

**ConBaT+: Possibilities and challenges in preparing student teachers  
in English for plurilingual education**

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**Abstract**

In this short article, I highlight some of the possibilities and challenges I have experienced as a teacher educator for English in employing ConBaT+, which is an approach that combines content-based teaching and plurilingual pedagogy. The approach aspires to promote interdisciplinary teaching, deep learning, and multilingualism as a resource by exploring a subject matter/content from different linguistic and cultural perspectives learners bring into the classroom. ConBaT+ is an innovative approach in the sense that it moves away from the monolingual ideology that content-based teaching strives for and has predominated English classrooms in Norway. One of the challenges I highlight in engaging student teachers in plurilingual pedagogy further calls for rethinking on how future English teachers should be prepared to successfully support a multilingual classroom for the benefit of language learning.

**Keywords:**

*ConBaT+, content-based instruction, multilingualism, plurilingual language teaching, linguistic and cultural diversity, metalinguistic competence, metalinguistic awareness*

## 1. Introduction

As migration is making society gradually become more linguistically and culturally diverse, schools face the challenge of responding to social change, being responsible for educating children to cope with the multilingual and multicultural world. The Norwegian government now mandates in a renewed curriculum (known as LK20) that multilingualism in the English should be supported as a resource. In particular, it is stated in the English curriculum that “the pupils shall experience that the ability to speak several languages is an asset at school and in society in general” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p.2). Consequently, part of the competence aims in English after year 10 include being able to “explore and describe some linguistic similarities and differences between English and other languages pupils are familiar with and use this in their own language learning” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 9).

The inclusion of languages other than English or Norwegian in the English curriculum thus implies that teachers should not impose the monolingual habitus that has dominated English classrooms on their English teaching. The monolingual ideology in second language classrooms was in part influenced by the popular view in second language acquisition that language input in the target language is essential (e.g., Krashen, 1981).

To safeguard the linguistic and cultural diversity of pupils and their plurilingual identities, a growing body of research in language education, both nationally and internationally, has emphasized the importance of acknowledging and activating the plurilingual repertoire of individual pupils and their *cumulative* linguistic competence, i.e., multicompetence (Cook, 1991), in the classroom. Engaging with the multilingual turn (e.g., Cenoz and Gorter, 2013; Krulatz et al., 2018; May, 2014; Slaughter & Cross, 2021), this paper first presents and discusses one of the approaches that promote plurilingual pedagogies, known as ConBaT+ (see Bernaus et al., 2012), with a focus on English as the target language. Second, drawing on my own experiences with implementing ConBaT+ in an English course in a teacher education program in Norway, I discuss some of the possibilities of and challenges to preparing student teachers of English for utilizing ConBaT+ or plurilingual pedagogies in general (I use multilingualism and plurilingualism interchangeably here although I am aware of the subtle difference between these two terms).

## 2. ConBaT+: Content-based teaching meets plurilingual pedagogy

ConBaT+ is an acronym of a project which was conducted from 2008-2011 within the framework of European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). The acronym comes from content-based teaching (CBT) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) complemented with a plurilingual approach to language teaching in which teaching activities are aimed at enhancing learners' awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity (Bernaus et al., 2012). The approach thus takes the diversity of languages and cultures present in the classroom as an asset and a tool for exploring the content being taught. By discussing the content from different linguistic and cultural perspectives, learners are also expected to attain deep learning on the chosen content. ConBaT+ is innovative in the sense that it views the language teacher as a facilitator for activating a plurilingual repertoire in each individual learner, rather than an expert in the subject content or the language being taught.

The plurilingual dimension of the approach also implies “a shift in the teacher’s attention from what students lack (in their knowledge) to what they already know” (Putjata et al., 2022, p. 400). Adding cultural dimensions to the content being taught (e.g., math, biology) is also regarded as something new in the tradition of CBT and CLIL. By adding multilingual and multicultural aspects to CBT and CLIL, ConBaT+ strives to enact multilingualism/multiculturalism in the classroom by “making explicit and conscious the knowledge and skills pupils have built themselves in the course of their experiences of languages and cultures, at school or outside school” (Bernaus et al., 2012, p. 224).

The project, which involved students, schoolteachers, teacher educators, and policy makers, resulted in a multitude of resources and materials, including 26 didactic units in different languages, among which 17 units are in English on various topics such as coffee, fairy tales, a healthy diet, and body parts mathematics (ConBaT+, 2011). Each unit contains teaching materials that can be used for several lessons with instructions for teachers. All didactic units are designed for specific content with an interdisciplinary approach, i.e., content-based instruction, in which activities and tasks facilitate the activation of the plurilingual competence of individual learners. In addition, most of the activities and tasks used in the lessons ensure that all types of language skills (reading, writing, listening and communication) are activated.

The idea of combining CBT and plurilingual pedagogy first appeared paradoxical, given that the purpose of CBT or CLIL was to promote the use of the target language, primarily English in European contexts, in other subjects to reinforce exposure to English for language learners. In contrast, the idea underlying plurilingual pedagogy demands the inclusion and

integration of other non-target languages in language teaching. Thus, English becomes relegated to a less dominant position, the opposite of the aim of CBT/CLIL (see also Melo-Pfeifer, 2018). Nonetheless, ConBaT+ is an attractive approach for Norwegian teacher education for English teaching as it responds well to the core values and principles of the current Norwegian curriculum, which include interdisciplinary teaching, deep learning, multilingualism as a resource, and social justice (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Two of the units in English from ConBaT+, *Coffee* and *A healthy diet*, have been put into practice (with some modifications) in the past few years in an English course I teach in which the student population is culturally homogenous with the same first language (L1), Norwegian, and English as their second language (L2). The students' background in additional language(s) varies, however, including French, German, Russian, Sami, Spanish and Thai with different degrees of literacy skills and confidence in using those languages. The students are ethnic Norwegian who also understand Swedish to a great extent and speak different dialects of Norwegian. They thus possess a plurilingual repertoire even though many of them do not perceive themselves as multilinguals, being fluent only in the two dominant languages in Norway, Norwegian and English. When the students were introduced to ConBaT+ in their fourth year of teacher education for English, they already had some basic knowledge of second and third language acquisition, content-based instruction and plurilingual education, which had been part of the earlier English curriculum. In what follows, I highlight some possibilities and challenges that I have experienced in utilizing the approach to prepare future English teachers for working in a culturally and linguistically diverse English classroom.

### **3. Empowering learners with more diverse linguistic and cultural background**

One positive outcome of working with ConBaT+ is likely attributable to a frequently recognized benefit of activating students' previous linguistic knowledge and lived experiences; the plurilingual dimension of ConBaT+ empowers learners with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Students' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire becomes an asset in solving tasks that require cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparisons, which allows those students with more diverse linguistic and cultural background to take a leading role in the classroom activity. This concurs with various studies adopting plurilingual pedagogies, the findings of which reveal that students develop a sense of confidence with more engagement in learning as they are able to express

their ideas in whichever language they feel comfortable with. By being able to choose the language learners feel most comfortable with, emotional and psychological barriers (e.g., fear, anxiety) in a second or foreign language classroom are likely to decrease (e.g., Galante et al., 2023).

In the present context, the students do not necessarily feel deficiency or anxiety in the target language, as they are fluent speakers of English. What was noticeable, however, was that the students who are normally passive in the classroom become more active when they experience that their lived experiences with languages and cultures become relevant and valuable resources in group discussions or activities. Tasks that draw on students' own knowledge and experiences have also contributed to strengthening affective bonds between the teacher and the students.

Empowering students in language learning can also happen when their role is shifted from being a language learner to a language expert, especially when the teacher does not share the same L1 and lets the students act as an expert or an advisor in their L1. When the students were asked to help me with their L1, Norwegian, or provide examples from their own cultures, they became more engaged in class discussions, feeling eager to share what they know and contribute to the discussions. This can be seen as a “socially just” practice in which “teachers become co-learners and risk-takers with their students” (Galante et al., 2023, p. 2)

Allowing students to actively exploit their prior or existing knowledge of languages and cultures to explore the content (e.g., food) has been experienced as a positive incentive to adopt ConBaT+, as it increases student engagement and motivation. The positive experiences with drawing on students' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires in language learning would further enhance their attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity and develop a “multilingual mindset” (Krulatz et. al, 2018, pp. 123). Such a shift in the mindset will be crucial for shaping student teachers' own views on multilingualism and their teaching practices in a multilingual classroom (see also Borg, 2006).

#### **4. Lack of metalinguistic competence**

Metalinguistic competence is vital for teachers in dealing with a multilingual classroom to help pupils see the connections between English and other languages learners make visible in the classroom. In other words, an ability to handle language as an object of comparative analyses is essential for learners to be able to detect similarities and differences among the languages at hand, which can be further used for language learning (see also Haukås, 2014). The multilingual turn thus has shifted teachers' attention in language teaching back to “a more conscious focus on form” (Melo-Pfeifer 2018, p. 202) from meaning-based language pedagogy (e.g., communicative

language teaching). Most students who are exposed to cross-linguistic comparison tasks, however, do not seem to demonstrate a high level of metalinguistic awareness or analytical skills. For example, when they were engaged in a comparative analysis of vocabulary and sounds among different languages they provided, the students were not able to detect subtle phonological differences between, for instance, English and Norwegian (as in *maize* versus *mais*), nor could they easily locate a pronunciation difference in the letter *i* in *rice* between English and Norwegian as a starting point of metalinguistic discussion. Such a lack of phonological awareness is unfortunate as the cross-linguistic comparison of the languages learners bring to the table does not make headway to metalinguistic discussions for the benefit of language learning.

The observation regarding the low level of metalinguistic awareness among Norwegian students resonates with the findings from Surkalovic (2014) which indicate that Norwegian student teachers of English lack an understanding of language as a system (e.g., general linguistic knowledge and competence). A relative low degree of metalinguistic awareness among Norwegian students, despite the massive exposure to linguistic diversity, may partly result from the monoglossic language ideology that has been prevalent in both English and foreign language teaching in Norwegian schools. As the use of only the dominant language, either Norwegian or English, has been emphasized in language classrooms, it appears that most Norwegian students have little experiences in seeing language as an object of study for cross-linguistic analyses. It has also been reported that student teachers in Norway do not possess sufficient theoretical knowledge of language structure in English even though they perceive grammar to be important in language teaching (Nygård & Brøseth, 2021).

In summary, this paper has shed light on some of the possibilities of and challenges to employing ConBaT+ which complies well with the core values and principles of the current Norwegian curriculum for primary and secondary education. Despite some positive outcomes of employing ConBaT+, it was observed that student teachers of English demonstrate a relatively low level of metalinguistic competence when partaking in plurilingual pedagogy. The lack of metalinguistic competence and insufficient theoretical knowledge of language as a system among student teachers of English are worrisome and thus call for rethinking on fundamental knowledge and competences they should be equipped with as language teachers to successfully support a multilingual classroom.

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