

Extensive language learning and multilingualism: pillars of modern education

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Abstract: This paper analyses the relationship between extensive language learning and multilingualism in contemporary educational contexts, highlighting the role of innovative teaching methodologies and plurilingual learning environments. Building on the theoretical framework of linguistic intelligence and theories of language acquisition, the study explores the educational value of multilingualism as a cognitive, social and cultural resource, capable of fostering the development of mental flexibility, metalinguistic awareness and intercultural skills. The analysis also focuses on the integration of implicit and explicit learning in language acquisition processes and on the role of educational practices that value students' linguistic repertoires. From this perspective, innovative approaches such as translanguaging and the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology are examined, which promote a dynamic and inclusive vision of language education, fostering the integration of subject-specific learning and the development of communicative skills.

Particular attention is also given to the role of Digital Language Learning Ecosystems, understood as digital environments that expand opportunities for language exposure and foster the integration of formal, informal and non-formal learning. In this context, digital technologies act as educational mediators capable of supporting collaborative, multimodal and inclusive teaching practices. The findings of this theoretical reflection highlight the need to rethink the role of the school as a complex linguistic ecosystem, in which multilingualism and methodological innovation are central to promoting educational models that are more inclusive and consistent with the transformations of contemporary society. Extended language learning thus emerges as a pedagogical approach capable of integrating cognitive, social and technological dimensions into the development of language skills.

Keywords: Extended learning; Multilingualism; Translanguaging; CLIL



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1. Introduction

According to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1997), linguistic intelligence can be described as the ability to use language effectively and to grasp its various semantic nuances. This form of intelligence enables individuals to use words flexibly and creatively, facilitating clear and effective communication, both in conveying information and in the ability to arouse interest and emotional engagement in their interlocutors.

This competence is not limited to knowledge of grammatical rules, but also encompasses broader abilities, such as reflection on concepts and a particular aptitude for learning through active listening. People with well-developed linguistic intelligence also demonstrate a remarkable verbal memory, which fosters a deep understanding of both the formal structure of language and its communicative functions.

The development of linguistic intelligence stems from the interaction between biological factors, environmental stimuli and individual experiences. Although some individuals demonstrate a particular aptitude for language use from an early age, these skills can be further enhanced through targeted educational interventions. In particular, regular reading, exposure to complex language and the practice of writing are effective tools for strengthening linguistic abilities. Dialogue and participation in structured discussions are also particularly useful for promoting critical thinking and improving communication skills.

The family environment also exerts a significant influence: children who grow up in contexts rich in communicative stimuli tend to develop more robust linguistic skills than those in less linguistically stimulating environments. Furthermore, exposure to multiple languages fosters the development of cognitive flexibility and helps to enrich expressive and interpretative abilities.

Even in the school context (Stanford, 2003), pupils with strong language skills are generally identifiable as early as the first years of schooling. They often show a strong interest in reading and storytelling and possess a broader vocabulary than their peers. Furthermore, they demonstrate particular effectiveness in learning processes based on listening, accompanied by good attention skills and a well-developed verbal memory.

To foster the development of these skills, teachers can adopt specific teaching strategies, including:

- language-based games, such as crosswords, word games and anagrams, which help to stimulate linguistic creativity;
- structured discussions and debates, which promote argumentative skills and critical thinking;
- systematic reading programmes using a variety of text types, to expand vocabulary and improve comprehension;
- regular writing activities, such as writing stories, personal reflections or short argumentative texts, to strengthen command of the written language and the ability to organise one's thoughts.

In light of the role that linguistic intelligence plays in processes of language acquisition, comprehension and production, the phenomenon of multilingualism can be interpreted as one of the main manifestations of language learning from a broader perspective. Within this framework, linguistic competences are not considered exclusively as individual skills, but as dynamic resources that develop through interaction between the individual, the social environment, educational contexts and cultural tools.

The term multilingualism, in fact, refers to the ability to use multiple languages within the same social or institutional context (Oxford English Dictionary, 2026). This phenomenon can be observed at both the individual and collective levels; however, when referring to the linguistic competences of the individual, the more appropriate term is plurilingualism, which differs from multilingualism despite often being confused with it in everyday language.

Plurilingualism describes a person's ability to use multiple languages to communicate in different contexts, even without complete mastery of each linguistic system. From this perspective, what is most important is not formal perfection, but the ability to draw upon one's linguistic repertoire in a way that is functional to communicative situations. We therefore speak of bilingualism in the case of knowledge of two languages and of trilingualism when three languages are known, whilst beyond this threshold the term plurilingualism or polyglotism is generally used. Conversely, the use of a single language defines the condition of monolingualism.

By contrast, multilingualism concerns the coexistence of multiple languages within the same social, cultural or institutional space. Significant examples include countries such as Canada, characterised by the coexistence of English and French, or Belgium, where three languages are officially recognised. Similarly, schools, organisations or media operating across multiple linguistic codes can also be considered multilingual contexts.

This distinction highlights a significant aspect from a pedagogical perspective: whilst plurilingualism concerns an individual's linguistic heritage, multilingualism represents the characteristic of the communicative ecosystems in which such competences develop. It is no coincidence that European language policies promote individual plurilingualism precisely as a lever to support social and institutional multilingualism (Piccardo, 2019). However, in the international literature, the term 'multilingualism' is often used in a broader sense, encompassing both dimensions (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013).

From a broad language learning perspective, multilingualism can therefore be understood as the result of the interaction between cognitive, social, cultural and technological factors. Languages are not merely tools of communication, but genuine cognitive mediators that contribute to the development of thought, mental flexibility and the ability to interpret the complexity of social contexts.

Scientific literature highlights, in fact, that multilingualism can be associated with various cognitive benefits, including greater executive control, improved working memory and greater cognitive flexibility. On a social and cultural level, knowledge of multiple languages fosters intercultural openness and the ability to navigate complex and diverse contexts. From an economic perspective too, language skills represent a strategic asset in an increasingly globalised society, broadening opportunities for professional integration.

At the same time, multilingualism also poses some significant challenges. These include the risk of marginalisation of minority languages, which are often supplanted by dominant languages, as well as educational difficulties linked to managing linguistic diversity in school settings. Added to these issues are phenomena of linguistic discrimination and challenges related to the planning of language policies in complex social contexts.

Precisely for this reason, multilingualism now represents one of the main challenges for education systems, which are called upon to rethink their teaching models in an inclusive and ecological manner. Schools, in particular, are increasingly becoming complex linguistic environments, where different linguistic repertoires coexist and where it becomes necessary to promote teaching approaches capable of valuing linguistic diversity as an educational resource.

From this perspective, multilingualism cannot be interpreted merely as a demographic characteristic of contemporary societies, but as a structural dimension of

learning ecosystems. The growing prevalence of bilingual and multilingual programmes in schools, as well as the use of multiple languages in workplace contexts and digital media, underscores the need to develop educational models capable of integrating linguistic plurality within a systemic vision of learning (Maher, 2017).

In this regard, language learning is increasingly taking the form of a distributed process, developing not only through formal education but also through social networks, digital environments and everyday communicative practices, confirming the need to interpret multilingualism as a fundamental component of extended learning.

In line with the above, it is also important to distinguish between the different processes through which languages are acquired and learnt. Indeed, when we speak of language acquisition, we generally refer to a natural, progressive and largely unconscious process, through which linguistic competences develop thanks to continuous interaction with the communicative environment.

Within educational contexts, implicit and explicit learning represent two complementary and closely interlinked dimensions. Implicit learning is characterised by its spontaneous and unintentional nature and is particularly typical of the early stages of language development. Through continuous exposure to language, be it spoken or signed, individuals gradually internalise grammatical structures, phonological patterns and modes of communicative use even in the absence of formal instruction. This process is evident, for example, in the acquisition of the mother tongue, which occurs mainly through listening, imitation and social interaction.

At the same time, explicit learning plays a central role, particularly in school settings, where it becomes necessary to develop more formalised knowledge, such as the grammatical rules of a second or foreign language, subject-specific content conveyed through language, and metacognitive strategies useful for improving study processes. In multilingual educational contexts, the teacher's role therefore becomes that of facilitating this more conscious dimension of learning as well, through activities of linguistic reflection, structured explanations and teaching programmes aimed at developing metalinguistic awareness.

The integration of implicit and explicit learning is particularly significant in second language acquisition processes. On the one hand, language immersion, authentic communicative practices and social interaction foster the development of implicit skills; on the other, guided instruction and conscious reflection on linguistic structures enable the consolidation of formal knowledge of the language. This integration enables students to simultaneously develop functional communicative skills and a more solid theoretical understanding of how language works (Balboni, 2008).

From the perspective of extensive language learning, this integration can be seen as the result of the interaction between informal experiences, social environments, educational practices and cultural tools, confirming that the development of language skills does not occur exclusively in formal contexts, but emerges from a broader network of communicative experiences.

Even academic skills that are not strictly linguistic benefit from this integration: for example, the ability to read fluently tends to develop through processes of automation linked to implicit learning, whilst critical analysis and in-depth interpretation of texts require more conscious and intentional cognitive processes, attributable to explicit learning.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic aspects, multilingualism also has significant effects on a social and cultural level. Knowledge of multiple languages in fact pro-

motes intercultural communication, mobility and exchange between individuals from different backgrounds. In this sense, multilingualism contributes to the construction of more nuanced cultural identities and the ability to navigate complex and diverse social contexts.

At the same time, multilingual experience appears to foster the development of cognitive flexibility in relational terms as well, making individuals better able to adopt different perspectives and understand alternative viewpoints. This open-mindedness is a key element in promoting inclusive attitudes and developing intercultural skills, which are increasingly necessary in contemporary societies characterised by high linguistic and cultural diversity.

These benefits can be interpreted as the result of an individual's active participation in complex communicative ecosystems, in which languages represent not only tools of communication but also cognitive, social and cultural resources that contribute to the individual's overall development.

2. Translanguaging

Alongside the cognitive, linguistic and social benefits associated with multilingualism, a concept of particular relevance for understanding the dynamics of language learning in contemporary educational contexts is that of translanguaging. This approach, developed within the fields of applied linguistics and the pedagogy of multilingualism, describes the way in which bilingual and multilingual speakers make integrated use of their entire repertoire of linguistic resources to communicate, learn and construct meaning.

Translanguaging is not simply a matter of switching from one language to another, as occurs in code-switching or translation, rather, it involves a dynamic and strategic use of elements belonging to multiple linguistic systems, which are activated simultaneously to facilitate comprehension and expression. It is a spontaneous and widespread practice in the everyday experiences of multilingual people, reflecting the integrated nature of linguistic competences (Li Wei, 2018).

The spread of this approach has been particularly fostered by the work of Ofelia García, who, in her book **Bilingual Education in the 21st Century** (2009), proposed a view of the linguistic repertoire not as a set of separate systems, but as a continuum of communicative resources. From this perspective, languages are not stored in distinct compartments within the speakers' minds but constitute a unified set of tools that are mobilised flexibly and creatively in different communicative contexts.

From an educational perspective, a notable example of the application of this approach is the CUNY-NYSIEB project in New York, which has promoted the integration of the languages of students from migrant backgrounds into school curricula. In the European context, however, the adoption of translanguaging has generally been more cautious and often situated within the theoretical frameworks of plurilingualism and plural approaches to languages (García & Sánchez, 2018).

An analysis of experiences in Europe and Italy highlights three main aspects. Firstly, the importance of contextualisation: the effectiveness of translanguaging practices depends heavily on the sociolinguistic characteristics of the regions, as demonstrated by the cases of the Basque Country, Belgium and Sweden. Secondly, the difficulty of moving beyond a purely declarative view of the promotion of linguistic diversity emerges: schools often limit themselves to acknowledging linguistic plurality without truly integrating it into teaching practices. The pedagogy of translanguaging,

however, requires a more profound transformation of educational dynamics, one that also recognises the active role of students and their families as educational resources. Finally, many initiatives remain fragmented or temporary; for this reason, it appears necessary to strengthen collaboration between schools, universities and institutions to promote structurally lasting interventions.

In Italy, a particularly significant initiative in this direction is the L'AltRoparlante project, promoted by the CLUSS Centre at the University for Foreigners of Siena since 2016. The project, inspired by the US CUNY-NYSIEB model, has involved numerous teachers and students from various school levels, with the aim of systematically integrating translanguaging into everyday teaching practices through training courses, educational planning and monitoring of activities. The innovative value of the initiative was also recognised through the award of the 2018 European Language Label.

A key feature of this specific project was the active involvement of families, considered an integral part of the educational ecosystem. Through activities such as multilingual interviews, it was possible to encourage direct parental participation and enhance students' language skills. The analysis of teaching practices, also documented through video recordings, highlighted the strong link between translanguaging pedagogy and intercultural education, demonstrating how the conscious use of students' linguistic repertoires can foster authentic, non-stereotypical intercultural reflection (Carbonara & Scibetta, 2020).

A concrete example of this approach is an educational programme implemented at the primary school in Serravalle Scrivia during the 2018–2019 school year, as part of the L'AltRoparlante project. The class involved, characterised by significant linguistic diversity, developed activities aimed at enhancing the pupils' multilingual skills, including the creation of a multilingual schoolscape and the use of tools such as personal multilingual dictionaries.

The project, dedicated to the theme of children's rights to mark the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention, involved conducting multilingual interviews with the pupils' family members. This activity had several educational objectives: to strengthen the active role of multilingual pupils, to recognise families as educational resources, and to promote intercultural reflection on different life experiences.

During the project, the students developed bilingual materials and prepared the interviews with the support of their families. Throughout the activities, family members spoke in their native languages, whilst the students took on the role of language mediators, facilitating communication and helping to create a space for intercultural dialogue. This type of experience fostered a dialogue based on reciprocity and helped to legitimise the use of the students' linguistic repertoires as an educational resource (translingual activism).

Experiences of this kind demonstrate how the promotion of plurilingual skills can contribute not only to linguistic development, but also to the co-construction of inclusive educational pathways and the promotion of mutual recognition among students from different cultural backgrounds (Carbonara et al., 2020).

From the perspective of extended language learning, translanguaging can therefore be interpreted as a pedagogical practice capable of connecting individual linguistic experiences with educational and social contexts, helping to transform linguistic diversity from a potential obstacle into a resource for learning.

3. CLIL

In line with perspectives that value multilingualism as an educational resource and with pedagogical approaches that promote the integration of students' linguistic repertoires, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) represents a particularly significant teaching model. This approach is fully in line with the concept of extended language learning, as it facilitates language acquisition through authentic subject-specific learning contexts, overcoming the traditional separation between language teaching and content teaching.

CLIL, promoted by the Council of Europe and progressively integrated into European education systems, represents a relatively recent methodology that has also been applied in the Italian school system, particularly in upper secondary schools. Its innovative nature lies precisely in the possibility of simultaneously developing linguistic and subject-specific competences, allowing students to learn curricular content through a foreign language.

The term CLIL refers to a teaching approach in which a non-language subject is taught using a foreign language as a vehicle for communication. In this way, the language is not merely a subject of study, but becomes a practical tool for accessing knowledge. This approach therefore enables the simultaneous promotion of both subject-specific learning and the development of communicative skills in the target language. The first European trials date back to the 1990s and developed through cooperation projects between schools, universities and international organisations.

In Italy, the introduction of CLIL was formalised through the reform of upper secondary education provided for by Law 53/2003 and the subsequent implementing regulations of 2010, which stipulated the compulsory teaching of at least one non-language subject in a foreign language in the final year of grammar schools and technical colleges. In language-focused sixth-form colleges, however, such teaching is provided for two subjects from the third and fourth years onwards.

From a pedagogical perspective, CLIL is an integrated methodology that pursues a dual objective: on the one hand, to facilitate the acquisition of subject content; on the other, to strengthen language skills through a meaningful and contextualised use of the foreign language. This approach also serves various educational purposes: it prepares students to navigate international social and professional contexts, promotes attitudes of intercultural openness, stimulates language learning through authentic communicative situations, and encourages innovative teaching methodologies geared towards the active construction of knowledge.

In line with the principles of active and situated learning, CLIL is based on a student-centred and participation-oriented teaching model. Compared to traditional, predominantly transmissive teaching, this approach promotes cooperative and workshop-based learning methods, through practical activities, group work and authentic tasks that encourage interaction and the personal re-elaboration of content.

A further element of continuity with the approach of extended language learning is the use of digital technologies and multimedia resources, which help to create rich and stimulating learning environments. Online research activities, for example, allow students to select information, process it and transform it into knowledge, whilst the use of video, audio and visual resources facilitates linguistic comprehension and broadens exposure to the language in authentic contexts (Balboni, 2014).

A central aspect of the CLIL methodology is also the use of scaffolding, that is, support strategies that gradually guide the student towards greater autonomy. From

this perspective, the teacher does not merely convey content, but constructs a guided learning pathway, offering cognitive and linguistic tools to facilitate understanding. Such strategies may include linguistic simplifications, examples and rephrasing, preparatory activities for texts, the creation of subject-specific glossaries, the use of concept maps and visual aids such as diagrams, graphs and advance organisers.

Typical CLIL teaching activities reflect this active approach and include, for example, identifying key words, reorganising information, completing diagrams, problem-solving activities, cooperative work, simulations, debates and guided research activities such as webquests. These practices promote not only language development but also cross-curricular skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and independent study.

The CLIL approach can benefit significantly from the integration of digital technologies. Access to authentic content in a foreign language, simulations, educational videos and subject-specific materials from international contexts all make learning more meaningful and motivating. At the same time, digital environments encourage the adoption of active teaching approaches, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning and cooperative learning, which promote the use of language as a functional tool for knowledge construction.

Teachers can make use of numerous digital tools to design effective CLIL programmes, facilitating the creation of integrated and multimodal learning environments (De Maurissens, 2018).

Finally, the effectiveness of this approach is closely linked to teacher training, as teachers must possess both adequate linguistic competence in the medium of instruction and specific methodological skills. In the Italian context, these skills are developed through university specialisation courses and language certifications, which also represent a means of professional development within teaching careers.

From a broader perspective, CLIL can therefore be interpreted as one of the most concrete applications of the principles of extended language learning, as it allows for the integration of language, subject content, social interaction and digital environments within a single educational process, promoting multilingualism as a resource for students' cognitive and cultural development.

4. Digital Learning Ecosystem

Another widely used methodology of increasing importance concerns Digital Language Learning Ecosystems. This phrase refers to those digital learning environments that enable greater exposure to languages and communicative interaction, overcoming the spatial and temporal limitations of traditional teaching. From this perspective, digital technologies should not be viewed solely as teaching aids, but as genuine learning environments in which language skills are developed through participatory, collaborative and multimodal processes.

The use of digital educational platforms, online collaborative environments, multimedia materials and applications based on artificial intelligence makes it possible to create authentic language learning situations. In these contexts, students are granted the opportunity to put their communication skills into practice in concrete and meaningful situations. Such an approach is fully consistent with the extended learning perspective, as it fosters links between formal learning, informal experiences and digital contexts, offering opportunities for language development even outside the traditional school environment (Pinto-Llorente & Izquierdo-Álvarez, 2024).

Furthermore, Digital Language Learning Ecosystems represent contexts particularly suited to the dissemination of translanguaging practices, as digital environments facilitate the integrated use of multiple languages thanks to the presence of translation tools, multimodal resources and opportunities for intercultural interaction. In this way, technologies help to enhance individual linguistic repertoires, supporting teaching models that are more inclusive and sensitive to linguistic diversity.

From an educational perspective, however, the integration of Digital Language Learning Ecosystems requires careful and informed instructional design, capable of considering not only the opportunities offered by technology, but also the relational, cognitive and inclusive dimensions of learning processes. In this context, teachers increasingly take on the role of guides and facilitators in complex learning environments, guiding students towards a critical and responsible use of digital resources (Nguyen & Tuamsuk, 2022).

5. Discussion and considerations

An analysis of the theoretical perspectives and teaching practices under consideration highlights that language learning can no longer be interpreted as an exclusively individual process or one confined to formal contexts, rather, it must be understood as a distributed and situated process that unfolds through interaction between schools, social contexts and digital environments, in line with the extended learning paradigm.

Within this framework, multilingualism emerges as a significant educational resource, capable of fostering not only the development of language skills, but also cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness and intercultural skills. Approaches such as translanguaging also help to move beyond a monolingual view of education, valuing students' linguistic repertoires and promoting more inclusive teaching practices.

Similarly, the CLIL methodology represents a concrete example of the integration of language and subject-matter learning, encouraging the functional use of language in authentic contexts and promoting forms of active and collaborative learning. These approaches are consistent with a view of language education as a dynamic and contextualised process.

Digital Language Learning Ecosystems are also playing an increasingly significant role, expanding opportunities for language exposure and enabling the integration of formal, informal and non-formal learning. Digital technologies facilitate access to authentic resources, intercultural interaction and the personalisation of learning pathways, establishing themselves as genuine environments for the development of language skills.

In light of these considerations, there is a need to rethink the role of the school as a complex linguistic ecosystem, in which the teacher increasingly takes on the role of facilitator and mediator of plurilingual and digital learning environments. From this perspective, the promotion of multilingualism and the conscious integration of technologies are fundamental elements for fostering more inclusive educational models that respond to the challenges of contemporary society.

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