



This paper is taken from

*Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation*  
*Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2008

edited by Alistair Ross and Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9560454-7-8

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*Dinvaut, A. (2008) Identities in textbooks: do they reflect cultural and linguistic diversity?, in Ross, A. & Cunningham, P. (eds.) Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation. London: CiCe, pp. 397 - 410*

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

**Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Socrates Programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **The Identities in Textbooks: Do They Reflect Cultural and Linguistic Diversity?**

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### **Abstract**

*This study scrutinizes language schoolbooks in French primary education and confronts the identities of the characters depicted with the ones of the learners. The world described by textbooks is binary, monocultural and monolingual; it does not reflect the multicultural and plurilingual identities of many learners, and does not give a true account of the target culture. Most authors try to simplify reality and thus deprive teachers and learners of complex, rich and various resources. By not giving teachers the tools to value children's identities and experiences, they inhibit the promotion of the cultural and linguistic diversity of European countries.*

Our world is plurilingual and multicultural, and plurilingualism and cultural diversity are core elements of the European identity, chosen as the basis of European citizenship ; the European Union and the Council of Europe implement their linguistic and cultural policy through campaigns, programmes and tools in the fields of culture and education. Among those tools, the European framework and the language portfolio enhance the importance of the students' backgrounds, when teaching a language. Both are officially recommended by the French ministry of Education and they have been integrated into the National curriculum (in 2002 for students aged 6-10, in 2003 for students aged 15-19, in 2005 for students aged 11-15). In Colleges of education, teacher trainers are asked to offer courses about the European framework and plurilingual competences. A key target of this teaching policy is that the linguistic and cultural identities of students should be considered as resources for each student and for the group. Do language textbooks implement this policy?

According to Alain Choppin (2005: 39-53), textbooks have four roles: they are didactic tools to implement teaching methods; they refer to the curriculum and to knowledge; they present documents (texts, recordings, etc.); they transmit the cultural, ideological and political values of their school system. These roles interact with each other. For example, to be in agreement with the European linguistic and cultural policy and to display true knowledge about Great Britain, the recorded dialogues of an English textbook should reflect the diversity of English accents; the documents should present multiculturalism in the United-Kingdom. To reinforce the didactic approach of the European framework, textbooks should refer to the students' knowledge and skills and provide adapted activities. Any teaching tool should take into account its audience and adapt to them; when languages are concerned, it implies that a textbook has to refer to the learners' languages. The last thirty years linguistic research, from Cummins to Coste, has provided evidence that linguistic and cultural competences in any language grow on what has been developed in the language first acquired by the learners. There are no

This paper is part of *Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice & Innovation, Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A and Cunningham P, published by CiCe (London) 2008. ISBN: 978-0-9560454-7-8; ISSN: 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

separate skills for each language, but a common plurilingual competence which develops in different languages.

### **Methodology**

We analysed primary and secondary textbooks and first studied 76 textbooks published between 1989 (the beginning of language teaching in French primary schools) and 2003 for the teaching of English, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish in primary and first years of secondary schools; the prefaces addressed to teachers and students and the first lessons can be considered as the foundation stones of the teaching year. In a way, they are contributing to the didactic deal between the teacher and his students. We scrutinized them and our questions were the following:

- are teachers expected to value their students' previous knowledge?
- is there any reference made to students' family languages?
- are family languages and French considered as possible resources to learn the target language?

The results of this first analysis led us to study the whole content of more recent textbooks and of some added tools (CD, activity book, teacher's book). We chose two secondary and eight primary textbooks for English, German, Italian and Spanish, published after 2003, i.e. after the introduction of the European framework into the French curriculum ; consequently, we could expect them to encourage cross-linguistic strategies, acknowledge the learners' languages and give a true picture of diversity in the target language and culture. Our questioning was similar to the one for the first survey

- do the authors encourage the teachers to take into account the children's linguistic potentialities?
- how do they describe the linguistic and cultural features of the target language area?
- do they enhance plurilingual competences and strategies and do they give self-assessment tools?

### **The children's languages**

Plurilingualism today, for children, is not only a long-term perspective but a component of everyday life: their nanny neighbours and school friends speak different languages; they go on holidays abroad; their parents use foreign languages at work; some have the direct experience of migration. Yet, in most textbooks, French is considered as the children's sole language and there is little mention of the children's linguistic profile. French is mainly used in textbooks to reassure the children, to give explanations and instructions and to convey cultural contents. In the first group of books, only seven out of 36 use French to encourage children to compare languages. The words and expressions used to name French by nine textbooks inform on the authors' conceptions: according to them, French is 'the only language children know' (*Katze Fax*), 'the mother tongue' (*Grenzenlos, Aufwind, Get Set Go, Primary Colours, Los Intrepidos, Una Rayuela*), 'the first language' (*Pebbles, Happy Street*). The authors of those textbooks simply erase the possibility that some children might have a mother tongue which is not French.

In the first group of textbooks, only four out of 76 encourage teachers to ask children about their knowledge of other languages. Though most textbooks advocate a child-centered pedagogy and invite teachers to adapt their tuition to the children's skills, learning profiles and interests (*Chit Chat, Get Set Go! Happy Street, Tamburin*), they do not mention the linguistic profiles. Even some Spanish books (*Encuentro, Nuevo Encuentro*) do not refer to previous knowledge of the language or of the culture, whereas some students are migrant's grandchildren or children. Another paradox offered by those textbooks is the advice they give teachers about the relationship with parents: authors suggest parents should be involved in language teaching; yet further reading shows the expected involvement is one-way: parents have to listen to the explanations and directions given by the teacher (*Pebbles, Chit Chat*); they ought to encourage their children and to help them learning (*Chit Chat, Happy House, Happy Street, Pebbles*). Those authors do not plan asking parents about the languages their children know thanks to holidays, family practice or migrations. Only two textbooks out of 76 (*Initiation à l'espagnol et à l'allemand en cycle 2*) suggest that parents could come to school to present their language and their culture.

In the second group of textbooks, seven out of ten only refer to the class language and to the target language, two refer to a third language, English: *Hop in!* includes specific activities for bilingual French-English children; *Zusammen* presents activities about German and English, but do not extend them to other languages, nor refer to languages learnt through social practice.

### **The targeted languages**

We analysed the way textbooks describe their target language, its varieties, its spreading and its coexistence with other languages. Describing the target language is a way of transmitting conceptions about languages and practice. The authors can depict the plurilingual reality or choose a monolingual conception. The latter is more frequent than the first option. When it comes to describing the linguistic reality of the areas of the target languages, most textbooks (in the two analysed groups) depict a binary universe, with two homogenous hermetic linguistic bubbles, one for the target language, and one for the learner's language. Interactions between languages are not shown in most language textbooks, though there is one exception for English : authors invite French children to be aware of all the English words in the French language. But they tell nothing about the numerous French words in the English language.

Few textbooks evoke the varieties of the target language, and no information is given about local or immigration languages in the concerned area. *Piacere* does not mention the varieties of the Italian language (apart from SMS in Italian).

The spreading of the targeted language in different countries is shown through maps and pictures of flags, cultural elements and landscapes. As far as English is concerned and in the second group of books, it varies as shown below :

Textbook	<i>Cup of tea</i>	<i>Domino</i>	<i>Good morning</i>	<i>Hop in !</i>	<i>Hullabaloo</i>
South Africa					
Australia					
Canada					
United States					
Great-Britain					
India					
Ireland					
New-Zealand					

*Cup of tea* encourages the students to explore atlas and dictionaries to find out all the countries where English is spoken as a first or state language. *Piruli's* authors insist on the place given to South America as well as to Spain. *Piacere* does not mention that the Italian language is spoken in Switzerland. *Zusammen* and *Wie geht's* explain the German language is used in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Two clichés are often encountered in the textbooks we analysed : French is considered as the mother tongue of all the learners and English as an international language deprived of any cultural dimension : suppose a German textbook only compares the target language with English or French, it means it implicitly chooses these points of view. Only three textbooks of the first group present various languages in their first lesson. An activity in *Channel 6* asks the children to recognise English among a dozen other languages. *Planet@*, starts with language-awareness activities, mixing Spanish with several other languages. *Aurelia* opens the teaching of German by the story of children in Berlin: some of them can speak Turkish or Italian besides German, all of them use some words of English with tourists. Through this narration, the authors convey the notion of plurilingualism in a simple manner: both France and Germany are visited by people who do not know the language and inhabited by people whose first language is not French or German.

As far as the second group of books is concerned, bilingual documents in *Piacere* show the use of English in Italy. *Wie geht's* shows a German father who sings in English and various documents (a TV programme, a concert poster, and street signs) are written in German and in English. Both those books enhance the status of the English language and do not consider other languages. On the other hand the authors of *Aufwind*, a secondary school textbook, acknowledge the linguistic diversity in the learners' community and in the areas of the target language :

Rémi, Laure, Elsa, Mehdi and friends, here you are in secondary school(...) German is the language spoken by Florian, Kim, Heiko, Madita, Claudia et Kai<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> « Rémi, Laure, Elsa, Mehdi et tous les autres, vous arrivez au collège... (...) L'allemand, c'est la langue de Florian, Kim, Heiko, Madita, Claudia et Kai ».

In *Zusammen*, the coexistence of various languages in the same country is shown ; a dialogue between a Turkish-speaker and a journalist acknowledges the possibility of using several languages and of developing different competences in those languages :

Journalist : Wie ist es bei dir, Sevgi ? Liest du gern ? Deutsch oder Türkisch ?

Sevgi : Deutsch lesen ist kein Problem, aber Türkisch kann ich nur sprechen und nicht lesen. (p.51)

*Mis primeros dias*, a textbook first published for migrant children in Spain, presents a Polish character : she draws a school and labels it '*szkola*'. Several pictures include Polish and Spanish. This simple device enables the acknowledgement of the experiences of migrant children, language awareness activities such as the comparison of European languages (*szkola*, *scuola*, *scolaire*, school, etc.), the introduction of geographical knowledge about migrations and the European Union.

An environmental vision considers that all languages have equal values, interact and contribute to a plurilingual competence. Such a vision is currently supported by language textbooks first designed for migrant children before being used abroad (*Aurelia*, *Mis primeros dias*).

### **Cultural diversity**

The French curriculum plans for the teaching of eight languages in primary schools: Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. The speakers of those languages live in multicultural societies. They are of different origins. Their age-groups, jobs, religions and classes contribute to their cultures, as well as their education or their environment (town or country). Those cultures are dynamic and are the result of exchanges. For example, those persons chose for their children local names or names borrowed to another culture-group. In such a context, textbooks have a double task: giving a true image of the target culture and addressing real students preferably to dreamt ones. Teaching a foreign language goes along with encouraging the students' reflection upon stereotypes and developing intercultural competences. The way societies and cultures are depicted will contribute to those targets.

Most textbooks describe the target culture and use a narrative device: characters are the same age group as the pupils, they go to school, live with their parents, brothers and sisters, they have pets and they share leisure time with friends. This enables authors to introduce differences and similarities and to motivate the students. We analysed the descriptions given by the authors as well as the narration to find out whether they were true-to-life. Alongside, we listed the characters' names, as well as the photographs of places and famous people, as indicators of plurality in the described society. In the first group of textbooks, the names given to the characters implicitly convey the idea of homogenous societies: in Spain, all the children are called Pablo or Maria, in England they are Kate or John, in Germany they are Hans or Helmut Schmidt. We found three exceptions: *Pasacalle* shows a group of friends in Spain, whose names are Daniel, Yoko and Kate ; *Português a brincar* introduces the learner with Joao, Luisa, Diego, Ana, Mary, John and Thomas ; the heroes in *Aurelia* have German, Turkish and Italian names. We extended the list of indicators for the second group of books, and the grid below shows the items which tend (or do not) to present the target culture as open and diverse.

Items	Textbooks									
	Zusammen	Wie geht's	Cup of Tea	Domino	Good morning	Hop in!	Hullabaloo	Mis primeros dias	Piruli	Piacere
White people										
Coloured people	no	no			no					
Old-age people	no	no			no					
One child is using a wheel-chair	no	no	no	no	no		no	no	no	no
Characters have names in the target language										
Characters have names of other cultures			no	no	no			(1)	no	No
Characters have fantasy names	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no		no
Some characters belong to and experience several cultures	no	(2)	no	no	no	no	(3)	(1)	no	no
Working class	no	no	no	(4)	no	no	no	No	(5)	(6)
Urban environment										
Rural landscapes or housing	no	no			no	no				

1. The characters reflect Spain today : some of them are migrants, Ana is Spanish, Silvia and Monika come from Poland, John from the Philippines, André from Cameroon, Mohamed from Morocco.
2. the biography of a young singer, Jasmin, whose father is German and mother Croatian
3. Part of the family lives in India, the others in London
4. an English postman and a milkman
5. Photographs of street children in Abidjan, a child soldier in Rwanda, children in a playground in Bolivia, children working in a factory in Columbia.
6. An old lady wearing plain informal clothes.

Do textbooks describe the target culture as open and dynamic or do they stick to clichés? To answer this question, we analysed the topics, photographs, examples of works of art. Cultural topics in main textbooks are: the children's culture, everyday life culture, art, literature, heroes, famous people, etc. Children's culture is widely used by the authors of language textbooks : songs, rhymes, tales and playground games enable to use the language as a tool ; they create motivation and they enable the students to communicate with children in the target language country. Everyday life is largely shown: food habits, specialties, traditional events (Halloween, Boxing day, ...), myths (*Babbo Natale, la Befana, ...*), sports (only in English textbooks). Photographs of things or places present the daily life in the country : red pillar-boxes, school lunchbox, train or bus tickets, a poncho, a school bus, etc. All textbooks present the target culture and its various characteristics : traditions, cultural buildings, famous landscapes, historical events, fine arts, music, literature and traditional characters, from Huckleberry Finn to the Commedia dell'Arte characters. *Zusammen* stresses the interactions between cultures, through photographs of well known works translated into German : *Harry Potter und der Orden des Phönix, Asterix und die Goten*, the evocation of cultural events such as the Book Fair in Frankfurt and of German emigration to the States. Other textbooks prefer to show only the inner culture (*Wie geht's*). *Cup of tea* presents the works of a British painter, Thomas Gainsborough, by Sir Edwin Landseer, as well as of an aboriginal painter, Turkey Tolson

Tjupurrula. *Mis primeros dias* includes a poem by Antonio Machado, traditional songs as well as a song by Rafael Amor. *Piruli* presents Spanish classical literature (Don Quixote de la Mancha), Argentine and Cuban contemporary poets, a Mexican fairy tale, *El gallinero* (by a Catalan painter, Dario de Regoyos). Sometimes the depicted culture does not reflect recent changes : in *Piacere*, the authors remind us that Luchino Visconti dealt with emigration, and present Eros Ramazzotti's song, which dealt with Italian emigration twenty years ago but there is no mention that nowadays Italy is a country of immigration, too.

The textbooks we analysed try to give a precise picture of the target culture and they select varieties adapted to young learners, but most of them do not show the exchanges between cultures.

### Plurilingual strategies and competences

All the textbooks of the second group declare they are reinforcing the principles of the European framework. Thus we looked for plurilingual strategies and self-assessment tools. But most textbooks present no plurilingual strategies, and if they do, they only concern languages studied at school. Three textbooks out of ten present language awareness activities, seven do not acknowledge any plurilingual competence. Cross-linguistic strategies are promoted by two textbooks in German (*Wie geht's, Zusammen*), but only between German and English. Those two books do not mention cross-linguistic strategies between a language taught at school and one learnt out of school.

*Piruli*, a textbook in Spanish, have the children recognise Spanish in a recording of six different languages. *Cup of Tea*, an English textbook, encourages teachers to build together the competences in the mother tongue and in the foreign language. Accordingly, they present several language awareness activities, encourage the children's reflection upon various languages, promote autonomous research in dictionaries, atlas, Internet for the children to discover the varieties of languages and links between them. Those activities implicitly acknowledge equivalent status to all the languages. The authors underline that those linguistic activities have an added value: they contribute to develop debating skills and to enhance citizenship values.

When it comes to self-assessment, *Zusammen* encourages children to evaluate their skills with the European framework, '*designed for all the European languages*'<sup>2</sup>. Such a statement is inaccurate, for the European framework was not designed for a limited number of languages. Besides, it excludes the learners who speak non-European languages : a fairly important number. Four textbooks give self-assessment tools adapted from the European framework (*Wie geht's, Zusammen, Hullabaloo, Cup of tea*), the others plan to do it in their introduction but only provide "*well done cards*" (*Hop in!*) or score grids learners cannot link with the European portfolio (*Piacere*).

The European framework is announced as required by the French ministry but is a mere labelling : plurilingual strategies are still very few in language textbooks.

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<sup>2</sup> *Nous vous aiderons à vous situer sur l'échelle des niveaux de compétences fixée pour toutes les langues européennes par le Cadre Européen commun de référence pour les langues.*

### Intercultural competences

Activities in textbooks implicitly convey conceptions about languages and cultures ; more specifically, they encourage teachers to give more importance either to the exposure of cultural contents or to the development of intercultural competences. Some textbooks transmit a binary vision of the world, e.g. when children have to link names with languages and places. Matching Juan with Spain and a toreador, Carla with Italy and spaghetti, etc. might reinforce stereotypes or even create them. *Piacere*, and *Wie geht's* counterbalance this possible effect by the presentation of cultural exchanges (the experience of migration and the visit of a foreign correspondent in *Piacere* ; the dynamism of the German culture, the translations of novels into German, a German boy who practices break dance, etc.). Whereas *Good morning* does not introduce any information to qualify the simplistic vision given by this language activity. *Cup of tea*, as we have seen earlier, encourages researches by children.

Not only do the contents reveal conceptions about cultures. Several strategies contribute (or not) to the intercultural approach :

- The selection of cultural objects : the Spanish side of the Euro coin, photographed in *Mis primeros dias*, is an intercultural object, for it is specific to Spain and shared by the countries of the Euro Zone.
- The children's involvement : from matching activities (countries and festivals in *Hop in !*) to autonomous searching in dictionaries or Internet (the road signs of English-speaking countries in *Cup of tea*), getting students active contribute to a more acute perception of cultural elements.
- The presentation of cultural varieties : *Hullabaloo* presents Christmas in different English-speaking countries, Australia, Canada, Florida, Hawaii, Great-Britain.
- Confronting the target culture to others and enhancing the functions of the cultural elements: the Noting Hill Caribbean carnival in London, carnivals in Venice, Belgium, Nice and Rio ; key spots in London and Paris ; English and French political systems.

Those strategies enable to compare cultures and give room to the expression of personal experiences ; children can be more aware of the links between culture and identities, they can realize the basic needs fulfilled by different cultures are shared by all.

### Perspectives

Recent language textbooks mention different languages, and give more space to plurilingual strategies ; some of them include language awareness activities. But language diversity in countries where the target language is spoken is not enhanced. There is no information given about local or immigration languages. Most language textbooks stick to the old scheme [one state - one nation – one language], even though they are « didactically correct » and state that they respect the European framework. They refer to target languages within close frames: inner frontiers defined by linguistic norms and outer frontiers defined by political nations (Laplantine and Nousse, 1997 : 35). The textbooks we analyzed present various and numerous aspects of the target cultures, but created characters and shown natives mostly belong to one group : adults are white urban white-collar in their thirties and their culture is homogeneous. Many students can find difficult to identify with these characters' children. The textbooks do not deal with

the plurilingual competence in a systematic and explicit manner. Self-assessment tools do not include assessment in several languages. There is no or little bridge between the school curriculum and the existential curriculum. The children have little possibility of analyzing and developing cross-linguistic strategies. Textbooks give no tools to take into account or simply to acknowledge the languages and cultures the children have experienced out of school. Differences are neutralized, and it seems the books address an average prototype pupil (Perrenoud, 1994 : 119). The image given of the target language speaker and the implicit conception of the learner are similar : a monolingual speaker tries to become bilingual, only at school. All those elements might hamper the motivation and the learning.

This survey encourages us to question the narrative device in textbooks : it could be replaced by extracts of youth literature. This solution would offer a wider choice of characters and situations, a more vivid and complex image of the target culture, as well as a direct vision upon literature in the target language. Giving a true picture of plurilingualism would contribute to develop a European culture, give a true image of the target cultures and increase the confidence of bilingual children. Introducing language awareness activities, literature extracts and plurilingual methodology for teachers would be simple modifications and would contribute to a new teaching culture. More widely, it would enable textbooks to play a role in the building of a plural European citizenship.

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## First group of analysed textbooks

### English textbooks

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### **German textbooks**

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*Kinderleicht, Deutsch Als Fremdsprache für Eltern*, Max Hueber

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### **Italian Textbooks**

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**Portuguese Textbooks**

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