

Towards language-sensitive teacher education: Developing a teacher competence taxonomy for the language dimension in languages and other subjects

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Abstract

One of the aims of teacher education is to contribute to continuity in plurilingual, intercultural, and language-sensitive education, across subjects and educational levels. In this paper, we present selected results of two European projects that support this aim. The article outlines the background and potential of a taxonomy of teacher competences that exemplifies dimensions of language-related teacher competence shared by teachers of languages and other subjects. The dimensions include descriptors for teaching competences proper, for collaboration with other teachers and stakeholders, and for teacher development. Furthermore, a dimension containing competences related to the analysis of languages, discourse and cultures reframes aspects of language teachers' content knowledge as a competence domain that is relevant, albeit to varying degrees, for all teachers. Two transversal dimensions, which contain teachers' language and digital competences, an overview of teachers' values and principles, and an account of professional learning opportunities complete the taxonomy.

Keywords: curricular coherence, language-sensitive education, language-related teacher education, plurilingual and intercultural competences, teacher development

1. Introduction

Developing the language competences of learners of all ages in language and subject teaching is essential for democratic participation in diverse societies, and therefore a crucial aim of all teaching and learning. Meeting this aim is a key collective responsibility of all teachers in an educational institution. The term *language-sensitive education* is often used in this regard, although typically with a focus on subjects other than languages (e.g. Beacco et al., 2016). However, the definitions of the term are very multifaceted. In this paper, it refers to an inclusive approach to teaching any subject by constantly taking into account the learners' individual linguistic and cultural repertoires, in order to support learners to deal with the language-related challenges they are faced with. Accordingly, there is a need for teacher education curricula and continuing professional development programmes to address the broad range of language-related competences required by all teachers to teach their subject effectively. A key argument of the materials presented in this

article is that collaboration between teacher educators and teachers of language subjects and of other subjects can result in horizontal coherence across subjects, involving mutual learning and a shared awareness of professionals' respective roles in developing the learners' repertoires. One way in which this collaboration can be facilitated is to highlight the extent to which language-related professional competences of different kinds of teachers overlap, and where there are differences. Furthermore, the instruments contribute to an understanding of how plurilingual and intercultural education involves an awareness both of language-internal plurilingualism (Wandruszka, 1979), which refers to the use of varieties (e.g. registers or dialects) of a single language, and of language-external plurilingualism (concerned with different languages), which can empower teachers in their complex task to apply plurilingual and language-sensitive methodologies in a context-sensitive way (Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015).

2. Language-related professional competences of teachers of all subjects

The taxonomy of teacher competences was first created as part of the *Guide to teacher competences for languages in education* (Bleichenbacher et al., 2019), an instrument published in English and French by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in 2019. The methodological steps contained a detailed analysis of forty international and national teacher competence frameworks, as well as descriptions of learner competences in the language of schooling, foreign languages (Council of Europe, 2001), and further language-related areas, such as plurilingual and intercultural competences (Candelier et al., 2012). The *Guide* was commissioned by the ECML to offer teacher educators and other stakeholders a convenient entry point to existing teacher competence frameworks, but also to conduct a needs analysis on what aspects of teacher competences are not yet sufficiently catered for by the existing instruments. To address these questions, the project team collated and sorted the competence dimensions and sub-dimensions of the instruments under scrutiny, and reorganized them into a new taxonomy, which is visualized in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1 The taxonomy of professional competences of the *Guide to teacher competences for languages in education* (Bleichenbacher et al., 2019)

The taxonomy consists of eight dimensions in total. It contains descriptors and examples of professional competences in six dimensions. Dimension 1, placed at the top, comprises overarching professional values and principles, and dimension 8 on the right includes professional learning opportunities that foster competences outlined in the preceding dimensions. Dimension 2 (language and communicative competences) and dimension 3 (information technology competences) are transversal to the following competence dimensions. This choice was taken to illustrate that teachers require a range of competences for rather different contexts, and often in different languages (e.g. a foreign language and the language(s) of schooling) for their profession. In the

domain of language competences, the contexts and registers span spoken and written academic genres, for instance to engage with the content of any subject and its language dimension (Beacco et al., 2017), to genres that are strongly informed by pedagogical and methodological considerations (e.g. when interacting with learners) or to interactions with other stakeholders (e.g. colleagues or parents). These concepts also underlie the other descriptors in the following dimensions. Dimension 4 constitutes a novel attempt to define metalinguistic, meta-discourse and metacultural competences as competences required for teachers of all subjects, alongside and in contrast to those competences of language teachers that are typically considered content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). The teaching competences in dimension 5 span areas such as planning, conducting and assessing learning with a focus on language and languages. Dimension 6 contains competences for the language dimension of cooperation and collaboration, and dimension 7 contains competences for the teachers' own education, professional development, including the language dimension of the importance of teacher wellbeing. The eighth dimension contains concrete suggestions for professional learning, such as doing micro-teaching, or joining teachers' association.

Draft versions of the taxonomy were submitted to feedback rounds at international workshops and conferences involving researchers in language education, teacher educators, teachers and student teachers. An international online survey (n=160) among teachers and teacher educators yielded insights on the need of a future instruments that describes common language-related competences of all teachers. One insight from this survey was that teacher competence instruments are considered necessary for a range of different uses, above all for the support of students in initial education and in-service teachers, but also to plan teacher education courses and to encourage language-related dialogue and collaboration among different kinds of teachers.

While the taxonomy capitalizes on the role of all teachers to contributing to the aims of Council of Europe language policies, which include plurilingual and intercultural education, it did not focus on the teaching of specific subjects, contexts, methodologies or age groups. Subsequently, the taxonomy fed into three further ECML instruments. It was adapted directly to describe teacher competences for sign language education (The ProSign Team, 2020), and served as basis for a new instrument that describes teacher competences for pluralistic approaches (Gerber et al., 2023; Schröder-Sura, 2023). Finally, it was adapted with a specific focus on the language-sensitive teaching and learning in different subjects, including languages, for the *Building blocks for planning language-sensitive education* (Bleichenbacher et al., 2023).

3. The Teacher Competence Profiles in the ECML Building blocks for planning language-sensitive teacher education

The Teacher Competence Profiles are embedded in a new ECML website entitled *Building blocks for planning language-sensitive teacher education* aimed mainly at teacher educators. They contain competence descriptors and illustrative examples. Unlike the three instruments mentioned above, the profiles offer descriptions of both shared (common) and specified examples for different kinds of teachers. The specified descriptors focus on teachers' contribution to language-sensitive education in four subjects: the languages of schooling, foreign languages, home languages, and subjects other than languages. Figure 2 is an example of how the competences within one dimension appear in the Profiles.

Dimension 7: Competences for initial teacher education and career-long development

This dimension contains professional competences for language-sensitive education which are related to all stages of a teacher's professional career, from initial education to career-long development, as well as to the six dimensions described above. It also points to the topic of mental wellbeing. While teachers' mental wellbeing is not a phenomenon that is unique to language-sensitive education, language and communication are an important aspect of strategies that teachers can employ to maintain their mental wellbeing and health.

7 A Further developing the professional competences for language-sensitive education outlined in the various dimensions above by actively participating in organised professional learning opportunities, from initial education to continuing professional development (CPD)

7 B Seeking out and choosing from a range of informal or self-selected professional learning opportunities related to or involving language-sensitive education, including self-assessment, self study, teaching a different level or age group, contributing and/or piloting new materials, etc.

7 C Considering the interrelation between language-sensitive education and mental wellbeing, and exploiting appropriate strategies when necessary



Subject teachers

They can keep up to date with recent insights on the language-sensitive teaching of their subject through reading and discussion with colleagues. (7 B)

They can explore opportunities for professional learning through activities such as mentoring student teachers, counselling colleagues, offering training workshops, or getting involved in the development of materials for language-sensitive education. (7 A)

Illustrative example:

A future secondary school chemistry teacher in her first practicum has received feedback from her mentor that her explanations are linguistically very complex and hence hard to understand for her learners. She does some reading on language-sensitive teaching, and then transcribes and analyses some of her self-recorded instructions, to track her progress towards teaching chemistry in a more language-sensitive way. (7 A, 7 B)



Language of schooling teachers

They can conduct an action research project on a topic related to the language-sensitive teaching of the language of schooling as a subject. (7 A)

They can talk to superiors and colleagues about challenging experiences as a teacher, in order to ask for or share advice on strategies, both language-related and other, to cope with stress. (7 C)

Illustrative example:

A primary school language of schooling teacher experiments with artificial intelligence (AI) tools used by his learners to draft and revise short essays. He discovers interesting ways in which AI can support language-related learning, as well as problems which could arise if used with a less reflective and critical approach and decides to share his insights at a teacher conference. (7 A)



Foreign language teachers

They can compare and choose from a range of formal and informal opportunities to maintain their target language competences. (7 A, 7 B)

They can keep a diary where they reflect on their theoretical knowledge and practical experience for the language-sensitive teaching and learning of foreign languages. (7 B)

Illustrative example:

A foreign language teacher notices how a colleague is struggling with the effects of a poorly organised and barely funded curricular reform that has made language-sensitive teaching almost impossible. She senses that the colleague may be at risk of developing work-related depression and encourages him to seek professional counselling. She also decides to raise the issue with the management team to review the implementation of the reform. (7 C)



Teachers of home languages

They can refer to specialist websites and podcasts to keep themselves informed on aspects of language-sensitive education. (7 B)

They can contribute, through their teaching, to empowering their learners to develop a positive plurilingual and pluricultural self-concept, while counteracting negative sentiments such as alienation, which could otherwise put their mental wellbeing at risk. (7 C)

Illustrative example:

A home language teacher of Japanese, whose initial education was mainly concerned with standard Japanese and classical literature, reads up on aspects of recent Japanese pop culture, such as mangas (comics) and animes (animated series or films) that have proven popular and motivating for learners of Japanese as a home language, as well as their fellow learners without a Japanese heritage background. (7 B)

Figure 2 Descriptors and examples in the Teacher Competence Profiles

Figure 2 shows the entire dimension 7 that contains competences teachers can draw on for their own initial and career-long education. After a brief introduction, the descriptors in blue are formulated in a generic way for all teachers. In the following row, the generic descriptors are specified in some more detail for the four groups of teachers named above. This enables users of the Profiles to focus specifically on certain kinds of teachers, but at the same time considering the other descriptions in parallel. A main insight from the editing and piloting of the Profiles has indeed been the difficulty to write discrete examples. As a result, a third row was added with even more concrete illustrative examples for the four kinds of teachers, which depict teacher practices in concrete contexts linked to the competences described above. Due to the substantial commonalities of language-sensitive teaching across subjects, even these examples are arguably transferable to different educational contexts without substantial changes (beyond referring to different kinds of teachers).

The Teacher Competence Profiles also contain tasks and suggestions for different ways to work with the competence descriptions. Using only the general overview of the dimensions as in Figure 1 above can serve for short reflection activities with (student) teachers, while more in-depth approaches can involve selecting specific descriptors and comparing the illustrative examples for teachers of different subjects. The Profiles are also cross-referenced to further parts of the *Building blocks*. These include short texts, graphics and tasks for a range of contexts in teacher education, such as planning or reviewing a teacher education curriculum, individual modules or courses, as well as teaching practice, mentoring and lesson observation.

4. Conclusion

The primary aim of the presented instruments is to respond to the recommendation to “facilitate communication and collaboration between teachers of different subjects” (Council of Europe, 2022). These aims, while uncontroversial, can be compromised by a lack of opportunities to debate the underlying concepts, including language-sensitive education as well as plurilingual and intercultural education. Moreover, the concepts have been developed and implemented in different ways across countries and educational systems. The recent ECML materials presented in this article will hopefully further stimulate this discussion.

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