

FREPA: How useful is it for (future) language teachers in Switzerland?

Daniela Zappatore | Lausanne | CH

Gli approcci plurali rappresentano una dimensione importante della didattica integrata delle lingue e come tale giocano un ruolo altrettanto importante nella formazione degli insegnanti di lingua, sia della lingua di scolarizzazione sia di lingue straniere. I nuovi piani di studio e i nuovi materiali didattici aiutano a rinforzare l'istituzionalizzazione di questi nuovi approcci nel sistema educativo svizzero. Di conseguenza è indispensabile che la formazione degli insegnanti di lingua in Svizzera includa sistematicamente gli approcci plurali tenendo conto da una parte di una visione integrante dell'insegnamento delle lingue e dall'altra dell'utilità di questi approcci per l'apprendimento di una lingua specifica. L'articolo discute dell'opportunità d'integrare gli strumenti europei, in particolare il CARAP e la banca dati di materiali didattici online, nei moduli didattici basandosi sulle esperienze fatte nel quadro di due dispositivi di formazione e sostiene che sia più utile concentrarsi – nel contesto svizzero – sui documenti di riferimento locali e sul materiale didattico ufficiale che permettono di dare delle risposte più concrete a delle domande legate alla messa in pratica. L'articolo conclude mettendo in evidenza l'esperienza e le attitudini degli insegnanti come dimensioni fondamentali nella formazione se si vuole che la messa in pratica sistematica degli approcci plurali abbia successo.



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Introduction

In the past 15 years, an increasing number of frameworks of reference and tools for language learning and for supporting the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence have been developed at European level, the most important and best known ones in the Swiss context being the *Common European Reference Framework for Languages* (CEFR) and the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP). The *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA) complements the aforementioned two instruments, “which still, more often than not, deal with linguistic abilities by juxtaposing languages, in spite of the principle [...] concerning plurilingual and pluricultural competence” (Candelier *et al.*, 2012: 9). Meanwhile, in the past 8 years in Switzerland, new curricula (*Plan d'études romand* (PER), *Lehrplan Passepartout*, *Lehrplan 21*, *Piano di studio della scuola dell'obbligo ticinese*) referring to

the CEFR and the FREPA as well as new course books (e.g. *Mille feuilles*, *New World*, *Explorers*, etc.) integrating the various approaches and tools have been developed. Given the institutionalization of pluralistic approaches in language teaching through these developments, teacher training will have to provide an answer as to how to integrate pluralistic approaches in didactical modules and reflect on the usefulness of introducing (future) teachers to the FREPA. Both questions shall be explored in the following, illustrated by two training experiences (training the trainers and pre-service teacher education).

Introducing the FREPA to (future) teacher trainers

Six cantons (Bern, Basel-Landschaft, Basel-Stadt, Solothurn, Freiburg [the German-speaking part], Wallis [the German-speaking part]) joined in the so-called *Passepartout* project with the aim, firstly, of putting into practice the Strategy of Language Teaching adopted by the EDK in 2004, and, secondly, of jointly developing and optimizing (foreign) language teaching methodology¹. Achieving both these aims requires a large number of teachers in primary and secondary school to be prepared for the envisioned innovation in a limited time, and as a consequence there was a demand for more trainers in in-service teacher (INSET) education than the institutions for initial and continuing teacher education could provide. Between 2008 and 2011, about 70 future teacher trainers attended the *Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) Passepartout* “*Weiterbildnerin und Weiterbildungner Fremdsprachendidaktik an der Volksschule*” aiming at developing the participants' competences in the following domains:

- (A) conceiving, planning, teaching and evaluating INSET courses
- (B) developing a scientifically based understanding of foreign language teaching today and its historical development
- (C) developing one's role as a teacher trainer.

Within domain B, we organized a day focusing on pluralistic approaches – in particular awakening to languages, which was the approach least known by the participants –, and the FREPA. At the beginning of the program, participants – to a large extent teachers with little or no experience in teacher training – came with different attitudes and different levels of openness towards plurilingualism, with some tending towards more traditional and monological (foreign) language learning and teaching, while others had been integrating the new approaches in their teaching for years already. We included various reflective practice activities all along the cursus, which helped deconstruct existing attitudes and beliefs and ensured that by the time we addressed the pluralistic approaches, these were meaningful and relevant to all the participants. At this point they still lacked a concrete idea of what competences and resources learners dispose of which allow them to profit from potential synergies among the languages of their plurilingual repertoire. The aims of the training day were therefore to develop a more concrete understanding of plurilingual and pluricultural competence and get to know additional ways to support its development in (foreign) language teaching.

Overview of the training day

The training day was organized in four blocks:

- A first discovery block during which participants experienced two *awakening to languages* and one *intercomprehension* activities, which they had to analyze afterwards with respect to the activated (internal) resources.
- In the second block, participants were first introduced to the FREPA, its content and structure as well as how it relates to the *Lehrplan Passepartout* by means of a short input and then compared the FREPA descriptors (in its 2007 version) to their own resources defined before. For this task, each group was given a different excerpt relating either to knowledge, skills or attitudes.
- The afternoon was dedicated to introducing the future teacher trainers to materials they could use in their courses such as a video with teaching sequences on *awakening to languages* and the FREPA online teaching material database.
- We ended the training day with reflections on the necessity of a change of attitude to perceive the meaningfulness and usefulness of pluralistic approaches and how to achieve this goal in INSET courses.

Block 1, 3 and 4 were successful: Participants enjoyed doing the activities, which led to a boost in self-confidence. Exploring concrete materials for their own teaching and teacher training courses as well as sharing and receiving guidance for their (future) courses were also well appreciated. Less appreciated, however, was the FREPA itself: Though the participants were only working with excerpts and focused firstly on the main descriptors and secondly on the descriptors, with +++, they were overwhelmed by the amount of descriptors and the graphic presentation in the 2007 version did not facilitate readability.

Challenges presented by the FREPA

Additionally to the amount of descriptors, a second main challenge concerning the FREPA was represented by the abstractness of the descriptors, even though this public was used to descriptors in general. Typical questions were: What does this mean concretely? Can you give an example? What kind of activity would I do? Does it always have to be a specific activity or sequence of activities? Is this descriptor pertinent for younger learners or rather for older learners? It takes time to develop this resource: How can we ensure progression? How can we make progression visible? Can we evaluate or test it? If yes, how? Are we even allowed to evaluate it (in particular attitudes)? Moreover, I observed that experience with pluralistic approaches was key to making sense of the descriptors. This point is also put forward by Candelier and Schröder (page 15 in this issue): “il faut établir des passerelles vers cette expérience par le biais de ressources qu’ils ont pu déjà viser (même si c’est de façon moins efficace) avec des approches non-plurielles”.

We were able to give some answers during the afternoon with the help of the additional teaching materials for INSET courses (video with teaching sequences, teaching material database), however, our main answers came from the *Lehrplan Passepartout* and the course books being developed (*Mille feuilles* and *New World*).

As an example we could mention a unit in *Mille feuilles 3.1* based on the French song “Polyglotte” by Henri Dès. By means of the activities linked to this song pupils not only develop listening comprehension in French, their first foreign language taught in school, they also discover that there exist words in French which they can understand thanks to German or other languages they know, and that they can use this knowledge strategically to help them understand the new language. They also learn how the pronunciation of certain word differs in German and French, even though they have the same written form. Furthermore, they discover why there are words that “travel” from one language to another and where they come from. Last but not least, they discover French words in everyday resources in their environment and mine these resources for similar words in German and French. Thus in

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this unit pupils develop resources towards five learning aims defined in the *Lehrplan Passepartout* for this age group that are closely linked to the FREPA:

- Listening:
“Einem Hörtext konzentriert zuhören und einfache Wörter verstehen.” (*Hören, Neuen Inhalten und neuem Weltwissen in der Fremdsprache begegnen. Hören, Lehrplan Passepartout*, 2010: 20), and
“Beim Hören von Texten Hörstrategien anwenden und sich darüber austauschen.” (*Hören, Die Fremdsprache in der Gruppe verwenden, Lehrplan Passepartout*, 2010: 20)
- Reading:
“Zu Hause nach französischen Wörtern (auf Packungen, in Zeitungstiteln...) suchen.” (*Lesen, Der Fremdsprache ausserhalb des Fremdsprachenunterrichts begegnen. Lehrplan Passepartout*, 2010: 21)
- Awakening to languages:
“Verhältnis zwischen Schrift und Laut beobachten, mit der Aussprache spielen. Ein in Deutsch und Französisch gleich geschriebenes Wort in der jeweiligen Sprache richtig aussprechen können.” and
“Einige Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede zwischen französischer und deutscher Sprache und Kultur kennen.” (*Bewusstheit für Sprache und Kulturen, Lehrplan Passepartout*, 2010: 24)

Two years later various activities in the first unit of *New World 1* support the transfer of the knowledge and skills developed in French to English, the second foreign language (L3): Pupils discover English words in German and in their everyday environment, they continue developing their observation skills, and describe similarities and differences between German, English and French, and learn how to apply their previously acquired knowledge and skills strategically to help them understand the new language, English.

Although a framework has to be comprehensive, exhaustive and general, it is by nature not easily accessible without theoretical and practical background knowledge that helps interpret it. When designing a curriculum or course books, authors have to select, order and “translate” the descriptors into learning aims and concrete activities such as the examples described above. They also have to provide answers to the question of what and how to evaluate within a specific educational system. While it is certainly important for a teacher trainer to have an understanding of how curricula and course books are developed, it begs the question whether it is useful and meaningful to introduce (future) teachers to the FREPA, in particular in our context.

Training future teachers of English L3 in primary school

In pre-service teacher education at the HEP Vaud we do not introduce students to the FREPA, instead we present pluralistic approaches as an integral part of foreign language teaching with the aim of

supporting the learners’ development of their plurilingual competence. We conceive the training and teaching of languages at the same time in a specific as well as in an integrative perspective. We shall illustrate this point with examples from an English didactics module.

Future teachers following the *Bachelor of Arts / Diplôme d’enseignement pour les degrés préscolaire et primaire* program at the HEP Vaud have a generalist profile with all students being trained in teaching French (language of schooling) and German as the first foreign language (L2), and having the possibility of choosing English (second foreign language, L3) as an additional subject. Students start in their first semester with a module on French language teaching, followed in the second semester by a module on language learning and teaching, and plurilingualism, taught jointly for French and German. During their third semester they follow a separate module for German and English if chosen, followed in the fourth semester by the third French module. Students finish in the sixth semester with the fourth French module and the second English module. Additionally, they can choose to follow a module on intercultural aspects in foreign language teaching offered jointly for German and English or a module on bilingual teaching on the topic of sustainability and how to teach it in German and English.

In this setting, *teaching for transfer* is a key concept to help students profit from synergies, progress in the development of their methodological competences, and limit redundancies.

- From a theoretical point of view, students deepen their understanding of plurilingual competence (knowledge, skills, attitude) and apply it to 10 to 12-year-old learners, for whom English is at least L3. We explore questions such as: What linguistic, metalinguistic, strategic competences have these learners already developed at this stage? How is their metacognition developing? How may attitudes and motivation impact the learning of English and German?
- From a practical point of view, we analyze examples taken from the official course books (mainly *More! CIIP* edition and *Der grüne Max*, but also *EOLE*) looking at questions relating to horizontal and vertical coherence as well as the aims defined in the *PER*. We look e.g. at

which reading strategies have already been developed during the previous years in German (and French) and how to adapt a procedure proposed in the English course book to introduce the same strategies in order to promote transfer and the development of metacognition.

- From a linguistic point of view, similarly to the examples mentioned above, we look at “loans” and internationalisms and how to exploit them for English language learning. At the same time, we analyze the progression of resources (knowledge and skills) from *awakening to languages* activities in French (*EOLE*) to a first transfer in German and a second transfer in English.

While we encourage teaching for transfer, it is also important to caution students with regard to the limits of transferability and make them aware of possible interferences. A typical example is “his/her” which can create confusion for young French learners of English. Including an *awakening to languages* activity addressing this phenomenon during an English class can help the learners on the one hand to understand and correct their mistake, and on the other hand to develop transversal resources such as

- “Observation et comparaison de corpus écrits et/ou oraux de langues différentes (*la formation du pluriel des noms entre les langues, y compris le français, ...*)”
- “Développer des capacités d’observation et de réflexion métalinguistique” (*Plan d’études romand (PER), Domaine Langues (2012), L27*)

The main challenge is to make students aware of the importance of pluralistic approaches in foreign language teaching and show them how they can be usefully and meaningfully integrated in different moments for different purposes.

Conclusions

While I do not question the need for the FREPA as a complement to the CEFR and its usefulness for curriculum designers, teacher trainers, and course book authors, and while I fully agree that “all language teaching should be linked to pluralistic approaches and through pluralistic approaches” (Candelier *et al.*, 2012: 10), my experiences in various teacher training settings convinced me of the limited accessibility of the FREPA descriptors as a tool for teachers, in particular for (future) teachers with little or no experience with pluralistic approaches. The main challenge here is to develop a basic understanding of plurilingual and pluricultural competence and of the learning objectives defined in the regional curricula for a specific (foreign) language as well as for the transversal competences. As this public lacks experiences and examples of their own, trainers should endeavour to illustrate not only the approaches themselves, but also to show how “traditional” (foreign) language teaching and pluralistic approaches can combine in a specific moment as well as throughout a language learning cursus to support the learner’s plurilingual development. Additional materials such as the online teaching material database can be useful to find ideas, but they often need to be adapted. A strong link with the official course books – pluralistic activities are increasingly systematically integrated – seems to be more promising. Yet first and foremost, trainers should not only focus on methodological knowledge and skill development, but need to concentrate on attitudes and beliefs of (future) teachers too (*cf.* Borg, 2011), because without openness and readiness to engage in pluralistic approaches, these approaches will not be put into practice.

Note

¹ *Cf.* <http://www.passepartout-sprachen.ch> (16.07.2015)

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Daniela Zappatore

is a teacher trainer at the Haute école pédagogique Vaud. Between 2008 and 2011 she was also a trainer and co-responsible for the CAS “*Weiterbildnerin und Weiterbildner Fremdsprachendidaktik an der Volksschule*” offered by the intercantonal project *Passepartout* in cooperation with the Pädagogische Hochschule FHNW, Pädagogische Hochschule Bern, Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg and the Pädagogische Hochschule Wallis. Her areas of expertise are teaching English as a foreign language, in particular of English as a third language in primary and secondary school, as well as integrated didactic approaches.