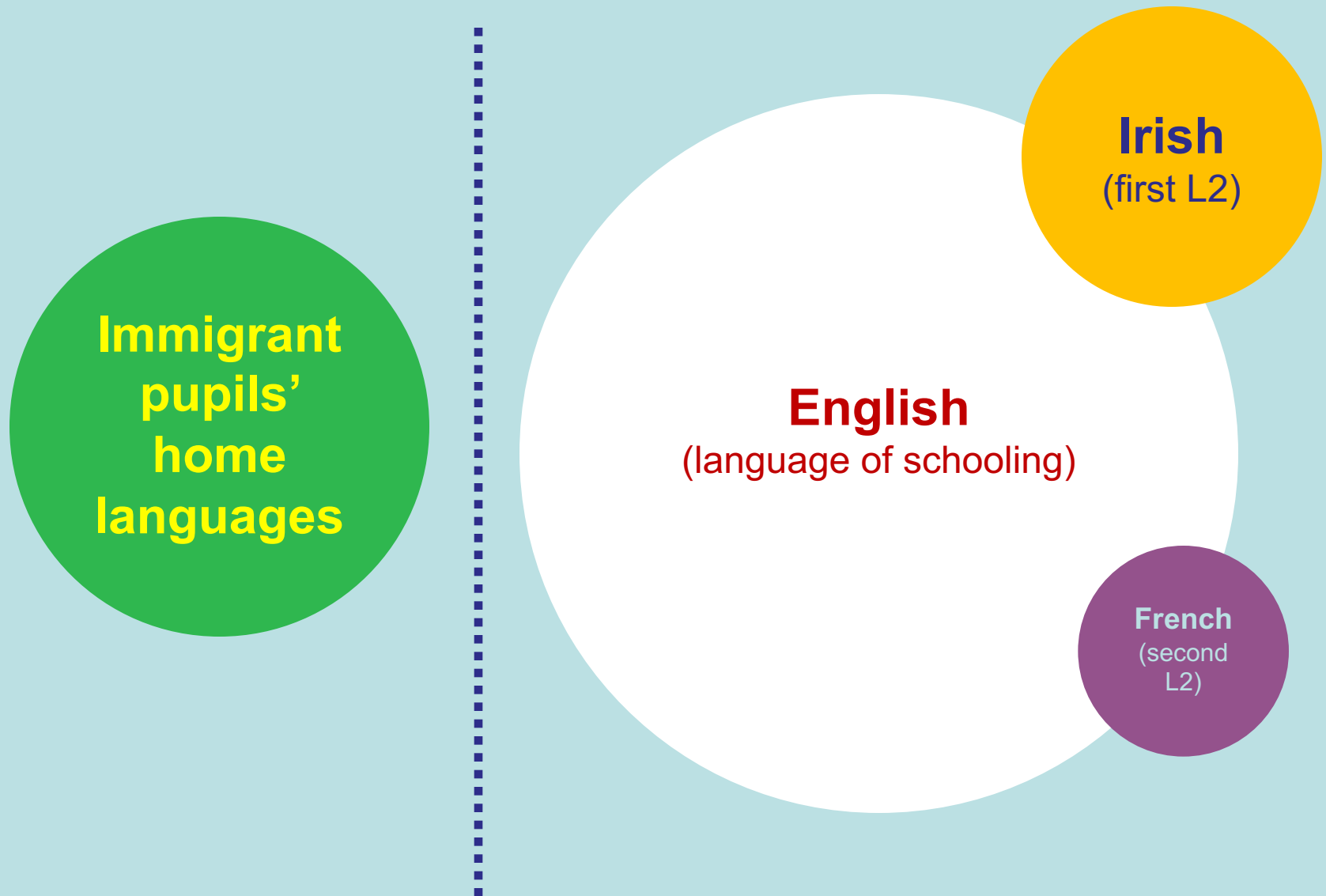## (With thanks to Déirdre Kirwan)

Languages in focus

Immigrant pupils' home languages

English (language of schooling)

French (second L2, Fifth and Sixth Class)

Irish (first L2)

A common scenario in schools with immigrant pupils

Immigrant pupils' home languages

English
(language of schooling)

Irish
(first L2)

French
(second L2)

The goal of the plurilingual approach

To develop pupils' plurilingual repertoires so that
- growth of oral proficiency in English, Irish and French is rooted in their home language proficiency
- reading and writing skills in English are transferred to home languages, Irish and French (cf. Cummins's [1981, 2008] interdepend-ence hypothesis)
- all languages in the individual pupil's repertoire are immediately available for spontaneous and context-appropriate use in speech and in writing

Immigrant pupils' home languages

Irish
(first L2)

English
(language of schooling)

French
(second L2)

Plurilingual literacy: some examples

From an early age pupils write "identity texts" in English and their home language

Irish pupils write dual-language texts treating Irish as their home language

The Sixth Class fashion show: texts in four languages

To keep up, Irish pupils get help from their family or neighbours to write texts in L3

In this school

Pupils' *everyday lived language* is an amalgam of English, Irish, French (in Fifth and Sixth Class) and (in the case of pupils from immigrant families) their home language
- All lessons are framed by and embedded in *dialogic* use of the language in principal focus
- Pupils gradually develop plurilingual repertoires that sustain multilingual classrooms
- Collaboratively they create a self-sustaining community of plurilingual speakers

Three points to note

- Because immigrant pupils use their home languages at school, their identities and agency are fully engaged in the educational process
- Pupils develop unusually high levels of language awareness
- According to PISA surveys, immigrant pupils are at serious risk of educational failure: in standardized tests, pupils in this school consistently perform above the national average

Conclusion:
A brief recapitulation and some questions for you

A brief recapitulation

- The plurilingual approach implies teaching/learning that is grounded in language use, engages learners' identities and agency, and exploits their existing repertoires while extending them
- Five propositions
  - By definition, the languages in a plurilingual repertoire are all equally available for immediate, spontaneous use in appropriate contexts
  - Language use that is part of learners' *everyday lived language* is spontaneous and authentic
  - The plurilingual ideal entails that language learning exploits all the linguistic resources at each learner's disposal
  - In their cultural, academic and official functions, languages are discrete
  - The development of plurilingualism as an educational goal entails reflective processes that add a metalinguistic/metacognitive dimension to learners' communicative proficiency
- Two examples
  - Young Danish teenagers learning English as a foreign language
  - Pupils developing plurilingual repertoires in an Irish primary school

Some questions for you

In your university-level English courses, whether they are delivered in classrooms, self-access centres or online

- What role is played by dialogic TL use?
  - Are your students able to participate fully in the discourse of learning, initiating as well as responding?
- How do you engage your students' identity and agency in the learning process?
- How do you make it possible for your students to draw on other languages in their repertoire when they are learning English?
- Do you encourage your students to use writing to support speaking and to speak interactively to in order to generate written text?
- How do your students document their learning of English?
- What role is played by self- and peer-assessment?

What two Danish teenagers wrote when asked:

"After four years of learning English, how would you assess your overall progress?"

Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That we worked independently … And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own.

I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our "together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.

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Can your university-level learners of English produce reflective texts of comparable fluency, accuracy, cohesion and coherence?

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What three of Scoil Bhríde's Sixth Class pupils said

Whenever in the class we pick a word and then we get all the people that have different languages to translate it, you find a lot of similarities and sometimes when we're learning like in Irish lessons and everything, pupils will put up their hands and say this means this in their language and it's quite interesting because there are a lot of similarities and that makes it easier for you to learn different languages

… sometimes in school we talk about Irish traditions and some people, like, they originally come from Ireland and they already know it and we don't, so when we're talking about our own countries, it's like when they're talking about Ireland, we'd have nothing to relate to or be proud of and to put our name on and so we'd be, like, we'd be empty. If you know a language that one of your parents knows don't forget it, don't try, like, not to speak it, don't hide away from it because it's what makes you **you** and it's special and it's, you can't, it's like having an arm or a leg you can't take it away from you

[If he couldn't use it at school] the child's language would get closed inside him and he wouldn't be able to speak it and I just want to say to other kids out there that if someone is trying to hide your language or doesn't want you to speak out loud you should be courageous and just say that you want to speak it … as well, you can't just focus on one language, you can focus on other languages

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Do your university-level learners of English have a comparable sense of security in their plurilingual identities?

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