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Young children learning languages in a multilingual context

**abstract:**

Luxembourg is a trilingual country where residents communicate in Luxembourgish, French and German concurrently. Children therefore study these languages at primary school. In this article I explore how six eight-year-old Luxembourgish children use and learn German, French and English in formal and informal settings over a period of one year. Their eagerness to learn and use German and English contrasted with their cautious and formal approach to the learning of French. My findings demonstrate that second language learning in a multilingual country is not an 'automatic' or 'natural' process but, rather, children's language behaviour depends on their personal goals, interests, competence, confidence and understanding of what counts as appropriate language use. These factors are influenced by the formal approach to language learning at school.

**key words:**

home, school, language learning, motivation

As a primary teacher in Luxembourg, I had many opportunities to watch my first and second graders write stories in German and French, the two languages taught at school, and make their first attempts at writing in English, Italian and Portuguese (Kirsch, 1997, 1999). These stories prompted me to enquire into pupils' experiences of learning languages out of school. Informal conversations with children and their parents revealed the range and richness of their linguistic environment.

In this article I investigate the motivation of six eight-year -old native Luxembourgish children to learn languages and explore the ways in which they learned German, French and English at school and in out-of-school contexts over the period of a year. Though these children were surrounded by languages in multilingual Luxembourg, aware of the need to learn languages and knowledgeable of some of the means of doing so, I argue that they nonetheless did not learn languages 'automatically'. The way they went about functionally practising these three languages depended on their personal goals, confidence, competence and an understanding of what counts as valid language learning. These factors were directly influenced by the formal approach at school.

I begin this article with an outline of a sociocultural approach to language learning underpinning my paper and a description of the linguistic context in Luxembourg. A brief section on methodology precedes my findings. I conclude with some reflections for practitioners.

## **1. Language learning as a social practice**

A sociocultural approach to second language learning is underpinned by the premise that the origin of language competence in a first, second or foreign language lies in the social reality and therefore in language use occurring in a discernible social environment (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lantolf, 2000; Markee, 2004). In order to acquire language, learners need to participate in the practices of their community (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998). Language learning is therefore an activity that can be viewed as 'publicly deployed, socio-interactionally configured, and contextually contingent' (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004: 515).

All language learning events are socially organised and embedded in cultural meaning systems. This means that novices learn a first and any subsequent languages in specific social, cultural, political and economic environments that make available particular linguistic forms which reflect particular cultural values and beliefs. Experienced members play a crucial role in the process of first and second language learning and socialisation. Firstly, they

influence the learners' developing attitudes, beliefs and representation of language learning through their own language use and perceptions of what counts as learning (Heath, 1983; Schiefflin & Cochran-Smith; 1984; Vasquez et al., 1994; Kanagy, 1999). Secondly, they construct learning opportunities which enable novices to participate 'at the periphery' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and then to play more complex and elaborate roles in their community (Wells, 1979; Bruner, 1983; Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 2003). While the more competent members such as parents, siblings or teachers guide the overall learning process, the novices internalise and reproduce particular beliefs, values and behaviours which enable them to use language appropriately and accurately and to develop knowledge about language learning.

This model of learning contrasts both with 'transmission' and 'learning' models (Rogoff, 1994). The former is underpinned by behaviourism and ascribes the more important role to the adult who 'fills empty vessels'. The latter views the child as active and ascribes a less important role to the adult. A sociocultural approach, by contrast, holds that meanings and understandings grow out of social encounters and that learning happens as the novice and the expert actively engage in common practices. Being 'active' hereby means taking control over the learning process but also 'acting on' the sociocultural practices and developing new ones. Gregory et al. (2004) highlighted ways in which young learners merged contrasting sociocultural practices. They illustrated the creative processes whereby young learners syncretised existing languages, literacies and practices to create new ones. The transformation of practices is possible because practices are socially constructed.

From the point of view of activity theory, a branch of sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1991; Frawley, 1997), practices are part of an activity system which is in constant dialogue with other activity systems (Engeström, 1987). The frictions between systems and settings can lead to clashes and contradictions which, in turn, are the driving force of development and change (Il'enkov, 1982). The relationship between learners and context is, therefore, dialectical, dynamic and constantly changing.

Activity theorists hold a positive view of human agency (Leont'ev, 1979; Wertsch, 1985; Nardi, 1996). Studies on language learning from this perspective provide evidence that personal goals are of central importance because they influence the learners' initiative, task approach, engagement and, eventually, their achievements. What they learn ultimately depends on their own goals and not on the objectives set by other people (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Platt & Brooks, 1994; Gillette, 1994; Wang, 1996; Roebuck, 2000).

Since a good understanding of human cognition and human action requires studying the everyday activities as they are embedded in their cultural, institutional, and historical context

(Wertsch, 1994; Rogoff, 2003), I now turn to the complex linguistic situation in Luxembourg. This section provides some first insights into practices of language use.

## **2. Language use in multilingual Luxembourg**

Luxembourg is the smallest country of the European Union bordering France, Belgium and Germany. The size, location, demography and economy are responsible for the residents' use of a range of languages. The country has three official languages: 'Lëtzebuergesch' (Luxembourgish<sup>1</sup>), French and German but many more are spoken because of the high percentage of foreign residents in the country. In January 2004, 38.6% of the inhabitants were non-nationals, Portuguese and Italian counting for the largest number (STATEC, 2004). Whilst many Italians speak Luxembourgish along with French and Italian, the Portuguese prefer French. Language use in Luxembourg is further influenced by the high number of transborder workers. More than a hundred thousand commute daily from the three neighbouring countries and 80% of the transborder workers come from France and Belgium (IGSS, 2005).

While multilingualism in Belgium and Switzerland is 'juxtaposed' (different linguistic communities living next to each other), the trilingualism in Luxembourg is 'superposed': the same people use different languages according to the situation (Trausch, 1998). Findings show that 96% of residents regularly use French, 81% German and 80% Luxembourgish (Fehlen et al., 1998).

According to Fehlen et al. (1998) the residents' most proficient and preferred language is Luxembourgish. It is the most frequently spoken language, followed by French and German, except at work where French dominates. As a written medium of communication, French is most used in public matters and professional lives. The choice of language for social and private affairs depends on the purpose and the users' academic qualifications. The rule seems to be 'French as often as possible, German as far as necessary' (Trausch, 1999:11). While the larger public prefers German, the intellectuals prefer French. English occupies third place in reading and writing and comes long before Portuguese and Italian. Luxembourgers are able to receive television broadcasts in seven languages on twenty-eight channels. Newspapers publish articles in five languages.

With typical pragmatism, schools privilege the teaching of languages. In the first two years of primary school, language learning accounts for approximately one third of the time table.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lëtzebuergesch' belongs to the West-Germanic branch of Indo-European languages. Linguists classify it as a West Middle German dialect called 'Moselle Franconian' (Hoffmann, 1991).

That increases to nearly 50% in the last four years (MENFP, 1999). Compulsory schooling includes two years of nursery, six years of primary school and three years of secondary.

Table 1 shows each language learned in each institution.

school	starting age	language (s) learned
Nursery	3 or 4	Luxembourgish
Primary	6	German, French
Secondary	12	German, French, English optional: Latin, Italian, Spanish

Table 1: Compulsory schooling in Luxembourg

Pupils become literate in German in Year 1, thus a language different from though linguistically close to Luxembourgish. German is taught as a distinct subject but is also the medium of instruction for most academic subjects. Oral French is introduced in the second term of Year 2 and writing in Year 3. Teachers tend to use French as the medium of instruction in the French lessons. Children have one hour of Luxembourgish per week but this is not sufficient to ensure competence in grammar and orthography. Luxembourgish is the language of non-academic subjects.

The curricula in German and French are geared to enhance children's comprehension, expression, reading and writing skills but the emphasis lies on accurate oral and written production. The following example taken from the French curriculum illustrates the vastness of the programme: pupils have four years to learn all the regular verbs in –er, –re and –ir and many irregular ones, and to conjugate these in the present, imperative, perfect, past tense, future, and in the conditional and subjunctive moods (MENFP, 1999).

We see from the above that the following factors are likely to influence and facilitate children's language learning processes:

1. Multilingualism as firmly rooted in the Luxembourgish identity
2. French being a high status language that is dominant in society
3. Exposure to German and French being possible on account of the proximity of these countries
4. Schools in Luxembourg having a long tradition of teaching German, French and Luxembourgish.

In this multilingual context, conditions seem ideal for children to become competent and fluent speakers of several languages. Before I detail ways in which children learn and use languages, I present the methodology of my study.

### **3. Design of the study**

The social nature of language learning and my sociocultural framework prompted me to choose ethnographic methods to collect data. I believed that I could best capture and understand children's encounters with languages and their ways of making sense of their learning experience if I worked with only six children and used a variety of methods over a long period of time. I choose six 'ordinary' eight-year-old native Luxembourgish pupils who were average to high achievers in their language lessons. The parents of Monique, Anne, Danielle, Gilles, David and Yves worked in local industries, business or administration and had a similar economic status. This sample was selected so that differences could not be explained by social class.

My study took place in an industrial town in South-West Luxembourg, close to France and Belgium and lasted over a calendar year (two terms in Year 3 and one term in Year 4). I used a variety of methods to collect data thereby relying most on participant observation of language lessons at school and semi-structured interviews with children, parents and teachers. In the interviews, I explored children's attitudes to language learning, their language use and the language learning activities. In addition, I twice used a survey to track the language use of children and parents over a week. Finally, I involved children themselves in the process of data collection. They kept a diary and documented their social and physical language learning settings with photographic and audio-records. These methods provided me with the necessary details on language use and allowed for multiple triangulations.

The data analysis was multilayered. First, I focused on the individual child or adult and examined their attitudes, motives, task engagement and learning activities. I then focused on the dyad and investigated how the participants co-constructed practices and structured learning events. Finally, concentrating on the cultural-institutional setting, I explored the context in which foreign languages have been and are currently used and taught in Luxembourg. Sociocultural theory offered an excellent framework to combine the three levels. I paid particular attention to participants' goals and attitudes. They were the key to understanding children's construction of themselves as language learners.

From the data I collected, it appears that all children used four different languages: German, French, English and either Italian or Spanish. In addition, some knew some words in Portuguese and Polish. My focus in this paper lies on the children's understanding of the ways in which they learned German, French and English.

## **4. Findings**

In this section, I demonstrate that although children were aware of the need to become multilingual and although they had many opportunities to use German, French and English outside school, second language learning was not an 'automatic' process. What they learned and how they learned was informed by their goals, competence, confidence and their understanding of appropriate language learning.

In the first part of this section, I examine children's motivation and in the second the ways they learned German, French and English in formal and informal learning environments.

### ***4.1 Rationale for learning languages***

At the beginning of my study, the six children had been learning German for three years and French for two years. As mentioned before, languages made up almost half of their school timetable and pupils were literate in these two languages. By contrast, no child had learned English formally but all had a range of opportunities to encounter it. All knew some basic words and utterances.

When questioned about the reasons for learning languages, children occasionally mentioned a 'weak' argument such as the 'nice sounds' but they never offered this as a unique reason. This comment seems to refer to the intonation, voice, rhythm, hence, inherent characteristics of natural language use (Bakhtin, 1981).

All children put forward multiple and 'strong' motives. They explained that they had to learn German and French in order to function successfully in Luxembourg and abroad.

'When I visit my friend in Germany and spend my holidays with her, I have to speak German because she does not understand Luxembourgish' (Anne).

'We can use it when we are going to Trier and speak a bit of German when we go shopping' (David).

'When we have to work with somebody who speaks French, we have to know it.' (Yves).

'Some people here speak German, uh, and some foreigners come from Germany and France' (Monique).

'[I want to learn English] In order to speak to the American [basketball coach] or on holidays, sometimes, or sometimes with my father' (Danielle).

'My mother and my godfather sometimes speak English so that I cannot understand. I know some words. I want to learn it so that I understand them. And in grammar school it is used as well' (Gilles).

These motives illustrate children's understanding of the country's linguistic, economic and demographic situation. They recognised that they needed to learn languages in order to communicate with people who live or work in Luxembourg but do not speak Luxembourgish. This was the case in shops, restaurants and clubs. Mastery of these languages also enabled them to understand their parents' private conversations and to communicate with acquaintances on holidays. Finally, a good understanding of these three languages was necessary at school because all academic subjects were delivered through any of these languages. While four children reported learning French 'because of school', only two mentioned learning it for communicative reasons. By contrast, five participants considered English to be an important tool for communication though they did not use it at school yet and only encountered it the media and conversations at home, in clubs or on holidays.

Pupils' clear articulation of their motives demonstrates that they had internalised the rules and norms regulating life in multilingual Luxembourg and inferred the need to become successful language users. The interviews revealed their understanding of languages as media of communication, socialisers and transmitters of culture (Sapir, 1970; Fantini, 1985). Rather than viewing languages as different 'systems' from their mother tongue, they understood them as a 'resource' (Wells & Nicholls, 1985). Finally, my findings show that these six children had developed strong attitudes towards language learning and saw the benefits of multilingualism from multiple perspectives. One could assume that this strong motivation and positive attitudes facilitate their language learning process. Lambert (1974) and Gardner (1985) argued that that strong instrumental motives and the prestige of the languages to be learned, foster positive attitudes which in turn increase students' efforts, perseverance and the likelihood of success. A similar connection between positive attitudes and the confidence in one's ability to achieve a task stem from Burstall (1970), Krashen (1982), Rudduck et al. (1993), Graham (1997) or Bandura (1997).

The next section examines the language learning activities which these, as it seems, highly motivated children undertook in order to learn languages.

## 4.2 Children's reported activities to learn languages

Asked how they learned languages, all children described the contexts where they used them. They did not always distinguish between language learning and language use, rather, they seemed to consider language learning as a social process where such a distinction made little sense (Larsen-Freeman, 2004; Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004). The following examples, translated from Luxembourgish, illustrate the case. (In brackets are the codes used in my data analysis).

R (researcher): What do you do to improve your German?

D (David): I read books, watch German programmes on TV, listen to music on the radio. And then, going to Germany.

R: How does that help?

D: You listen to people and you memorise what they say. And you look at the signposts and try to remember

R: Anything else?

D: I practise a lot with my mother, doing homework, writing spelling tests and revising grammar (*reading, watching TV, listening to people and to music, memorising words, practising*).

R (researcher): What do you do to improve your French?

M (Monique): When I go to my ballet class, uh, because my teacher speaks French.

R: Do you talk to her?

M: I remember new words. When we learned the word 'comprendre' at school, I already knew it from my ballet teacher. Because I listen carefully (*listening, memorising words*).

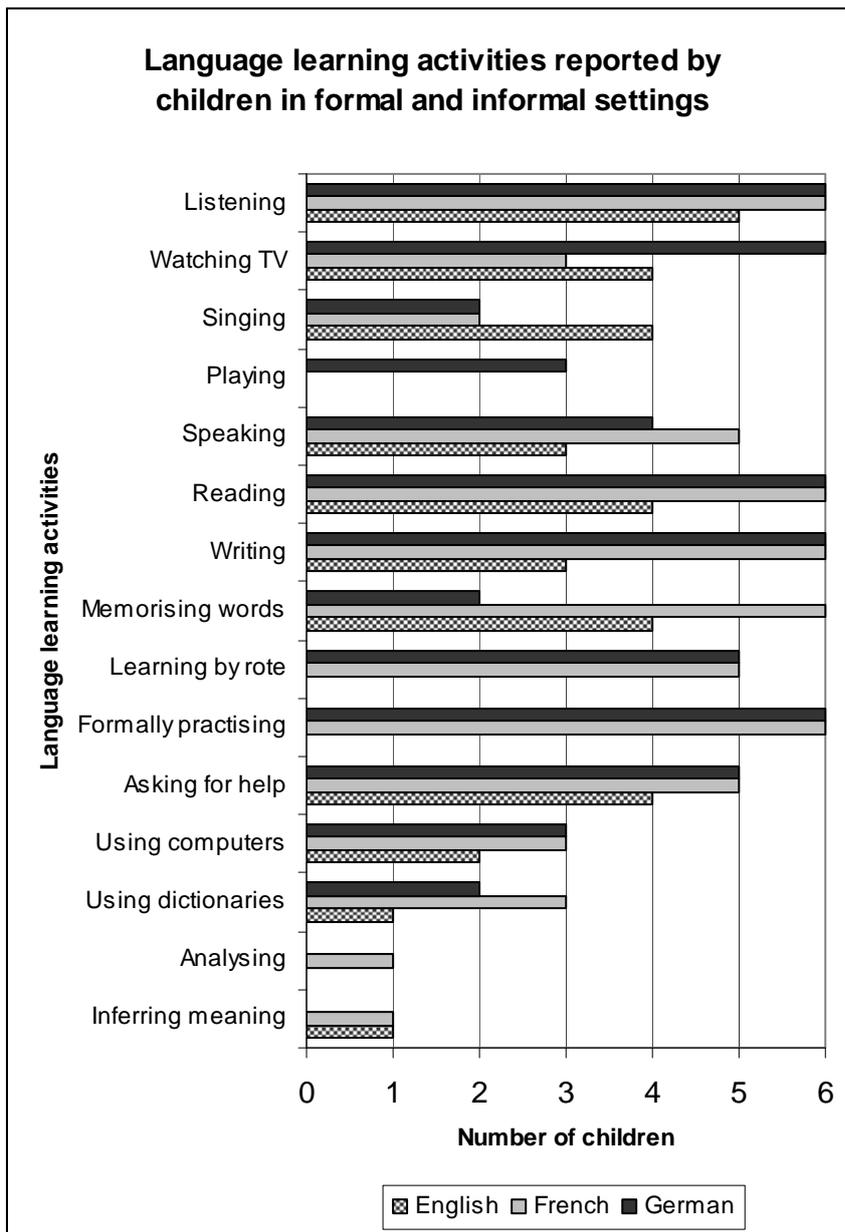
R (researcher): How do you improve your French?

D (Danielle): I do spellings tests with my mother. Last time, I made a mistake and my mother made me correct the word five times (*practising*)

R (researcher): How do you improve your English?

G (Gilles): I look up words in my Duden [dictionary]. I want to be speak well that I can go with my father to England to go fishing (*using dictionaries*).

Children reported that they engaged in a range of activities in both formal and informal situations with facilitators including parents, siblings, shop assistants, pen pals, holiday acquaintances and coaches or instructors in order to learn German, French and English. Graph 1 displays the number of children who mentioned particular activities for learning these three languages at home. A detailed table summarising all children's activities at home, school, abroad (on holidays and on day trips) and in the 'city' (in clubs, supermarkets and restaurants) is displayed in the appendix.



Graph 1: Number of children engaging in a range of formal and informal language learning activities in German, French and English at home.

The range of language learning activities reported in formal and informal settings by children was confirmed in interviews by the parents and the teacher. The triangulation of my data demonstrated children’s awareness of their rich linguistic setting and their understanding of practices fostering language learning. In addition, they were an indicator of the trustworthiness of my data.

In the next sections, I present these activities according to the formal or informal setting in order to show the extent to which children’s language use is influenced by their goals and their understanding of language learning.

#### *4.2.1 Formal settings for learning languages*

At school, children followed a highly structured curriculum. The teacher, whom children had in Year 3 and 4, tried to make the language lessons as interesting as possible by drawing on children's interests, needs and cultural background. Nevertheless, they were heavily teacher-led and the prescribed national textbooks with their emphasis on form and accuracy dominated in the classroom (MENFP, 1999; MENPPS, 2002). The teacher drew largely on audiolingualism to deliver German and French.

In the French lessons, she tended to introduce children to lists of vocabulary and grammar points through an introductory text. She made pupils practise the new linguistic features in many oral, but particularly written exercises such as 'fill the gap' exercises and spelling tests. She also invited them to write stories about the topic of their particular 'leçon' (i.e. friendships, transport, sports) in order to help them use the vocabulary and grammar points in a more 'open' way. More than 50% of the exercises in the French textbooks in Year 3 and 4 are dedicated to structured written exercises and nearly 25% to structured oral ones. Though teachers should spend ten to twenty percent on 'open' oral and written work in order to develop children's ability to express personal experiences, research studies have shown that teachers - the teacher of this class was no exception - devoted nearly all their time to structured exercises, particularly to writing (Wolff & Stammet, 1992, 1993). Apart from the focus on drills suggested by the curriculum, the minister of education encouraged translations of vocabulary and systematic rote learning. She claimed that these methods were fundamental ways of learning languages (MENFPS, 2001). The teacher of the six children whom I observed during a calendar year acted on this advice. She regularly asked children to learn poems or parts of the introductory text of a new 'leçon' by rote and to write them by heart. The German lessons followed a similar format though there was less emphasis on vocabulary learning. This can be explained by the linguistic similarities between German and Luxembourgish.

Depending on the subject, the language of instruction was German or French. When children had comprehension problems, the teacher reverted to Luxembourgish, or, in case of the French lessons, to German. Children used the languages of instruction but the vast majority switched to Luxembourgish in more informal situations, for instance, for the purpose of clarification. The teacher answered in the target language.

Pupils' knowledge and skills were assessed approximately fortnightly in a written test marked out of 60. The average of these marks decides whether a pupil moves to the next grade.

Children who have more than two insufficient marks (less than 50%) repeat the academic year.

Asked how they learned German and French at school, the six children mentioned listening to an adult, speaking, reading textbooks and worksheets, completing exercises, memorising words, learning by rote, doing spelling tests, conjugating verbs and doing declensions. There was little difference between these formal activities at school and those at home as hinted to in the excerpts presented at the beginning of section 4.2. Indeed, parents reckoned that they, a grandparent or a friend spent up to two hours daily helping the youngsters with their homework or preparing them for a test. (On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, children attended school from 8 to 12 and 2 to 4. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays they had courses from 8 to 12.)

#### *4.2.2 Informal settings*

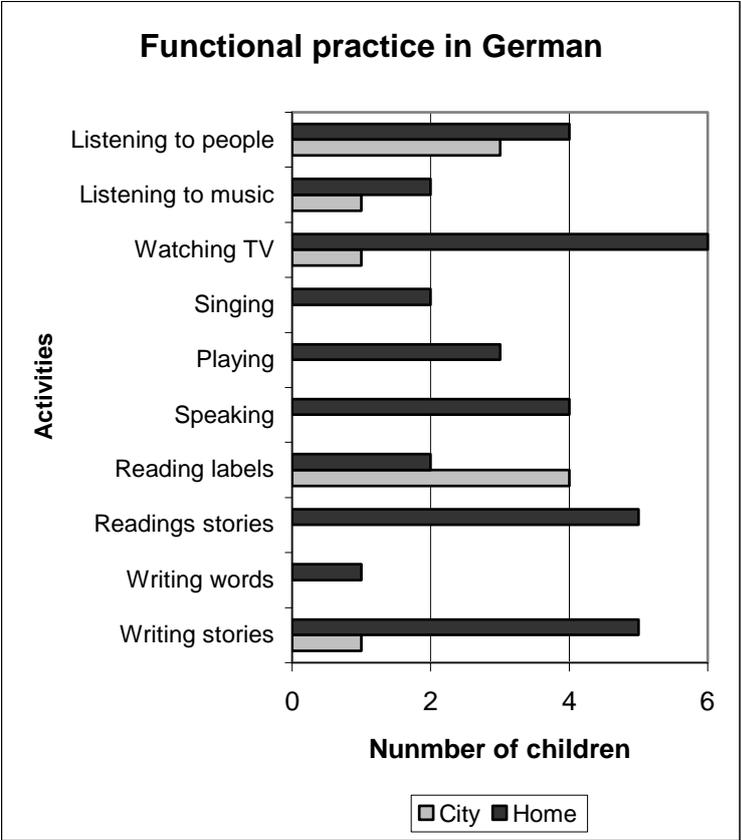
In addition to formally practising German and French, children also functionally practised these languages as well as English. 'Functional' or 'naturalistic practice' (Fillmore, 1979; Oxford, 1990) enables children to use the language effectively in real and authentic situations of communication. It comprises activities such as listening to music or people; watching TV; playing games; conversing; reading, and writing. Rubin (1975), Bialystok (1981), O'Malley & Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) provided evidence that these strategies improved the learners' linguistic proficiency.

In what follows, I present the activities in which children engaged at home and the city (clubs, shops, restaurants) in order to functionally practise German, French and English. It will become apparent that children had many opportunities to use these languages but that they did not always use them with the intention to improve their competence or even with the awareness that functional practice had the potential to further their linguistic proficiency.

As far as German is concerned, all six children had the opportunity to listen to native German speakers, for instance when they went to a neighbouring town in Germany. However, on these occasions, only three children reckoned paying attention to the use of German in order to recognise new words, asking for their meaning and memorising them.

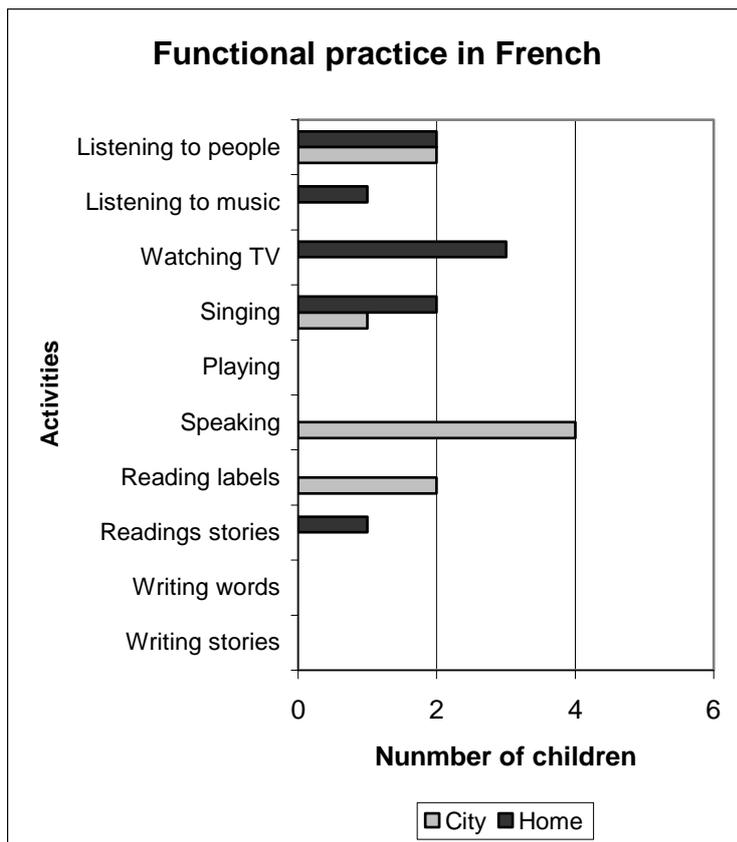
Asked how they improved their German, they all mentioned listening to songs and watching television programmes. Four children reported regularly speaking German at home: three played 'in German' and two girls had regular conversations on the phone with a relative or a pen pal. None of the children used German in (local) shops or clubs which is understandable because their town was close to the French-speaking borders where German is rarely used. Almost all children reported reading German storybooks and writing letters to pen pals or

non-school related stories in this language. In addition, Gilles regularly wrote short essays for the 'Cubs newspaper'.



Graph 2: Activities for functional practice in German

While children felt at ease in German, enjoyed using this language on a daily basis and mentioned many activities allowing for natural practice, the language learning activities reported in the case of French and English followed a different pattern. This is clearly visible in the Graphs 2, 3 and 4 that display children’s reported activities for functional practice in German, French and English.



Graph 3: Activities for functional practice in French

All six children reported getting some linguistic input in French, for instance through television, music and conversations in local shops, clubs or restaurants. Two children encountered French when their parents used it to exclude them from their private conversations and three regularly overheard a parent and older sibling doing homework. Although the six pupils reckoned having these rich opportunities for linguistic input, they did not take advantage of them. They admitted not paying attention to French conversations except when parents used this language at home as a language of exclusion. They rarely watched French programmes, preferring the German ones, and rarely listened to French music, preferring English, Italian and Spanish. Further, they seldom spoke in shops or restaurants. Two children even stated that they avoided French. They largely relied on their parents who translated if necessary. The other children reported using what I call formulaic and predictable phrases rather than having real conversations. Monique and Anne were the exception in that they used French most. Monique spoke to a native-French friend and her weekly ballet trainer while Anne regularly used French when she went shopping with her mother.

The reluctance to use written French was apparent with all six children. Though they were all literate in French and were all able to read long texts and to write stories, only one child read (i.e. looked into) a French magazine - and only occasionally - and no child used written

French at home other than for practising the language formally. Asked why they used this language so rarely, they explained that they perceived French as very difficult and, most importantly, had the choice of not using it: they could rely on their parents and watch TV, listen to music or read books in languages other than French.

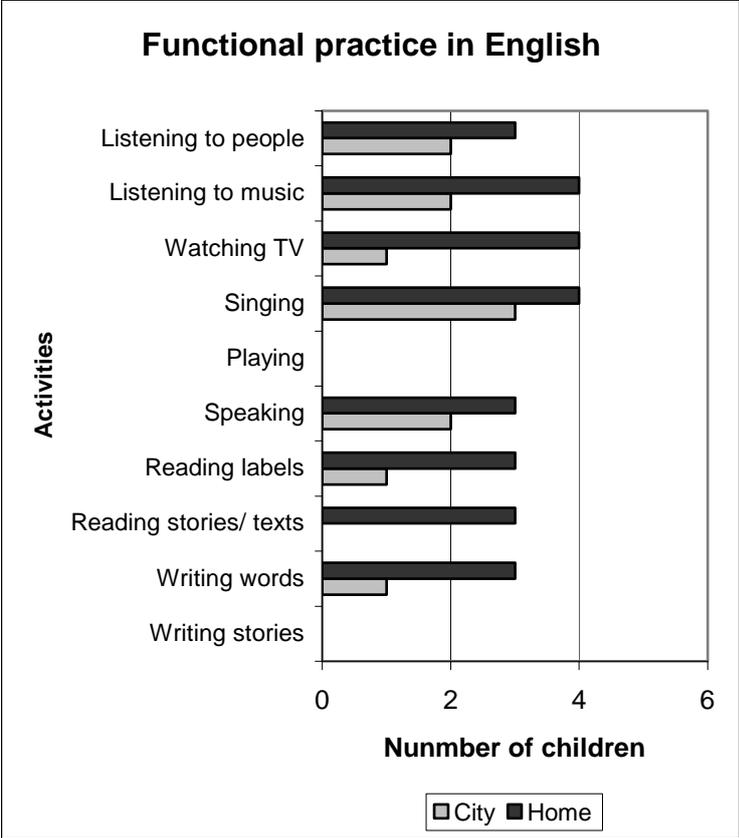
Children's use of French sharply contrasted with their endeavour to understand and communicate in English, a language not formally learned at school. Four children regularly listened to English music at home and two in clubs (ballet and music lessons). Interested in the music, some tended to read the texts on the cover of their CDs and even copied them. Others attempted to read labels on packages and asked parents if their pronunciation and translations were correct. The parents explained that these initiatives of reading and writing were very similar to children's first steps when learning German and stated that they very much encouraged and supported children's interest in this new language. It is worth detailing the endeavour of three children.

Monique, Gilles and Danielle had regular opportunities to hear the language being used by their parents, an instructor or a coach. Danielle played basketball and her coach issued instructions in English and sometimes in French. Eager to learn some English and keen to please the American coach, she regularly asked her father to translate phrases that could come in useful on the court. She learned these phrases by rote and made notes in her diary. When she drew pictures for the American, she copied some of these sentences on the back of the drawing.

The parents of Monique and Gilles sometimes used English to exclude the youngsters from conversations. Like other parents, they previously used French but because children began to understand too much, these two families used more and more English words. This shift in language attracted much interest of the two children who memorised some of the new words and asked for translations thereafter. Gilles had also some rare opportunities to use English in Cubs where he was taught to use the morse code to communicate in English with children all over the world. Like Monique and Danielle, Gilles regularly asked his parents for English words or phrases of interest to him and used them in brief exchanges.

I was fortunate to witness children's competence in English (knowledge of some basic words and phrases) and their endeavour to 'communicate' (exchange some information) on several occasions. Their wish to make the acquaintance of English children prompted me to set up a pen pal link with children in London. On arrival of a letter, the pupils immediately deciphered it. They relied heavily on contextual, linguistic and grammatical clues and only rarely asked for translations. Having read the text, they wrote a short letter in English modelled on the sentences of their pen pals. It consisted largely of information related to children's names,

siblings, age, hobbies and favourite sports, animals, colours and books. The situation did not require the six children to use English. They could as well have responded in German or French or asked me to translate their letter. It was their choice to make the effort to communicate in English. Asked why they did so, the majority explained that this task helped them learn English.



Graph 4: Activities for functional practice in English

In sum, children’s language use and language learning activities reflect the rich and diverse opportunities to encounter and use a range of languages in (and around) multilingual Luxembourg. They formally practised German and French at school and at home. Their use of languages in informal situations depended on their competence and confidence. Feeling most at home in German, they used this language most. Though all children were literate in French and perfectly able to have conversations in this language, they rarely used it in authentic situations of communication outside home and school. These situations are abundant in a trilingual country where French has a dominant position but most children did not take account of the rich opportunities. Though they understood the need to learn this language and were aware that proficiency comes with language use, they nevertheless used French very little compared to English.

The next sections will show to what extent children's personal goals and the impact of school influence their language behaviour.

## **5. Discussion of findings: the impact of children's goals and confidence**

It is clear from section 4.1 that all children understood the importance of learning languages. The observation of competent language users and the participation in events requiring the use of foreign languages made them realise that they needed languages, particularly French, in order to function in Luxembourg. However, these motives, though strong, seemed to lie too far ahead to instil in these children a real interest in learning French (Stables & Wikeley, 1999; Brumfit, 1999) and in participating more fully in their community. While children had some immediate needs to use German and English, this was not the case when it came to French.

As far as German and English is concerned, all children were eager to watch popular movies, listen to songs, read magazines and share information with friends. In addition, they were keen to communicate with German and English speaking non-nationals. In order to participate in socially valued activities and to successfully communicate with acquaintances, the six children endeavoured to use, and thus to learn, these languages. Their desire to learn a language depended, therefore, on their perceptions of the social dynamics, their communicative needs and the use value ascribed to the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2003). This is a clear indication that the origin of their competence lies in the use of languages in particular sociocultural practices (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lantolf, 2000; Markee, 2004). Once children felt a need to use a language, they developed personal goals and created opportunities to learn these languages. For instance, they paid particular attention to speech events, memorised unknown words and asked for translations. Children's goals determined the ways in which they interpreted opportunities to use languages and reconstructed them to suit their own linguistic needs. This finding is in line with research done by Coughlan & Duff (1994), Gillette (1994), Wang (1996), Roebuck (2000) and Platt & Brooks (2002).

While children had many needs to use German and English, they seemed to have fewer immediate needs to use French though they lived in an environment where French was one of the dominant languages. They felt that they had a choice to use or to avoid the language. For instance, they would only watch French television programmes if there were no alternatives and they would only speak French in the presence of an adult if they were required to. Even in the French lessons where the use of French was expected, they tried to

get by in Luxembourgish whenever possible. In situations where French was required in shops or restaurants most children preferred to use their parents as mediators. To use the phrase of Lave & Wenger (1991), they participated 'at the periphery'. Their opportunities for learning French consisted of eavesdropping and observation.

Monique and Anne were exceptions. Monique had to use French in her ballet classes and on the rare occasions the family visited French-speaking friends. Anne had been socialised into the use of French early on. Her mother had simply refused to speak for her daughter when she knew that the latter had the necessary vocabulary to get by or if she could provide her with the necessary vocabulary. She explained:

'When Anne was able to say 's'il-vous-plaît', she was also able to say 'un coca s'il-vous-plaît' [a coke please]. I have not ordered her any drinks since she has been able to say that. I simply expect her to make the effort and speak. Some years ago, she thought that she was forced to speak but now, she endeavours to speak'.

At the age of ten, Monique and Anne were now confident to have conversations while their four friends tended to have brief exchanges in French using formulaic phrases. The reasons behind their reluctance to speak were the lack of confidence and the fear to make mistakes. Although children's achievements in French were average to high, four pupils evaluated their achievements as low based on the number of mistakes in their written work.

Whilst parents encouraged and reinforced children's playful approach to learning English, they replicated the emphasis on accurate language use in German and French which dominated at school. This was particularly visible in the hours parents spent on formal practice and their focus on marks. Monique reported that her mother calculated the average mark after each test. She mentioned that her average was 53 out of 60 at that moment which she considered not to be 'high enough'. Asked how she could improve, she suggested writing more exercises, doing more spelling tests and revising her grammar. Like her friends, she referred almost entirely to highly formal activities and rejected the rich, multiple opportunities for functional practice abundant in Luxembourg. In other words, children valued as effective language learning methods the formal practices in which they predominantly engaged at home and at school. This is a sign, that they had internalised the values and beliefs of adults.

The prescriptive and mechanistic approach for learning languages organised by adults and reproduced by children have the potential to develop the learners' accuracy, particularly in writing, but they are unlikely to be effective in developing their confidence and the communicative skills necessary to function in a multilingual society (Krashen, 1982; Spada, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 2003). In addition, the isolationist approach to teaching languages has led to a split between language learning and language use. School seemed to have turned learning French into an academic subject removed from children's actual needs. As a

result, these children seemed to learn French in order to succeed academically rather than to use it in society. This artificial separation of learning and using languages risks resulting in a decline of students' motivation (Dewey, 1933; Long, 1998).

The behaviouristic and highly structured methods promoted by parents and teachers when it came to learning German and French, contrasted with the sociocultural model which children choose in order to make their first steps in English and to improve their competence in German, a language all children felt confident using. Children's participation in activities involving these languages was guided by parents' encouragement and support. Children's language use fostered the development of personal goals and self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to do a task). There is ample research evidence that personal goals and self-efficacy are related to students' willingness to try new tasks, to their task approach, perseverance, and eventually their performance (Viau, 1994; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Bandura, 1997; Graham, 1997; Donato, 2000; Lantolf & Genung, 2002).

To summarise, participation in social practices involving the use of several languages enabled the six children in this study to develop an understanding of the need to become multilingual and to gain knowledge of socially valued ways to learn languages. The children understood that they had much freedom to explore ways of learning English while they had less power to negotiate ways to learn German and French, two of the official languages of the country. The focus on accuracy had an impact on children's confidence which in turn affected their use of French. They created rich opportunities to use German and English but they were less eager to use French, a dominant language in Luxembourg. They made use of authentic situations of communication if they felt competent, confident, had strong communicative needs and did not feel under pressure to 'perform'. My findings show that these children did not learn languages 'automatically' though they were immersed in languages. The context for learning is not 'out there' (Nardi, 1996) but children continuously constructed opportunities for language learning, based on their confidence and personal goals.

I conclude this section with some reflections for practitioners.

## **6. Implications for practitioners**

My findings indicate that parents and teachers should encourage and support children's playful approach to learning languages. They should take account of their dispositions and attitudes and remember that learning is emotional as well as cognitive (Dewey, 1987;

Vygotsky, 1978). By imposing highly formal classroom practices early on and ignoring the ways these activities influence confidence, self-esteem and interest, they are likely to diminish pupils' chances to become successful language users.

In addition, teachers and parents should foster children's immediate needs to use languages. At home, this is possible by 'guiding children's participation' (Rogoff, 1990) in situation of language use, firstly, by creating stimulating situations where children can listen to and observe competent language users, and, secondly, by scaffolding children's language learning process and encouraging independent language use. At school, teachers encourage learner independence and reinforce pupils' wish to use languages by giving them responsibility over their learning (Holec, 1981; Gretsch, 1998) and by creating productive learning environments that build on and extend children's previous learning experiences (Dewey, 1938; Bruner, 1996; Sarason, 1997).

Finally, I like to endorse the point made by many researchers, educators and policy-makers that school needs to bridge the gap between the sociocultural and linguistic diversity in the community and the dearth of such diversity at school. Valuing the diversity of language use outside school and opening up the formal learning environment to such richness will enable children to build stronger continuities between school and the sociocultural practices of a particular society, to recognise the inextricable links between language use and language learning, and to develop strong personal goals to use languages for authentic purposes of communication. They will also understand that activities for learning languages differ according to the settings, and that differences and contradictions are part of activity settings (Il'enkov, 1982). Rather than rejecting particular learning activities as invalid (i.e. functional practices) and perceiving settings as dichotomous, they will comprehend that settings extend each other and that learning activities which are valid in one setting can also be effective in a different context.

Continuities are built when teachers start where children are; listen to their voice; respect their identities and representations and, finally, draw on their sociocultural experiences (Bernstein, 1970; Lave & Wenger, 1996; Gretsch, 1997). Teachers should substitute the atomistic and structuralist learning programmes with dialogical models where children use languages orally and in writing for a wide range of authentic purposes with a range of facilitators (Street, 2001; Ellis, 2003). An example of such an approach based on a sociocultural view of language learning is, in my eyes, task-based language teaching. According to Ellis (2003) this approach offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom, is intrinsically motivating, focuses on meaning and form, emphasises the product and the process and is compatible with a learner-centred philosophy. Task-based language

teaching is not only an effective tool for language learning (Long, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 2003) but it also affects learner development through the focus on the learning process. A teaching method underpinned by a sociocultural perspective on language learning seems to be ideal, particularly in a multilingual context such as Luxembourg where young learners need to be motivated and willing to learn to use a range of languages in their daily lives.

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## Tables and graphs

Table 1: Compulsory schooling in Luxembourg

Graph 1: Number of children engaging in a range of formal and informal language learning activities in German, French and English at home.

Graph 2: Activities for functional practice in German

Graph 3: Activities for functional practice in French

Graph 4: Activities for functional practice in English

## Appendix

### Children's language learning activities

Language learning activities	GERMAN				FRENCH				ENGLISH			
	H	S	C	A	H	S	C	A	H	S	C	A
Listening	6	6	3	3	6	6	2	2	5		4	1
Watching TV	6	1	1	2	3	1		1	4		1	
Singing	2	2			2	2	1		4		3	
Playing	3	1				2						
Speaking	4	5	0	4	5	6	4	4	3		2	1
Reading	6	6	4	1	6	6	2		4		1	
Writing	6	6	1		6	6			3		1	1
Memorising	2	2		2	6	6	2		4			
Learning by rote	5	6			5	6						
Practising	6	5			6	6						
Asking for help	5	4			5	3	1	1	4			
Using computers	3	6			3	6			2			
Using dictionaries	2	6			3	6			1			
Analysing		1			1							
Inferring meaning					1				1			
Translating						1						

Table 1: Number of children engaging in a range of formal and informal language learning activities in German, French and English at home, at school, in the city and abroad.

H: home; S: school; C: city (clubs, shops and restaurants); A: abroad