



# BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PLANNING LANGUAGE-SENSITIVE TEACHER EDUCATION: 1 - WHAT IS LANGUAGE-SENSITIVE EDUCATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

ENG

BLEICHENBACHER LUKAS  
AND THE PROJECT TEAM



## Building block 1

### WHAT IS LANGUAGE-SENSITIVE EDUCATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

#### What is the purpose of this introductory Building block?

The purpose of Building block 1 is to discuss two key questions for curriculum planners, teacher educators and (future) teachers before they work on any of the other Building blocks:

- **What is 'language-sensitive education'?**
- **Why should all teachers be 'language-sensitive'?**

#### Who is this Building block for?

- those responsible for the content and quality of teacher education curricula at undergraduate and postgraduate level,
- curriculum planners and curriculum developers for teacher education,
- teacher educators and those organising professional development for practising teachers.

Some of the tasks and questions in this Building block may also be useful to stimulate discussion with teachers and student teachers at all educational levels.

#### The main objectives :

- to ensure that the term 'language-sensitive education' as it is used in all the Building blocks is understood;
- to make it clear why language-sensitive education is important for all stakeholders at all levels of education, from pre-school to further and higher education;
- to stimulate discussion about the importance of language sensitivity in your specific educational context.

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#### CONTENTS

- A. What is language-sensitive education?** – exploring the meaning of 'language-sensitive education' and the implications of what a language-sensitive approach to teaching includes.
  - B. Why is it important for all teachers and teacher educators to be language-sensitive?**
  - C. To what extent does pre-service and in-service teacher education in your context address language-sensitive teaching?**
  - D. Language sensitivity in a broader context** – language sensitivity and democratic culture.
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## A. What is language-sensitive education?

- a) What does the term 'language-sensitive education' mean to you?** You may wish to think about teachers and learners at a certain educational level (e.g., primary school, secondary school), and/or students and/or teachers in teacher education (initial education or continuous professional development).

### Commentary

One topical way into thinking about language-sensitive education is to resort to artificial intelligence. Here is a response from Chat GPT:

*"Within the educational context, language sensitivity refers to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that respects the linguistic and cultural diversity of students. It involves recognizing that students come from different linguistic backgrounds and may have varying levels of proficiency in the language of instruction."*

*Language sensitivity in education requires educators to be aware of the potential language barriers that students may face, and to make appropriate accommodations and adjustments to support their learning. This can include providing bilingual or multilingual resources, using inclusive language that avoids stereotypes and bias, and acknowledging and respecting the cultural backgrounds and perspectives of all students"*

(Chat GPT March 8 2023 as answer to the question "What is language-sensitive education and why is it important?").

This is perhaps the way you think of language sensitivity because in your context diversity of language backgrounds in classrooms is an important consideration. But it is not only learners with different language backgrounds that face 'language barriers': as the second paragraph implies, every learner is different, and many may encounter language challenges of one kind or another. Effective language-sensitive teaching helps them to address these challenges.

- b) The following can be considered aspects of language-sensitive teaching and learning. Which of these examples correspond to your view of language sensitivity? What other examples would you want to add to this list?**

- i. being sensitive to the language needs and language repertoires of learners;
- ii. using language in a supportive and varied way in teaching and supporting learning;
- iii. understanding and exploring with learners the language demands of different subjects;
- iv. being sensitive to the language demands of texts and other resources used in teaching;
- v. being ready to guide learners as regards the language requirements of different tasks;
- vi. helping learners to develop their language awareness and language skills;
- vii. supporting them as they gradually learn to use different varieties of the language of schooling and other languages in their learning and in their lives as citizens;
- viii. enabling learners to understand how different languages relate to each other and to the language of schooling, and how these languages matter for their learning.

## Commentary

As mentioned, the aspects listed in task b) above can all be seen as examples of different kinds of language sensitivity, and you probably thought of some others. Here are a few remarks on the implications for teachers of the eight aspects listed in task b) (using the same numbering).

- (i) This reminds us that each learner has a different language repertoire in their own language, and in many cases in more than one language. Teachers need to be aware of these differences in order to know which learners may need help with understanding and using the language of schooling in the appropriate ways for different purposes.
- (ii) When interacting with the class, the clarity of a teacher's instructions and questions is crucial to successful learning. There are also many different kinds of questions that can be asked depending on the teacher's purpose, so choosing those most appropriate for the teaching situation is an important part of planning.
- (iii) At the same time learners need to be able to use language in their learning of different subjects and to understand that different kinds of language may be used, for example when understanding texts, learning new concepts, describing processes etc.
- (iv) It is not only the language that teachers themselves use that needs to be thought about: textbooks and other learning resources are used in teaching most subjects, and learners may need help understanding some of the language they contain. When teachers create their own teaching resources or use material they have found online, they will also need to think about whether the language is clear and easily understood.
- (v) Diversity and mixed ability are increasingly a feature of classes. Given that each learner has a different language repertoire, it is to be expected that some will need extra help when tackling learning tasks. However, learners can also help each other in this respect.
- (vi) All teachers have a role to play in raising learners' language awareness so that they can further develop their oral language skills and their literacy.
- (vii) This includes helping them to become aware of the different varieties of language that are used for different purposes, both at school and in the communities in which they live.
- (viii) In many classrooms there are learners with home languages, minority languages and/or language varieties that are different from the language of schooling. Their languages are important parts of their repertoires and can be useful aids to understanding and learning. Learners whose home language is the language of schooling also need to realise how knowing one language can support the learning of others.

### c) Look at figure 1 below.

- i. ***What are the similarities and differences between your understanding of the term 'language-sensitive education' and the contents of figure 1? In what ways do your ideas complement or conflict with those in figure 1?***

### What does 'language-sensitive education' involve?

The term 'language-sensitive education' describes an inclusive approach to teaching any subject: teachers help their learners to deal with the language demands of learning tasks so that, whatever their language and/or social background, all learners can make the most of their education.

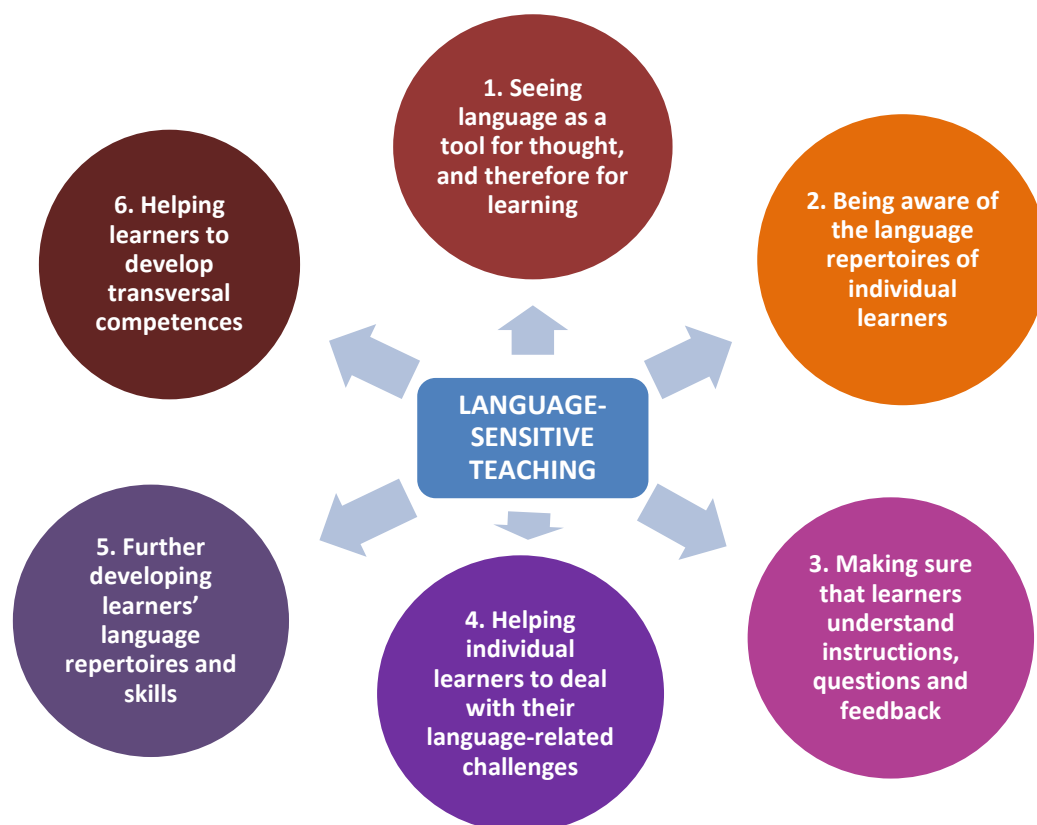


Figure 1: What does language-sensitive teaching involve?

### A closer look at the elements in figure 1

'Language-sensitive education' is not a simple concept to explain because it covers several aspects of the handling of language and communication in education, and it overlaps with other concepts and terms. For example, 'language-sensitive teaching' is also known as 'linguistically responsible pedagogy' (for example, in Finland), 'linguistically responsive teaching' (Lucas & Villegas 2013), and 'language-aware teaching' (for example, in Germany). There are several discussions of language sensitivity in the literature, some of which are cited [here](#) under the heading '*Related resources*'.

In the Building blocks, we make a distinction between 'language sensitivity' and 'language-awareness': language awareness is understanding how language and communication work in different circumstances; language sensitivity is using this awareness actively in one's teaching.

1. The learning of any subject depends partly on being able to understand and use the necessary language, especially any new words or expressions, ways of writing etc. As Alexander points out: *“Language and the quality of language are essential to cognitive development, learning and teaching in all contexts [...]. If language unlocks thought, then thought is enhanced, challenged and enlarged when language in all its aspects, [...] and in every educational context, is pursued with purpose and rigour.”* (Alexander 2009:271).
2. Teachers need to know something about the individual language repertoires of each learner, both about their competences in the language of schooling, including their level of literacy and their ability to express themselves orally, and about their background and skills in other languages.
3. Being language-sensitive means using helpful ways of interacting with learners, for example, making sure that instructions and questions are understood, rephrasing them if necessary, giving clear and helpful feedback, supporting talk with body language or visuals when necessary, etc. This is especially important when learners have first or home languages which are different from the language of schooling.
4. When learners are dealing with new concepts or subject knowledge, teachers can provide some helpful linguistic support, for example by explaining new words, highlighting which language features (words, sentence structures, speech acts) are especially important, asking questions that stimulate thought etc., while also encouraging them to solve conceptual challenges themselves (this is part of what is often called ‘scaffolding’). Learners for whom the language of schooling is an additional language can be encouraged to use their other languages as a means of thinking about and understanding new concepts and new terms.
5. Learners need to learn to use language that is related to the subject appropriately when carrying out learning and assessment tasks. They should gradually further develop their language repertoires so that they can deal successfully with these subject-related language demands. Some learners need individual help with this, for instance learners with special needs such as dyslexia, or recently arrived migrants who are not yet fully competent in the language of schooling.
6. Many of the skills that learners need to develop during their schooling and beyond are transversal in the sense that they are needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century life in a democratic society. For most of them language and communication competences are essential. Among its *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, the European Commission includes ‘personal, social and learning-to-learn competence’; UNICEF lists decision-making and problem-solving among the ‘Transferable Skills’ which it sees as critical in children’s education; and the Council of Europe’s *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* specifies, for example, the importance of: listening carefully to differing opinions; listening effectively in order to decipher another person’s meanings and intentions; asking questions that show understanding of other people’s positions; and so on. Being able to use language(s) sensitively in intercultural situations is also highlighted (Council of Europe 2018: 19-20). During schooling it is important for learners to develop such skills and the values and attitudes that underpin them.

**d) Match the five fictitious examples of language-sensitive teaching below with the relevant characteristics of language-sensitive teaching in figure 1 above. They may match with more than one characteristic, and there may not be a match for all of them.**



1. In lower secondary school X, where 25% of learners have home languages other than the language of schooling, a class teacher has created a list of all of the learners in the class which includes information about their different language and cultural backgrounds and also about their general level of literacy and oracy in the language of schooling (based on her own experience of working with them and last year's examination results). The teacher has shared this list with all the subject teachers who work with these learners.
  2. In primary school, a teacher gives instructions when introducing a writing and drawing task about healthy food, using a loud and clear voice. He then asks two of the children to repeat it in their own words. Before they do the writing, he asks the children to suggest some useful words for the task and writes them clearly on the board.
  3. In secondary school, a geography teacher is working with her learners on essay writing. Before asking them to write about the causes of earthquakes, she gets them to read a sample essay about volcanoes and to think in groups about the differences between the way it is written and everyday spoken language. Groups talk about differences in sentence structure (e.g. more use of the passive voice, subclauses etc), use of technical vocabulary (lava, eruption etc.), division into paragraphs etc. Then, during the essay writing, the teacher offers help, especially to the learners who have lower levels of literacy in the language of schooling.
  4. During a review of the teacher education curricula for all subjects in the faculty of education at a university, course leaders are asked to suggest improvements. As part of this process, they share ideas specifically about how using different kinds of questions and giving feedback to learners in a variety of different ways could be included in the revised curriculum.
  5. In a teacher education programme, those responsible for overseeing teaching practice (the practicum) and observation assignments carried out by their student teachers in local schools are preparing workshops for these students. In the workshops they will present new criteria for assessing practice teaching and observed teaching. The new criteria will focus on the ways in which teachers and student teachers use language in their interactions with learners. These also include criteria for assessing the help teachers provide for learners with language disadvantages or who have problems expressing themselves.
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## B. Why is it important for all teachers and teacher educators to be language-sensitive?

### Introduction

Over recent decades the need for all teachers to give greater attention to the language(s) which they and their learners use and to be language-sensitive has become ever more urgent. To mention just two reasons for this:

- **Handling linguistic and cultural diversity**

In many schools in Europe and beyond, due to migration there are now much larger numbers of learners whose language and cultural backgrounds are different from those of learners born in the country. This may mean that they need more support with using the language of schooling confidently. However, at the same time diversity of cultures and languages in classrooms offers teachers good opportunities to widen the cultural and language horizons of all learners.

- **Developing digital literacy**

The very fast development of the internet and the wide use by learners of social media and online sources means that youngsters are exposed to more varied uses of the spoken and written language and possibly also to more numerous confusing influences and disinformation that are difficult for them to deal with. At younger ages, children may need guidance, including from teachers, in how they should interpret what they read and hear online, and in how they use such media in their lives and in their school learning.

Depending on the context there may be other equally important reasons to develop greater language-sensitivity in educational settings.

**a) Which of the following points of view do you agree with? If you have the opportunity, discuss your answers with someone else.**

- “As a teacher in primary school, I understand that we have to help pupils to develop their ability to use the language of schooling competently and appropriately in all their lessons, whatever the subject.”
- “I think the teaching of language is the job of the teacher of the language of schooling. Teachers of science like me have to concentrate on our subjects – there is so much to teach. We don’t have time to focus on language except maybe in written work if the meaning isn’t clear.”
- “I am a teacher of the language of schooling. I work on various aspects of learners’ language skills, including their literacy. But I don’t know enough about the specific language demands in science or geography or other subjects to be able to help learners to do well in those subjects. Subject teachers need to work on literacy and oral language skills needed for their subjects.”
- “I believe that being able to understand and use language is closely connected with and essential for learning: often I’ve found that it is much easier for learners with strong language skills to acquire and understand new concepts or new information than for those with limited language skills.”
- “In one of my history classes there are seven children who have a migrant background and don’t speak the language of schooling so well. They struggle with the subject, but



it's not really my job to help them with the language – that would take time away from teaching the history syllabus. They should be taught language separately.”

- vi. “In a school like ours with a diverse population of learners, and in any school, it is crucial to take an inclusive approach to our teaching. I think teachers of different subjects need to work closely with the teachers of the language of schooling to help all learners develop and broaden their language skills. This will not only help them to do well in their education – it will also help them in their lives after school. But I’m not sure they should be allowed to use their home languages in school.”

### Commentary

Given the pressures that teachers are under, it is perhaps understandable to hear some teachers express views like those expressed in (ii) and (v). However, it is true that the teacher of the language of schooling (iii) will find it difficult to help learners to deal with the specific language challenges they face in each subject. Subject teachers have to understand that, to make progress in a given subject, learners also need to be helped with the necessary language related to their specific subjects. This includes not just the new specialist vocabulary needed to acquire new knowledge and understand concepts, but also the special ways in which language may be used in written texts and assignments about the subject. This is especially important for learners for whom the language of schooling is a second language. Encouraging them to use their own languages to try to understand new terms and concept and to seek help from another learner who speaks their home language can be helpful for them.

In the end, as expressed in (vi), schools and teachers have a duty to be inclusive, that is to provide the best possible learning opportunities to all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds and possible disadvantages. This is what makes teaching such a challenging but worthwhile job. Language is an integral part of learning, especially in school settings. Allowing learners to use their home language or other languages they know in school if they wish may help them to make progress in developing their language skills and may also give them more confidence.

- b) *Thinking of one of the subjects that student teachers in your context are going to teach when they qualify, or a subject taught by practising teachers whom you work with, list some of the language demands that their learners may have difficulty with. Compare the difficulties that occur at an early stage, e.g. year 5 or 6 of their schooling, with those at a later stage, e.g. years 9 or 10 of their schooling.***
- c) *Choose three of the difficulties you have mentioned. Do student teachers in your context know how to help learners to overcome them? How does their teacher education course help them with this?***

### Commentary

It is often said that “every teacher is a language teacher”. As long ago as 1975, following three years of work, a committee of educational experts appointed by the UK government, which was concerned about standards of literacy and language use in education, published a report called *A Language for Life*. The report contained various important recommendations, including the following:

- “Each school should have an organised policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher’s involvement in language [...] development throughout the years of schooling.”

- “A substantial course on language in education [...] should be part of every primary and secondary school teacher’s initial training, whatever the teacher’s subject or the age of the children with whom he or she will be working.” (The Bullock Report 1975:513-515).

These and the various other recommendations in the report were unfortunately not implemented in the UK at the time or later, but they highlight very important points about the close relationship between language and learning and about the role of teachers in helping their learners to develop their ability to use language effectively as they progress through schooling. Learners cannot reach their potential in any subject unless they are also able to use the language of schooling effectively.

Let’s look in more detail at some important aspects of language-sensitive education. One is the way in which teachers themselves use language in their interactions with learners: there are many ways of giving instructions, asking questions, giving feedback, and so on, and the ways in which teachers do this has an impact on learning as well as on learners’ motivation.

Another main aspect is the ways in which language (including written language in textbooks) is used to mediate information, to get learners to think about new concepts and relate them to their experience, to learn from each other in group activities, etc. All of this often requires teachers’ guidance and support. For example, some learners, and not only those with other home languages, have more difficulty than others when expressing themselves orally and/or in writing.

In addition, different subjects in the curriculum require learners to use language in different ways, whether they are answering questions in class orally or doing a written task for homework or as part of a test: think, for example, of the differences between the ways in which language is used in mathematics lessons and in history lessons.

Also, children entering education, and indeed later on, may not consciously think much about the way we use language, but when they do, they often find new words, names, ways of expressing oneself, accents and words in other languages very interesting. Teachers of all subjects can deepen this interest and encourage ‘language exploration’ by getting learners to focus on new terms related to the subject, differences between informal and formal language, relations between words in different languages, cultural aspects of language, and much else. Noticing, experiencing and experimenting are all essential parts of learning, and there is great richness to be explored and exploited in languages.

In summary, language plays a key role in learning any subject, even subjects like art and music. But for learners it is more important than that. Language plays a key role in every aspect of life. The more knowledge and understanding they have of the ways in which they learn to understand and to use spoken and written language while at school and across subject boundaries, the easier it will be for them to reach their educational potential and to use language – or, better, their languages – for life.

**C. To what extent does pre-service and in-service teacher education in your context address language-sensitive teaching?**

*Figure 2 below is a mind map of some areas of language-sensitive teaching that could be addressed in pre-service and in-service teacher education. How important are they in your context? Which other aspects of language-sensitive education are important in your context?*



**Figure 2: Mind map of some areas of language-sensitive education**

- a) *Which of the main areas (in rectangles) of language-sensitive education in figure 2 above do you consider most important for (future) teachers of all subjects and their learners in the context where you work?*
- b) *Are these main areas and their sub-areas (ovals) addressed in teacher education courses and/or teaching practice? Are any other main areas also important for your context of teacher education?*
- c) *There are question marks (?) in the mind map. What other aspects of language-sensitive teaching can you think of that are important for your context but not included in the mind map?*
- d) *How could language-sensitive education be given more attention in your context, for example in teacher education and in the mentoring of teachers?*

### Commentary

It is difficult to include all the relevant areas of language-sensitive education in a mind map. Depending on the context and whether teachers are working in primary, secondary or further education, priorities will vary. The areas and sub-areas that you listed no doubt reflect your and your colleagues' priorities and preoccupations regarding language in teaching and teacher education. These arise directly from the challenges teachers experience in classrooms in their educational settings. Ideally, teacher educators and those supporting practising teachers need to create their own list of priority areas and sub-areas based on local research into learners' needs and teachers' classroom challenges. These priorities may also be determined in part by the language policy of the institution and of the national authority which oversees teacher education. However, such policies are not always made explicit.

The main question is: how can teacher education help teachers to become more language-sensitive, especially in the priority areas for their specific educational settings and subjects? [Building block 3](#) aims to address this question by suggesting how teacher education curricula or in-service programmes can be redeveloped to include more attention to language sensitivity. [Building block 4](#) offers guidance on reshaping individual modules or courses to include a strand addressing language-sensitive education in more detail, while [Building block 5](#) is concerned with ensuring that language sensitivity has a central place in teaching practice and lesson observation.

As regards questions (a), (b) and (c), the suggested 'Profiles' and tasks in [Building block 6](#) aim to show in more detail and with examples how specific aspects of language sensitivity may be priorities for different categories of teachers. To complement Building block 1, the document provided [here](#) offers a list of areas of language-sensitive teaching that is more comprehensive than that offered in figure 2.

## D. Language sensitivity in a broader context

As suggested in figure 1, a language-sensitive approach in education also includes giving attention to 'transversal competences' that focus on language and communication, as described, for example, in the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC)*. In this Framework, the 'competences' are divided into four closely related groups: 'values', 'attitudes', 'skills' and 'knowledge and critical understanding'. Each category covers many aspects of democratic citizenship, but several are relevant to or directly concern language and communication.

- a) ***Read through the following small selection of descriptors relevant to language and communication taken from Volume 2 of the RFCDC. In your view, how important is it that such competences should form part of school learning and should be addressed in teacher education?***

### Under 'Values':

#### ***Valuing cultural diversity***

*Promotes the view that one should always strive for mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue between people and groups who are perceived to be 'different' from one another.*

### Under 'Attitudes':

#### ***Openness to cultural otherness***

*Shows interest in learning about people's beliefs, values, traditions and world views.*

#### ***Respect***

*Gives space to others to express themselves.*

### Under 'Skills':

#### ***Analytical and critical thinking skills***

- *Can identify similarities and differences between new information and what is already known.*
- *Uses evidence to support his/her opinions.*

#### ***Skills of listening and observing***

- *Listens carefully to differing opinions.*
- *Listens attentively to other people.*
- *Watches speakers' gestures and general body language to help himself/herself to figure out the meaning of what they are saying.*
- *Can listen effectively in order to decipher another person's meanings and intentions.*

#### ***Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills***

- *Can express his/her thoughts on a problem.*
- *Asks speakers to repeat what they have said if it wasn't clear to him/her.*
- *Asks questions that show his/her understanding of other people's positions.*

### Under 'knowledge and understanding':

#### ***Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication***

- *Can explain how tone of voice, eye contact and body language can aid communication.*
- *Can describe the social impact and effects on others of different communication styles.*
- *Can explain how social relationships are sometimes encoded in the linguistic forms that are used in conversations (e.g. in greetings, forms of address, use of expletives).*

(Council of Europe 2018. Volume 2, pages 16-22)

- b) Are competences for democratic citizenship, including their relationship to learners' developing language competences, discussed in your context? If so, what views do people express?**
- c) How can teacher education enable teachers of any subject to address such transversal competences in their teaching, especially those relating to language and communication?**
- d) What specific guidance can be given to encourage teachers to exemplify and encourage a 'democratic culture' in their classroom teaching?**

### **Commentary**

Transversal language competences, sometimes called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills or transferable skills, are referred to in bubble 6 of figure 1. However, the extracts from the *RFCDL* cited above cover various aspects of language and communication that are not included in the mind map at figure 2. The extracts highlight that language and communication are integral parts of human behaviour and are governed by deeper values and attitudes, such as respect for others, willingness to accept and engage with other cultures, and being ready to listen to opinions which one may not agree with. These 'transversal competences' are essential both within and outside the educational domain, especially now that young people are exposed to so much communication via social media and to opinions and information ranging from inspiring to dangerous.

These competences may not always be seen as essential to learning new information and concepts or preparing well-written assignments about a given topic, for example, in science or geography. However, such transversal competences are very relevant to the process of learning and the ways in which learners communicate with each other and with teachers. Language sensitivity is a crucial factor in how teachers address and interact with their learners, ask questions, give feedback and so on, and it is equally crucial for learners to learn language-sensitive ways of interacting with one another and school staff, and, more importantly, to develop the values and attitudes that underpin language-sensitive interaction in the world outside school.

One way in which transversal competences such as those in the *RFCDL* extracts in task a) above can be addressed in teaching and learning is to regard each lesson across the curriculum as an opportunity for teachers and learners to practise language-sensitive 'communicative behaviour' and for learners to be invited to notice and follow this model. As an example, a teacher can take opportunities to invite learners to express their thoughts and opinions on a topic in a 'democratic' way, guiding them in the use of appropriate and respectful language. The teacher and other learners should then listen respectfully to the opinions expressed and choose suitable language to respond, agree or disagree. Or, in an activity about body language and tone of voice, learners could be asked to comment on video clips in which body language and/or tone of voice are used to get certain messages across.

In volume 3 of the *RFCDL* (notably pages 25-42), guidance is given on ways in which teachers can help develop these transversal competences.

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[www.ecml.at/languagesensitiveteachereducation](http://www.ecml.at/languagesensitiveteachereducation)

**[www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at)**

The European Centre for Modern Languages is a Council of Europe institution promoting excellence in language education in its member states.

**ENG**

**[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)**

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

