



# University students' plurilingual profiles in a French frontier city

Denyze Toffoli

## ► To cite this version:

Denyze Toffoli. University students' plurilingual profiles in a French frontier city: Similarities and differences between more and less plurilingual students. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, 2015, 5 (1), pp.25-43. 10.1515/cercles-2015-0002 . hal-01227576

**HAL Id: hal-01227576**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01227576>**

Submitted on 18 Nov 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Denyze Toffoli

University students' plurilingual profiles in a French frontier city: similarities and differences between more and less plurilingual students

Abstract

Plurilingualism has been targeted as an objective of the European Commission and its deployment is naturally thought to originate in the education sector. A recent study of the Commission (2012) has pointed to the poor results of French schooling with regards to foreign language instruction, but few quantitative studies have looked specifically at student perceptions of foreign language instruction at university.

The University of Strasbourg is less than ten kilometres from Germany and only some 140km from Switzerland. Various international agreements provide room for cooperation between the three countries. Nearly 20% of the student population is foreign (mostly European, but also African and Asian, with a small representation from both North and South America). 23 different languages are offered for study, 18 up to degree level. The recent (2009) merger of what was previously three local universities and a certain number of schools and institutes provides a background of both varying requirements and diverse pedagogical practices with regards to language acquisition.

As a prelude to the implementation of new language policies, a survey of 1400 students, representative of all faculties and schools, was conducted in April 2014, to determine students' positions on languages and language learning. Students' plurilingual profiles, attitudes and language learning preferences were probed. Results include a quantification and identification of languages spoken and comparative studies of more and less plurilingual students concerning language learning skills, representations and preferences, as well as engagement in international mobility. Conclusions suggest policy adaptations as means for promoting and valorising plurilingual skills within the university community.

Key words: Plurilingual profiles, learning preferences, representations, language and teaching policies

Denyze Toffoli, University of Strasbourg, France. [dtoffoli@unistra.fr](mailto:dtoffoli@unistra.fr)

# 1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF, Council of Europe 2000) defines

*Plurilingual and pluricultural competence [as] ... the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw (p. 168).*

This definition of plurilingualism resonates with Claire Kramsch's (2009) concept of *The Multilingual Subject*, who, although she has chosen the term "multilingual" over "plurilingual", is describing the individual's repertory and relationship to language(s) and not necessarily a situation related to geopolitical context.

Stephen May (2013) and the contributors to *The Multilingual Turn* (Lourdes Ortega, David Bloch, Ofelia Garcia and others) criticize the historically monolingual position of researchers in applied linguistics, a position which idealises the voice of the native speaker and creates concepts such as *interlanguage* and *fossilization* to explain phenomena that are seen as departures from this norm. In a context where a growing consensus of researchers regard language learning as a complex process, both epistemologically and empirically (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2007, de Bot 2007, etc), many applied linguists challenge the monolingual paradigm. Notions such as *linguaging* (Maturana & Varela 1998; Becker 1988, cités dans Garcia & Wei 2014) and *translanguaging* (Garcia & Wei 2014) contribute to the elaboration of a new, multi-pluri-lingual framework.

*Linguaging* is essentially the construction of language through the integration of the linguistic code, the individual and social contexts. *Translanguaging* involves this type of language creation, as practiced by plurilingual individuals and communities, "as well as the pedagogical approaches that use those complex practices" (Garcia & Wei 2014, p.15) The complex development of language competence recognises partial skills emerging differentially in individual learners, in a constantly but irregularly changing context, both influencing and being influenced by innumerable factors, including other languages and people(s) (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). As we are exposed to other languages, other people, other cultures, we are more likely to nurture interest than fears, thus increasing mutual

understanding and limiting mistrust (Kramsch). This is the base of the Council of Europe's language policy (CEF 2001).

In line with the monolingual image of speakers of different languages portrayed in school textbooks and carried through the secondary school system (Castellotti & Moore 2002), young French adults arriving at university are generally perceived of as monolingual, having added a few notions of other languages to their scholastic baggage, but having few plurilingual skills. This perception / denigration / self-denigration is reinforced by some serious studies, such as the *First European Survey on Language Competences* (European Commission 2012), which relegates 15 year-old (end of middle-school) French students to last place in terms of second language competence in virtually all skills areas. Students arrive at university with a reputation for being “bad at languages” (Poteaux 2012) and far from attaining the European targets of two foreign languages at a B2 level.

This perception is also accompanied by representations of these students as lacking in autonomy. Bézille (2002) accuses institutional (scholastic) conditioning of consigning students to passive and receptive modes of learning, which prevent them from fully taking charge of their own learning. This is reinforced by educational traditions which place more value on transmissive teaching than exploratory and experiential learning.

To recapitulate: in a European context where plurilingual skills are valorised and targeted at supra-national levels, for both pragmatic and ideological reasons, prevalent representations of French university students portray linguistically impoverished learners, lacking in the necessary autonomy to make significant progress in this area. This paper describes a study undertaken to confront these stereotypes with students' perceptions of their own language skills, language learning practices and autonomy.

## **2. Context of the study**

One of the oldest European universities, the University of Strasbourg's geographical location in Alsace has meant an agitated history, alternating between German and French nationality, torn between Catholic and Lutheran influences. Recent history saw a separation of the University into three distinct entities in 1971, following the student upheavals of 1968. Twenty years later in 1991, an experimental “European University Pole” preluded the reunification of the three local universities into the present University of Strasbourg in 2009.

This recent merger has made Strasbourg into one of the largest French universities, attracting some 45000 students in 2014 and employing over 4700 faculty and staff.

Geographically and demographically Strasbourg is near both Germany and Switzerland, bordering on the former and less than a two-hour drive from the latter. A member of *EUCOR*, *l'Université du Rhin supérieur* (University of the Upper Rhine), Strasbourg and the *Université de Haute-Alsace* (Mulhouse) provide international degrees in partnership with the German and Swiss universities of Fribourg, Basel and Karlsruhe. Linguistically, with 23 languages offered for study, Strasbourg officially teaches more languages than any other French university. Eighteen of these languages are taught to degree level.

All students arriving at the University of Strasbourg from secondary school anywhere in France, have studied at least two foreign languages during the course of their education, the principle one (often, but not necessarily English) for seven years and the secondary one for five. They are supposed to have attained a B2 level in the primary language and a B1 level in the secondary one by the end of secondary schooling, as defined by the National Education objectives (*BO spécial N°2 du 19 février 2009*). At the age of 15, they are expected to have attained an A2 level, which is globally the case, according to a comparative study between countries (European Commission 2012), but this level is significantly lower in France than in most European countries. Many language instructors at university intuitively feel that entering students do not have the expected B2 level, and this would appear to be confirmed by B2 certification testing during the course of their degree, where some 50% of candidates do not achieve the required results (*Bilan national CLES 2012-2013*). For university entrance, language level certification is not required and entry measurements are not performed.

Language policy for non-specialist language students at the University of Strasbourg is directly related to the policies existing in the three previous universities, with those from the previous scientific university being the most coherent and rigorous, while those from the law and economics university were the least formalised and those from the Arts and languages university the most traditional. Over the last ten years, numerous meetings, studies and projects have been instigated with the aim of providing coherent, institution-wide language policies and provision. In January 2014, two project leaders were nominated to propose a re-organisation of language instruction for “specialists of non-language disciplines” (*langues pour spécialistes d'autres disciplines* or *lansad*, in French, perhaps best translated as Institution-Wide Language Provision or IWLP [Morley et al, 2013] in English). While various

studies had been carried out to look at the similarities and differences in instructional design and pedagogical approaches, or to compare resources and organisational policies, the students themselves had never been formally questioned as to their own perceptions of language learning at the university.

The survey detailed below thus targeted the following research questions:

- what are the plurilingual profiles of University of Strasbourg students,
- do these profiles influence the perception students have of their language learning at the university
- and if so in what ways?

### 3. Methodology

In spring 2014 an extensive questionnaire was created by a researcher in applied linguistics, assisted by three Masters-level research assistants and a researcher in sociology<sup>1</sup>. The survey targeted the opinions of these “non-specialist” students, regarding their language learning at the university. Questions underwent several revisions; consultations with concerned bodies and preliminary tests to validate the individual question formulation and comprehension by prospective students. In spite of all these precautions, we have of course discovered with retrospect questions that should have been asked, but weren’t and others that could have been better formulated.

The final version is composed of five parts: “My Profile”, “Languages that I know”, “My language learning at the University of Strasbourg”, “What I think about my language learning at the University of Strasbourg” and “What I think about my language learning in general”. The questionnaire was formatted in *Limesurvey*, allowing on-line delivery and collection of responses. Students were approached by e-mail, during the last two weeks of April, with an accompanying message from their Dean or language instructors at the university. In 120 cases, paper copies of the questionnaire were given to students at the end of a language class and collected upon completion. These copies were entered into *Limesurvey* by the research assistants. Statistics were treated using the application *Sphinx*. In all 1446

---

<sup>1</sup> Sincere and deepest thanks to Dominique Dujardin (research engineer), Monicá Fierro-Porto and Fatima Hamade for their help, especially in the statistical treatment of this study. Special thanks to Samah El Khatib, for her tenacity in the face of challenge, her implication in the study and in the treatment and presentation of the results.

responses were gathered, representing about 3% of the 45000-strong student body. 1181 of these were complete (all questions were answered) and the remaining 246 were returned only partially completed. The sample population reflects the demographics of the student body, although it is not strictly representative: predominantly undergraduate (80% of participants, compared to 60% in the university), feminine (63%, compared to 57%), of French nationality (85%, compared to 80%). The disciplines represented in the sampling are as follows:

[Please insert Table 1 here]

## 4. Results

Despite the predominance of French nationals in our sampling, 75 different native languages were cited, the most common of these being French and Alsatian, with high representations of Turkish and Arabic, followed by Spanish, German, and, practically on par at just over 1%, English, Chinese (although this includes diverse Chinese dialects), Russian and Portuguese (see Table 2). Other languages account for 7.9% of responses, 47 of these (among which Dutch, Norwegian, Kurde, Hebrew, Serbe or Thai, but also Picard, Wolof, Occitan, Berbère, Lingala, Zaza and Dioula) being cited by only one person. The answers cumulate at well over 100%, presumably because several people gave 2 answers, indicating that many have what they consider to be 2 mother tongues. This situation represents 14,5% of those questioned. The greatest number of these “bilingual natives” are Franco-Alsatian bilinguals, accounting for 5,5% of the surveyed population, followed by Franco-Arabic (2.1%), Frano-Turkish (1.2%) and Franco-German (1%) bilinguals.

[Please insert Table 2 here]

The languages students had studied at school provided a fairly classic reflection of the foreign language offer in French schools, with English in first place (90%), followed by German and Spanish. The specific numbers however (German in a strong second place at 67% and Spanish in third at 29%) represent an inversion of the national norm for the second and third foreign languages, undoubtedly reflecting the importance of German in the frontier region of Alsace. Interestingly French was cited by almost 1% of the sample group as being a foreign language studied at school. We presume this refers to foreign or immigrant students having received special instruction in French, although it may represent a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the question. One question specifically concerned “the language of schooling” and interestingly, only 24 people (2%) indicated a language different from their

native tongue. This may be because they felt they had already responded to this question in citing a second native language. While all students declared having studied at least two foreign languages over the course of their secondary studies, the vast majority are only studying one foreign language at university, although nearly a third of those questioned are studying two or more and 186 (15%) declare they are studying three or four foreign languages at university. All of the languages offered officially for study at the University of Strasbourg have attracted students among those answering the questionnaire. In fact students declare studying 28 different languages, although only 23 are part of the official offer. I shall return to this point in the analysis and discussion section.

Students were asked to evaluate their own skills in the foreign languages they speak. Although the CEF scale is used at the university, we were not sure all students would be familiar with it for all languages they were studying, so proposed a simple, perceptive, Likert-type scale instead. In Table 3 below the self-assessment of the most numerous group for each number of languages appears in bold: in their first foreign language, of 1224 respondents, nearly 80% rate themselves “quite good” or better. This positive self-image erodes significantly for the second foreign language, where fewer students self-evaluate in the “good” categories and more in the “not good”. Although this overall trend continues for each successive language, we do find more “very good” evaluations for languages 3 and 4, than for language 2. We also find that while a majority of 2 and 3 FL learners assess their ability as “not very good”, the 4 FL majority self-assesses as “quite good”.

[Please insert Table 3 here]

The information collected in the preceding question was used to identify two sub-groups of plurilingual competence. The first group includes students learning only one foreign language, while the second isolates those learning four foreign languages. The answers of the two groups to various other questions were then compared, despite the difference in size of the two groups (932 vs 62), with a view to establishing correlations between more and less plurilingual profiles and other criteria. The first comparison explored was their representations of language learning itself. Students were asked to rate a number of popular conceptions about language learning: whether they consider it to be primarily mastery of grammar or of quantities of vocabulary, the ability to communicate, or to speak without an accent, knowledge of the culture of the corresponding language, the capacity to understand all that they hear or read in the language.



Both groups present similar rankings regarding these representations (see Table 4), in that they both consider language learning to be first and foremost an ability to communicate. Furthermore, approximately 22% of students in both groups believe that language learning involves vocabulary acquisition. In both groups, listening comes in fourth place, right before, or on a par with learning grammar. However, the two groups show major differences regarding their conception of learning a language as a means to discover a foreign culture. Those students learning four languages (4 FL: the “more plurilingual” group) rank language learning as a means to discover a new culture in second place, 30% of them (19 students) choosing this definition of language learning, whereas in the 1 FL (“less plurilingual”) group, this definition is ranked in seventh place, with only 7% of the group’s students choosing it (although this represents 65 people).

[Please insert Table 4 here]

Further analysis indicates that the majority of the students learning four foreign languages are majoring primarily in arts, literature or languages (for 35.5% of them) or alternatively in law, economy, management, political and social sciences (25.8%). On the other hand, most of the students learning only one foreign language are majoring in health sciences or sciences and technology (48.1%) – see Table 5. This could well provide one explanation for the emphasis the “more plurilingual” group places on the cultural aspect of language learning, as their studies likely raise awareness of cultural issues. However, it should be noted that these numbers are to be treated with some circumspection due to the relatively small sample size of the “more plurilingual” group.

[Please insert Table 5 here]

The survey also contained questions focused on students’ preferences for different types of learning activities (Table 6). We asked them to check the activities that most help them to learn.

[Please insert Table 6 here]

In order to interpret these preferences, we grouped them into three categories:

- 1- Receptive skills (watching video and reading articles),
- 2- Interaction activities (conversation workshops and exchanges with peers or instructors),
- 3- Teacher-guided activities (material on the LMS and in textbooks).

The term “teacher-guided” in this instance designates activities designed and organised by language teaching specialists, not necessarily activities accomplished by students under instructors’ supervision or in their presence. According to the rankings established by counting the number of responses for each activity, both groups share similar attitudes to the three categories of activities: both groups tend to prefer learning with receptive activities (watching videos and reading articles), interaction activities rank second and teacher-guided activities are felt to be the least helpful (see Table 6).

This corroborates the results for the following question, whether or not students prefer to manage their own language learning (see Table 7).

[Please insert Table 7 here]

The high percentages (64% and 70.6%) of positive responses clearly indicate that these students not only feel comfortable with activities requiring autonomy and self-determination, but actually prefer taking charge of their own learning. This attitude may be related to the fact that approximately 55% of the students questioned (803) are learning foreign languages in self-directed open access centres where they are responsible for their own learning trajectories, including setting learning objectives, choice of subject matter and choice of materials.

[Please insert Table 8 here]

Looking at the reasons selected by both groups to explain this preference for self-direction (Table 8), being able to make headway according to individual strengths came in first place, being able to work on subjects of their own choice in second and personal time management, which presumably includes progressing at one’s own pace, third. The aforementioned all took priority over the potentially “entertaining” aspects of self-directed learning.

As for the 234 students who prefer not to manage their own learning (only 16% of the total sampling), the main reason cited is that they consider themselves in need for supervision and direction. These are of course pleonasms for the original question. Other reasons (in order, when the numbers for the two groups are taken together) include the perception that self-directed learning does not allow for progression, lack of time, lack of motivation, a preference for lectures, and not having the appropriate tools. In all cases, the results for the “4 FL” group may be regarded as anecdotal given that the number of persons involved is only between 4 and 9 students, that is to say between 0.2% and 0.6% of the overall sampling.

[Please insert Table 9 here]

Finally, we decided to confront the answers of these same two groups on the subject of study abroad. This delivered perhaps the highest differences between the groups. As can be seen in Table 10, proportionally fully 15% more students are interested in study abroad in the “more plurilingual” group than in the “1 FL” group. The difference between those having already spent time abroad is also significant: almost 13% in the “4 FL” group, as compared to only 1.5% in the “1 FL” group. Note that only 1.9% of the “1 FL” group are foreign students doing their study abroad in Strasbourg, while fully 9.7% of the “4 FL” group are in this situation. Once again, the small numbers in the “4 FL” group mean that these results must be treated with some circumspection, but the general trends are probably reliable.

[Please insert Table 10 here]

## **5. Analysis and discussion**

In this section, I will first analyse the different results presented above, relating them both to the framework of plurilingualism presented in the introduction and to the initial representations that were being challenged (poor results in languages, lack of autonomy, etc.). I will also attempt to associate these results with research in other areas, which can give them meaning in a new light, specifically work on out of classroom language learning (OCLL), online informal learning of English (OILE), and self-determination and autonomy constructs (notably in conferring aspects of learner control).

This study has provided some basic information about plurilingualism in the student population, concerning both the vast diversity of linguistic origins and the widespread and diverse interest in language learning. Some 250 students are studying languages that would be considered in the less widely used and less taught (LWULT) category. These include languages like Dutch, Italian, Turkish and Japanese, but exclude Arabic, Chinese, German, Spanish, French and English. I mentioned that students declare studying 28 different languages, although only 23 are officially on offer at the university. The “extra” languages are ones proposed by a multilingual open-access centre, which provides resources for several languages not on official offer, on a non-credit basis. It would appear that French students, like their British counterparts, have an interest in languages beyond the purely “compulsory” (Britain has seen a significant increase in enrolment in optional language classes since the disappearance of compulsory language learning in secondary school, cf Morley *et al.*, 2013).

Beyond culling this basic information, it appears that some of the insights gained into student interests and representations in this study may well be linked to students' plurilingual profiles, that is to say their involvement with learning more (or fewer) languages.

As indicated above (see Table 4) the interest in culture and learning about culture as part of language learning was rated very differently by the 1 FL (less plurilingual) and 4 FL (more plurilingual) groups. The link established between the majors of both groups (Table 5) could be a point of departure for exploring this area further:

- Might there be less emphasis on cultural issues in scientific programmes?
- Are science, health and technology majors essentially studying English as a lingua franca (ELF) with more utilitarian objectives, and NOT as a cultural artefact?
- Do the students in the principle disciplines represented in the 4 FL group have other elements in common that might explain their interest in culture?

Most of the students in scientific and health disciplines are studying English, with a small proportion studying German. This is perhaps indicative of a perception in these fields (relayed by professionals) that English is the only foreign language required in order to have access to international research and attain international exposure professionally. This in turn may favour a utilitarian approach to the language, to the detriment of interest in wider cultural aspects.

It could be argued that law, economics, political sciences, literature and languages are all disciplines in which culture has an important place and in which national cultures influence the very content of the discipline. At the University of Strasbourg, languages in these majors are also predominantly taught in traditional classroom settings, under the direction of teachers who are for the most part products of “language, literature, civilization” programmes of study. This background may incite them to put more emphasis on cultural elements in their course material. On the other hand, students' interests in culture in the 4 FL group might also be a consequence of their developing pluricultural identity and have nothing to do with the type of study they are pursuing. Our exploration of the data to date does not allow a more nuanced vision of this question, although presumably the introduction of information about students' language levels, about the specific language centre in which they are studying their languages, or about their level of satisfaction concerning their language learning experience would influence this panorama and merit exploration in a further study.

Language self-assessment was used in the questionnaire (with the results given above in Table 3 and by asking students to supply their “CEF level” for their first FL), but exploited

only for the creation of the two sub-groups. Looking more carefully at this data might also allow links to be established between learning increasing numbers of languages and more or less favourable self-assessment or between level in the first FL and the number of other languages pursued later on, and so on.

The results presented above regarding the types of activities that students find most helpful for language learning also invite commentary. My own “teacher intuition” led me to expect that interaction activities would rate higher in these results, primarily because it seemed this would be perceived as most useful in “being able to communicate”, which they ranked first as a definition of what language learning is (see Table 4). It is also more difficult for students to practice interaction outside of formalised learning situations. The relative preference for receptive activities therefore came as a surprise. Does this suggest a certain lack of initiative, or seeking of comfort zones that require little effort? Further exploration and correlation with aspects such as language level might reveal that proficiency is also a criterion for preference of certain activities. Research such as that of Mercer (2014) or Rubio (2014) into the L2 self indicates that questions of face, confidence, comfort with error-production etc. may also be important reasons for preferring receptive over interactive activities. Proficiency has been shown to play an important role regarding these aspects of self and could be a determining factor here. As such it may indicate that this preference for receptive activities is not an indication of lack of autonomy at all.

It could, in fact, be considered representative of a superior degree of self-direction, in that it is the students themselves who decide where, when and how to watch videos or read articles, mostly choosing their own content as well. From this point of view, preference for receptive activities doesn’t necessarily express a lack of autonomy: these are often cited by students as informal online learning activities they undertake outside of all formal learning (cf.: Toffoli & Sockett, 2010, 2015); these are also the types of activities which learners engage in during time in the open access centres (CRL, cf.: Rivens Mompean, 2013) where many of them are enrolled and where they choose their own learning material. Again, further exploration into the specific correlations between these preferences and the type of language centre where the learners are enrolled could reveal additional insights.

Because watching videos and reading are the principle activities cited in Table 6 as useful for learning, it might be tempting to interpret this as indicating that the students concerned are motivated more by the entertaining aspect of these activities than by their learning potential, despite the wording of the question (“...the activities which most *help* me

learn languages”). Yet, when analysing the hierarchy they establish between reasons for preferring autonomy, entertainment, or the “amusing” aspect of directing one’s own learning comes in last place, with over 30 percentage points of difference, indicating that this definitely seems to be a secondary consideration.

The questions concerning autonomy and self-direction in language learning were of particular interest, as the majority of language provision at the University of Strasbourg takes place in self-access centres which are regularly subject to criticism from various internal bodies who advocate a return to “traditional” language teaching. Despite the fact that only 55% of the students questioned in this survey are learning language principally in self-access centres, fully 64% of them state a preference for managing their own learning. While this may indicate that many students find they can manage their own learning within traditional pedagogical structures, it may also indicate the frustration of some students, faced with teacher-directed learning that they probably did not choose. The reasons for not assuming or not wanting to assume autonomous behaviour are well-documented in the literature (cf. (Candas, 2009; Kannan & Miller, 2009; Little, 2002; Poteaux, 2010) and include perceptions about the lack of ability to do so, lack of motivation, time or tools (which are often excuses) that appear in the results in Table 9. Interestingly, only 16% of respondents actually give reasons for not wanting to manage their own learning. This may point to an important role for teachers in the preparation of adults capable of undertaking lifelong learning: the absolute necessity of fostering self-directed learning during the university years. While the research team had anticipated that degrees of plurilingualism would influence desire for self-direction in language learning, this hypothesis would appear to be unfounded, as the results for our 1 FL and 4 FL groups are very similar, both in preferences for self-direction and in the reasons given for those preferences (see Tables 7, 8, 9).

The final factor that was explored in terms of differences between students with different degrees of plurilingualism is the question of international mobility. As the results indicate (see Table 10), more 4 FL students not only state interest in study abroad, but have already undertaken such mobility. Wondering whether such mobility is an initiator or a result of plurilingual skills and interests would appear to be a moot question, the relation between the two being fundamental, within Europe, but also worldwide. Relating this information back to the most represented disciplines in the two groups would indicate that health, science and technology students are much less involved in international mobility than their humanities, business and law counterparts.

## 6. Conclusions

While leaving room for more exploration, this initial study does give us a clearer picture of students' plurilingual profiles (languages of origin and languages being learnt), at least at the University of Strasbourg. Contrary to prevalent French stereotypes, the student population is linguistically diversified and quite plurilingual (all students having at least two languages), with self-assessed skills that are felt to be “good” in their first foreign language.

This study provides evidence that “more plurilingual” students are likely to have different attitudes and approaches toward language learning than “less plurilingual” students, especially as concerns international mobility and the cultural finality of language learning, perhaps due to their perception of the necessity of international mobility in a globalised workplace, but perhaps also linked to a perception in some fields that “English is sufficient”.

In line with other recent studies in OILE (Toffoli & Sockett, 2010, 2015), the students queried here also demonstrate an interest in learning tools that are directly and informally accessible, probably highly influenced by their overall internet culture. Confronted with stereotypes of lack of autonomy, this study points to the interest in and desire for self-directed learning of the vast majority of students, in terms of content, activities and planning / time-management.

### *6.1. Influencing language policies?*

These conclusions could be taken as pointing to inflexion of university language policies in several areas:

- taking into account plurilingual difference,
  - by valorising in some way these skills (Duchêne & Heller 2012),
  - by constructing a curriculum based on plurilingual concepts (see below),
- increasing plurilingualism, with a view to increasing international mobility and global tolerance
  - by inducing more students to study more diversified languages, especially in health, sciences and technology
- building on student preferences for language learning content and activities,
  - introducing stronger content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approaches (Taillefer, 2013),

- integrating OILE and OCLL research into teaching approaches,
- maximising self-direction in language learning, thereby providing students with solid skills for lifelong learning.

Ways that these objectives could be achieved involve inciting language teachers to think not only about what to teach and how to teach, but more about what students need to learn and how they prefer to learn, for example optimizing opportunities for interaction (speaking) in the organisation of language learning and doing more with subjects that really interest students, for example those they have chosen as majors (developing CLIL), while perhaps also finding opportunities to introduce a cultural focus into some learning or allowing discovery of how different approaches to scientific phenomena may be culturally based.

CEF (2000) provides different curriculum scenarios for integrating several languages. These scenarios focus on the common base of language awareness and language learning strategies that can be introduced with an FL1 and suggest differentiated and specific objectives and teaching approaches for FL2 and FL3 (for example more comprehension-based approaches, or job-specific / discipline-specific approaches). By integrating teaching principles based on the provision of plurilingual instruction (not all courses in all languages have the same, general, communication goals, learning strategies do not need to be taught in conjunction with all language courses, intercomprehension strategies could be elaborated and build on, etc. – CEF: 169). True meaning could be given to coordinated, coherent language policy decisions at university level.

“Language teaching is still seen primarily in terms of mutual ignorance, if not strict separation; this view is reinforced by the institutional structure of most European education systems, which operate according to the principle of disciplinary compartmentalization” (Castellotti & Moore, 2002: 15). Linguistic diversity is desirable on the basis of global understanding (Kramsch), but also from the point of view of cognitive enrichment (Bialystok, 2007 demonstrates, for example, how bilinguals experience some “protection” against Alzheimer’s disease and give evidence of reduced cognitive age, compared to their unilingual counterparts.). Universities thus have many reasons to promote plurilingualism, in a global strategy of educating future world citizens.

Bibliography



Bezille, H. (2002). Critique et autoformation : quelques repères historiques. *Pratiques de Formation / Analyses*, (43). Retrieved from <http://biblio.recherche-action.fr/document.php?id=185&format=print>

Bialystok, E. (2007). Language acquisition and bilingualism: Consequences for a multilingual society. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 28(03), 393–397. doi:10.1017/S0142716407070208

Bulletin officiel spécial n° 2 du 19 février 2009. (n.d.). Retrieved December 29, 2014, from <http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid20873/special-n-2-du-19-fevrier-2009.html>

Candas, P. (2009, February). *Analyse de pratiques d'étudiants dans un centre de ressources de langues : indicateurs d'autonomie dans l'apprentissage*. (THESE). Université de Strasbourg. Retrieved from <http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00943151>

Castellotti, V., & Moore, D. (2002). Social Representations of Languages and Teaching. In *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education* (pp. 1–28). Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Retrieved from <http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/linguistic/Source/CastellottiMooreEN.pdf>

Council of Europe. (2000). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. CUP. Retrieved from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)

De Bot, K., Lowie, W., & Verspoor, M. (2007). A Dynamic Systems Theory approach to second language acquisition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 10(1), 7–21. doi:10.1017/S1366728906002732

European Commission. (2012). *First European Survey on Language Competences - Final Report*. European Commission. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/docs/en/final-report-escl\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/docs/en/final-report-escl_en.pdf)

Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2013). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kannan, J., & Miller, J. L. (2009). The Positive Role of Negative Emotions: Fear, Anxiety, Conflict and Resistance as Productive Experiences in Academic Study and in the Emergence

of Learner Autonomy. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(2), 144–154.

Kramsch, C. (2009). *The Multilingual Subject*. Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2007). *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Little, D. (2002). Autonomy in language learning: Some theoretical and practical considerations. In A. Swarbrick (Ed.), *Teaching Modern Languages* (pp. 81–87). Routledge.

May, S. (2013). *The Multilingual Turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL, and Bilingual Education*. Routledge.

Mercer, S. (2014). The Self from a Complexity Perspective. In S. Mercer & M. Williams (Eds.), *Multiple Perspectives on the Self in SLA* (pp. 160–176). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Morley, J., Campbell, C., Howart, P., & Nereo, F. (2013). *UCML-AULC survey of Institution-wide Language Provision in universities in the UK* (No. ISBN: 978-1-907207-68-6). The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/detail/disciplines/Languages/Survey\\_of\\_institution\\_wide\\_language\\_provision](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/detail/disciplines/Languages/Survey_of_institution_wide_language_provision)

Olive, M.-N., & Socha, J. (n.d.). *Bilan national CLES 2012-2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.certification-cles.fr/files/bilan2013.pdf>

Poteaux, N. (2010). Histoire d'une innovation et trajectoires d'acteurs. In B. Alberio & N. Poteaux, *Enjeux et dilemmes de l'autonomie : une expérience d'autoformation à l'université* (pp. 41–65). Les Editions de la MSH.

Poteaux, N. (2012). Autonomie et plurilinguisme : une même aventure ? *Arena Romanistica Journal of Romance Studies*, (11), 138–151.

Rivens Mompean, A. (2013). *Le Centre de Ressources en Langues : vers la modélisation du dispositif d'apprentissage*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: PU du Septentrion. Retrieved from <http://www.septentrion.com/en/livre/?GCOI=27574100883330>

Rubio, F. D. (2014). Self-Esteem and Self-Concept in Foreign Language Learning. In S. Mercer & M. Williams (Eds.), *Multiple Perspectives on the Self in SLA* (pp. 41–58). Multilingual Matters.

Taillefer, G. (2013). CLIL in higher education: the (perfect?) crossroads of ESP and didactic reflection. *ASp. La Revue Du GERAS*, (63), 31–53. doi:10.4000/asp.3290

Toffoli, D., & Sockett, G. (2010). How non-specialist students of English practice informal learning using web 2.0 tools. *ASp. La Revue Du GERAS*, (58), 125–144. doi:10.4000/asp.1851

Toffoli, D., & Sockett, G. (2015). L'apprentissage informel de l'anglais en ligne (AIAL), qu'est-ce que ça change pour les centres de langues ? *Recherche et Pratiques Pédagogiques En Langues de Spécialité. Cahiers de l'Apliut*, (Vol. XXXIV N° 1). Retrieved from <http://apliut.revues.org/>

## Tables

|                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Law                          | 16,6% |
| Sciences and technology      | 29,7% |
| Medicine and Health Sciences | 15,4% |
| Human and Social Sciences    | 19,4% |
| Art, Literature, Languages   | 13,1% |

Table 1

| Native language   | Nb. cit. | Freq. |
|-------------------|----------|-------|
| French            | 1205     | 83.3% |
| Other             | 115      | 7.9%  |
| No response       | 111      | 7.7%  |
| Alsatian          | 85       | 5.9%  |
| Turkish           | 49       | 3.4%  |
| Arabic            | 47       | 3.3%  |
| Spanish           | 30       | 2.1%  |
| German            | 26       | 1.8%  |
| English           | 17       | 1.2%  |
| Chinese (various) | 16       | 1.1%  |
| Russian           | 16       | 1.1%  |
| Portuguese        | 16       | 1.1%  |
| Luxembourger      | 15       | 1.0%  |
| Total queried.    | 1446     |       |
| Total responses   | 1636     |       |

Table 2

| Foreign language self-assessment | Bad   | Not very good | Quite good  | Good        | Very good | Total responses |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|
|                                  | %     | %             | %           | %           | %         | Nb.             |
| 1st FL                           | 3,1   | 17,8          | 28,1        | <b>34,2</b> | 16,7      | 1224            |
| 2nd FL                           | 9,9   | <b>30,9</b>   | 30,5        | 21,2        | 7,4       | 514             |
| 3rd FL                           | 15,1  | <b>31,7</b>   | 25,8        | 17,2        | 10,2      | 186             |
| 4th FL                           | 22, 6 | 25,8          | <b>29,0</b> | 9,7         | 12,9      | 62              |

Table 3

| Learning a language is                     | 1 FL learners |             |          | 4 FL learners |           |              |
|--|---------------|-------------|----------|---------------|-----------|--------------|
|  | Nb. cit.      | Freq.       | rank     | rank          | Nb. cit.  | Freq.        |
| No response                                | 255           | 27.4%       | 2        | 5             | 8         | 12.9%        |
| Mastering the grammar                      | 104           | 11.2%       | 5        | 4             | 9         | 14.5%        |
| Having a large vocabulary                  | 231           | 24.8%       | 3        | 3             | 13        | 21.0%        |
| Being able to communicate                  | 576           | 61.8%       | 1        | 1             | 45        | 72.6%        |
| Speaking without an accent                 | 24            | 2.6%        | 8        | 7             | 4         | 6.5%         |
| <b>Knowing the culture of the language</b> | <b>65</b>     | <b>7.0%</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>2</b>      | <b>19</b> | <b>30.7%</b> |
| Understanding everything you read          | 91            | 9.8%        | 6        | 6             | 6         | 9.7%         |
| Understanding everything you hear          | 203           | 21.8%       | 4        | 4             | 9         | 14.5%        |
| Total queried                              | 932           |             |          |               | 62        |              |

Table 4

| Discipline of study                                       | 1 FL learners |              | 4 FL learners |              |
|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
|   | Nb. cit.      | Freq.        | Nb. cit.      | Freq.        |
| No response   | 62            | 6.7%         | 5             | 8.1%         |
| Law, economics, management, political and social sciences | 152           | 16.3%        | <b>16</b>     | <b>25.8%</b> |
| Science and technology                                    | <b>280</b>    | <b>30.0%</b> | 6             | 9.7%         |
| Health sciences   | 169           | 18.1%        | 1             | 1.6%         |
| Human and social sciences                                 | 198           | 21.2%        | 12            | 19.4%        |
| Arts, literature, languages                               | 71            | 7.6%         | <b>22</b>     | <b>35.5%</b> |
| Total queried   | 932           | 100%         | 62            | 100%         |

Table 5

| The activities that most help me to learn | 1 FL learners |              |          | 4 FL learners |           |              |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|---------------|-----------|--------------|
|   | Nb. cit.      | Freq.        | Rank.    | Rank          | Nb. cit.  | Freq.        |
| No response                               | 222           | 23.8%        |          |               | 5         | 8.1%         |
| <b>Reading articles</b>                   | <b>441</b>    | <b>47.3%</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>2</b>      | <b>35</b> | <b>56.5%</b> |
| <b>Watching videos</b>                    | <b>476</b>    | <b>51.1%</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>1</b>      | <b>37</b> | <b>59.7%</b> |
| Conversation workshops                    | 343           | 36.8%        | 3        | 4             | 27        | 43.6%        |
| Activities on the LMS                     | 144           | 15.5%        | 6        | 6             | 10        | 16.1%        |
| Speaking with other students              | 273           | 29.3%        | 5        | 3             | 29        | 46.8%        |
| Speaking with the teacher                 | 312           | 33.5%        | 4        | 4             | 27        | 43.6%        |
| Using (text)books                         | 115           | 12.3%        | 7        | 5             | 15        | 24.2%        |
| Total queried                             | 932           |              |          |               | 62        |              |

Table 6

| I like managing my own learning | 1 FL learners |            | 4 FL learners |              |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|--------------|
|                                 | Nb. cit.      | Freq.      | Nb. cit.      | Freq.        |
| No                              | 219           | 36%        | 15            | 29.4%        |
| <b>Yes</b>                      | <b>388</b>    | <b>64%</b> | <b>36</b>     | <b>70.6%</b> |
| Total responses                 | 607           | 100%       | 51            | 100%         |

Table 7

| I prefer to manage my own learning because  | 1 FL learners |       | 4 FL learners |       |
|---|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|
|   | Nb. cit.      | Freq. | Nb. cit.      | Freq. |
| I can proceed according to my own strengths | 272           | 70.5% | 27            | 75%   |
| I manage my time better                     | 248           | 64.2% | 21            | 58.3% |
| I can work on subjects that I like          | 272           | 70.5% | 23            | 63.8% |
| it's more fun                               | 126           | 32.6% | 12            | 33.3% |
| Total responses                             | 386           |       | 36            |       |

Table 8

| I prefer not to manage my own learning because | 1 FL learners |       | 4 FL learners |       |
|--|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|
|  | Nb. cit.      | Fréq. | Nb. cit.      | Fréq. |
| I need to be supervised                        | 150           | 16.1% | 9             | 14.5% |
| I need direction                               | 89            | 9.6%  | 6             | 9.7%  |
| I prefer lectures                              | 61            | 6.6%  | 4             | 6.5%  |
| I don't have the necessary tools               | 45            | 4.8%  | 5             | 8.1%  |
| I'm not very motivated                         | 66            | 7.1%  | 4             | 6.5%  |
| I don't have the time                          | 80            | 8.6%  | 5             | 8.1%  |
| it's not a good way to make progress           | 88            | 9.4%  | 5             | 8.1%  |
| Total responses                                | 217           |       | 15            |       |

Table 9

| I envisage studying abroad | 1 FL learners |       | 4 FL learners |              |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------|---------------|--------------|
|                            | Nb. cit.      | Fréq. | Nb. cit.      | Fréq.        |
| No response                | 287           | 30.8% | 9             | 14.5%        |
| No                         | 182           | 19.5% | 6             | 9.7%         |
| Yes                        | 234           | 25.1% | <b>25</b>     | <b>40.3%</b> |
| I don't know               | 197           | 21.1% | 8             | 12.9%        |
| I already have             | 14            | 1.5%  | <b>8</b>      | <b>12.9%</b> |
| I am a foreign student     | 18            | 1.9%  | 6             | 9.7%         |
| Total queried.             | 932           | 100%  | 62            | 100%         |

Table 10