

## **REFLECTIONS ON AND CONSEQUENCES OF AN AUTHENTIC MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN LUXEMBOURG**

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Luxembourg is the second smallest country in the EU, situated between France, Germany and Belgium. Its geographical location has contributed to shape its language history. When the state was created in 1839, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg lost its French speaking territory, and the new state was solely monolingual, with the population speaking Moselle-Franconian, which is a German dialect.

Luxembourg decided to maintain a very original language structure, in my opinion. French and German were no longer specific to geographical territories, but rather to socio-functional sectors. French was the written language of the educated class and German was the written language of the common people. In 1843, French became compulsory in primary education, along with German. Luxembourgish gradually grew to become the language of identity of our small Luxembourg community.

Today Luxembourg has two official languages so-to-say, French and German, as well as one national language – Luxembourgish. A Luxembourg resident can choose one of the three languages for official communication with the administration, and the administration is recommended to respond in the chosen language. To further “complicate” matters, official texts, laws and court decisions are in French, whereas, police or bailiff reports are written in German.

A typical native Luxembourgish family will speak Luxembourgish at home, read a Luxembourgish newspaper written in German, will usually watch TV in Luxembourgish or German, sometimes also in French. They will generally order their meal in French and receive official documents in both German and French.

But it doesn't stop here. Technological innovations are also popularizing the Luxembourgish language. For a long time Luxembourgish was merely a spoken language, whereas nowadays written Luxembourgish is used more frequently due to text messages and e-mails. Obviously, this is a more informal communication, and it is tolerated to write Luxembourgish with grammatical mistakes.

So, in fact, the average Luxembourger is truly multilingual in the sense that he or she uses different languages frequently on a daily basis. Language-switching is considered as a way of life. In the same sentence, you tend to use words from various languages, and people actually understand what you are saying. As a consequence, you will rarely find Luxembourgish websites configured in several languages, as everybody presumes that the reader is fluent in the chosen language.

Believe it or not, the situation becomes even more intricate, if you take a closer look at Luxembourg's population: 43% are non-Luxembourgish. They are mostly European citizens, among which the Portuguese community represents the majority. Newcomers continue to speak their mother tongue and they manage by communicating in one of our three official languages.

Hence, the Luxembourg traditional trilingual nature – Luxembourgish, German, French – is combined with further expanding multilingualism, which forms our modern Luxembourgish society. In the streets of Luxembourg, you will always hear many different languages without any obvious language dominance.

Nevertheless, since the first legislation concerning primary education, dating back to 1843, the teaching of languages remains a politically debated issue. For each school reform, the language issue provokes the most heated discussions in Luxembourg.

Our educational system consists of pre-primary school, primary and secondary school.

Pre-primary school is compulsory for all four-year-old children. One of the missions of pre-school is to teach Luxembourgish to the many immigrant children.

Primary school starts at the age of six until the age of twelve, when pupils are oriented towards one of three tracks of secondary school. So far nothing very unusual, except that three languages are constantly used at this level: Luxembourgish, German and French.

In primary school, children are firstly alphabetised, then taught and literally immersed in German, which becomes the formal language of instruction, whereas Luxembourgish is used for informal communication. Learning to read and write in German certainly implies the learning of a new language, but the closeness to the Luxembourgish language makes it relatively easy for those children whose mother tongue is Luxembourgish. This transition is, in fact, considered as a necessary transition from a spoken language to one that is written and essential for learning.

During the second year of primary school, French is introduced and gradually gains more importance, to the point of becoming the main language of instruction in upper secondary school.

For the first 6 years in primary school, every child is taught mathematics, history or any other subject in German, except, of course, French, whereas in secondary school, French can become the language of instruction, depending on the orientation. This is why mastering French and German at a relatively high level is a major factor for succeeding in our school system.

*Bear with me, there is more.*

In addition, like in all other European countries, English is becoming increasingly important in Luxembourg due to the economic sector and English being a common language for many foreigners working in Luxembourg. In the second year of secondary school, whilst studying

Luxembourgish, German and French, English is introduced as an additional foreign language. English is, for some students, their first “real” foreign language, for others, their fourth foreign language. Delightfully, music, films and internet is fuelling young people’s interest to learn English.

Luxembourgish people are very proud of the multilingual tradition of their country. In the language profile drawn up by the Council of Europe in 2005, experts testify that Luxembourg represents an example of a “successful and ambitious language policy”.

Many students in Luxembourg graduate from secondary school with remarkable skills in several languages that enable them to pursue higher education in French, German and English-speaking countries, which clearly offers wide opportunities.

Unfortunately, for 44% of the students in Luxembourg, Luxembourgish is not their mother tongue. This number is constantly rising: in 2010, 58% of the children entering pre-primary school couldn’t speak Luxembourgish. These children are unable to transfer their knowledge of Luxembourgish to German, and therefore are struggling to achieve the required level in the taught languages. As a consequence, there are many failures at school, especially when this is combined with a socially disadvantaged background, leading to a very high rate of grade repeaters and a higher than average rate of early school leavers.

For a very long time, multilingualism was considered solely as a major strength of the Luxembourgish school system. Through PISA, nevertheless, it became obvious that it might as well be one of its biggest threats. The Luxembourg school is, in many respects, a school of segregation, in which children with a socially disadvantaged background may succeed, but not without much difficulty and effort. In respect to the performance of 15 year-old pupils measured in the PISA study, Luxembourg hardly reaches the average of OECD countries, not only for reading but also for mathematics and science.

There are explanations, but all of them challenge our traditional educational system. We are trying to improve things - mainly in the field of language teaching.

The different actions that are undertaken can be grouped into three areas: 1. defining objectives, 2. adapting the mode of assessment and 3. mobilising teachers.

1. The objectives: Most people from Luxembourg are taught at a level which is close to that of a native speaker in all three or even four languages. These are exceptional students, but to our stakeholders, to people of education, they implicitly represent a model to imitate. Being trilingual is perceived in our country as mastering three languages perfectly.

However, this image is not realistic. Besides a few exceptions we tend to expect too much, as students don’t master these languages to the same level. Striving for identically high levels in each language does not correspond to a real need, because most jobs do not require the same skills in all languages.

Today this seems obvious, but the external view of the Council of Europe was very helpful, and following their recommendations, we have specified learning objectives for different languages. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, we are

defining standards of spoken and written skills as well as for reading and listening skills. These standards also serve as a basis for student orientation towards different vocational or learning paths.

This means that a student opting for administrative work must obtain written competences in several languages, whereas someone who aims for a technical training needs to be proficient in at least one language.

The requirement today is to take into consideration all areas of language learning – writing, reading, listening and speaking – and thereby reducing the value attributed solely to writing. This offers some encouragement to students who have, for example, a good understanding of the language but who are not perfect in grammar and spelling.

2. We are also focusing on the difference between formative assessment, measuring during the on-going learning progress of the student (during the cycle) and summative assessment, certifying the level achieved by every student at the end of that cycle. Also, metacognitive strategies are becoming an increasing focal point of language teaching and its evaluation, mostly to help language learners to detect common structures in the many different languages they have to deal with in daily life.

3. The challenge for the ministry is to convince teachers of the necessity to accept these changes in paradigms, so that they apply them in classrooms, a process that seems to be a permanent and shared aim in many European countries.

How can these changes happen? Firstly, by recruiting the right teachers and, secondly by training them adequately initially and in-service.

Luxembourg's education system is recruiting teachers with very high linguistic skills.

Before the creation of the University of Luxembourg in 2003, every secondary school teacher was required to obtain his or her degree at an English, German or French university. Teachers with a high competency in languages are, of course, a prerequisite for multilingual education. Nevertheless, this *conditio sine qua non* does not only have advantages.

*By the way, some students also learn Latin in secondary school.*

Teachers' training in Luxembourg reinforces a representation of the use and teaching of a language known as a mother tongue. Beyond that, I believe that many teachers don't receive a sufficiently specialised training in language teaching and learning, which means that they are often not aware of the difficulties that arise from learning languages, different to their mother tongue. Moreover, the teaching profession remains closed to potentially excellent teachers, due to the high level of language skills as a prerequisite. In times of teacher shortages, this aspect should not be neglected either.

Despite Luxembourg's long tradition of multilingual education and highly specialised teachers in German, French or English, we do not have a common education for languages yet. Languages are treated independently, which often hinders teachers to access all the

different forms of support specific to multilingual teaching, for example the use of paraphrases, of reformulation in another language.

Therefore the transfer of competence, knowledge and strategies from one language to another is not guaranteed in our schools. In order to make multilingual teaching and learning more efficient, teachers have to be aware of the challenges of language learning for children, who are not taught in their mother tongue. Furthermore, teachers must be conscious that young people, who learned a language in the streets or in a socially disadvantaged family, don't necessarily reach the level of academic language to succeed in the education system without help.

And then, of course, teachers in school need to develop a common reflection and set out a coherent strategy. They need to share a common vision that they can apply to their subject. What is true for language teachers also is true for teachers of other subjects.

They must help their students understand the concept of different subjects, but also teach them how to use technical terms and how to express themselves clearly in all the subjects. As a conclusion, in our schools, whatever their specialisation is, all teachers are – or should be – language teachers. A CLIL-approach (Content Language Integrated learning) is no more an exception but becomes the rule. All teachers have to reinforce with students a language that enables the communication of complicated ideas. I believe that the skills required by a teacher working in Luxembourg's multilingual environment are the very ones needed by all teachers working with children from a wide range of backgrounds.

Training teachers becomes a real challenge in such a complex multilingual context. Luxembourg can be considered as a test lab for these challenges but it will also have to handle the consequences. Adequately trained teachers are no longer an option but a necessity. On-going reforms in the area of initial and in-service teacher training, as well as research in the matter at the university will hopefully provide answers to this complex and critical task.

The introduction of the conference states that *the study of the teaching profession necessarily involves a deep analysis of a wide array of knowledge, skills and emotions that affect the professionals in Education, their students, the colleagues, school, parents, and thus the whole society.*

With this contribution I first of all wanted to point out **one** of the many challenges that all of us will have to face sooner or later in a society that is constantly changing and becoming more heterogeneous and this in a multitude of ways. Secondly, I wanted to provide some elements of reflection on how to construct teachers' training.

After all, the aim of everyone involved in education is to give all the children a chance, independent of their language, social or other background, to give them a good start in life so that these children become contributors to a peaceful world.

*And, finally, to prove to you all my commendable language skills, I had this speech corrected by an employee whose mother tongue is English and it took her 8 hours to review and correct.*