



Pluricultural Competence of Asian Language Students in France

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Abstract

Thanks to globalization, language learners can easily come into contact with peoples of target cultures through the Internet, student/professional mobility, low-cost travel, and so on. However, frequent contact with people of other cultures does not necessarily lead to successful communication with them. Concepts such as “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram, 1997/2009), “sociocultural competence” (Byram and Zarate, 1997) and “pluricultural competence” (Coste, Moore and Zarate, 1997) are useful in helping us explain why this is so. By referring to the components of such a competence, we will examine case studies of French-speaking university students learning an Asian language (Japanese, Korean, Mandarin). The analysis of information gathered through questionnaires and semi-guided interviews with individual students helps us obtain insights on how pluricultural competence was acquired in these students, and more generally, to understand the factors at play in the development of this competence in foreign language learners.

1 Introduction

In a world where globalization is increasingly accelerated, we see more and more instances of people travelling to other parts of the world, be it for short-term tourism or long-term relocation, or whether it is for voluntary travel or due to forced migration. As a result, chances of coming into contact with people of other languages and cultures have become more likely than ever. Even for those who do not travel, it has become very easy for anyone to come into contact with people of other cultures right in their home or cities – including with immigrants – or through the cyberspace. But has this phenomenon enabled the population in the world to acquire more open attitudes and intercultural skills due to such increased contact with “otherness”? If it does, then in what ways?

Through several case studies of students learning foreign languages in their home city, specifically French-speaking university students of Asian languages (Japanese, Korean and Mandarin), this paper will provide insights on how such open attitudes and intercultural skills are acquired or can be developed, while drawing upon concepts such as “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram, 1997), “sociocultural competence” (Byram & Zarate, 1997/2009), and “pluricultural competence” (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997).

2 Literature review

Hymes (1972a) reminds us that we must “not only see languages as part of systems of speaking but also to see systems of speaking from the standpoint of the central question of the nature of socio-cultural order” (p. 70). Indeed, a speaker needs to acquire communicative competence – that is to say to gain knowledge of social, cultural and situational rules on how members of a community interact with one another – so as to know how to act appropriately in a particular situation. Hymes (1972b) also introduced the concept of “communicative competence”, although his use of this term applied mainly to “endolingual” communication, i.e. between persons of the same native speech community. More recently, several very similar and related concepts were introduced with the context of foreign language learners in mind. These concepts – “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram, 1997), “sociocultural competence” (Byram & Zarate, 1997) and “pluricultural competence” (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997/2009), and more recently “transcultural competence” (Biell & Doff, 2014) – are useful for helping us describe the ability and skills needed to communicate successfully with persons of other cultures, and will be presented below.

2.1 Intercultural communicative competence

Expanding on Hyme’s concept of “communicative competence”, Byram (1997) defines “intercultural communicative competence” as the competence that allows people

to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language [...] to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to themselves and the other and [...] to act as mediator between people of different cultural origins. Their knowledge of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately – sociolinguistic and discourse competence – and their awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of the language. They also have a basis for acquiring new languages and cultural understanding as a consequence of the skills that they have acquired in the first place. (p. 71)

According to Byram, there are five interdependent aspects or components to intercultural communicative competence, namely (1) *savoir être* (attitudes), (2) *savoirs* (knowledge), (3) *savoir comprendre* (skill of interpreting and relating), (4) *savoir apprendre* (skill of discovery and interaction), and (5) *savoir s’engager* (critical cultural awareness). He further suggests that intercultural competence can be developed through frequent and sustained contact with the target language that a learner is picking up as well as interactions with the speakers of that target language.

2.2 Sociocultural competence

Byram and Zarate (1997) refer to *sociocultural* competence as the ability

to interpret and bring different cultural systems into relation with one another, to interpret socially distinctive variations within a foreign cultural system, and to manage the dysfunctions and resistances peculiar to intercultural communication [...] (p. 13)

The latter mentioned four subtypes of sociocultural competence, namely (Byram & Zarate, 1997, pp. 14–20):

- *savoir être*: affective capacity to relinquish attitudes towards and perceptions of otherness and a cognitive ability to establish and maintain a relationship between native cultures and foreign cultures.
- *savoir apprendre*: ability to produce and operate an interpretative system with which to gain insight into hitherto unknown cultural meanings, beliefs and practices, in either a familiar or a new language and culture.
- *savoirs*: system of cultural references which structures the implicit and explicit knowledge acquired in the course of linguistic and cultural learning, and which takes into account the specific needs of the learner in his/her interaction with speakers of the foreign language.

- *savoir faire*: capacity to integrate *savoir être*, *savoir apprendre* and *savoirs* in specific situations of bicultural contact, that is, between the culture(s) of the learner and of the target language.

Viewed from the perspective of the native/non-native speaker distinction, Byram and Zarate (1997) argued that native speakers “live at the centre of a system of values and beliefs, from which they – ethnocentrically – perceive their own sociocultural experience and their contact with other cultures” (p. 9). On the other hand, learners of a foreign language perceive the very same culture differently, not only as a foreign culture, but also with their very own “ethnocentric perspective” (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 9). In an interaction between a native speaker and a foreign speaker, each party has a different “perspective of otherness of the interlocutor” (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 10) and these perspectives are an integral part of the interaction. In contrast to Byram’s intercultural communication skills, the authors of works on socio-cultural competence seem to imply that the assessment of experience abroad is not necessarily correlated with language proficiency (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 74). Some dimensions of “socio-cultural competence are indeed related to language competence while being independent” (Byram & Zarate, 1997, pp. 72–73) but it is no less true that other aspects such as “the relationship to otherness in its affective and cognitive dimension” or “taking into account the identity of the learner” (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 73) could very well be independent of linguistic competence.

2.3 *Pluricultural competence*

Last but not least, the concept of *pluricultural competence* was introduced at around the same time as the above concepts. Closely linked to that of *plurilingual competence*, Coste, Moore and Zarate (1997/2009) consider plurilingual competence and pluricultural competence together, and define them collectively as “the competence to communicate linguistically and to interact culturally [...] by an actor who masters, to differing degrees, numerous languages, and has, to differing degrees, the experience of numerous cultures, all the while being able to manage the totality of this language and cultural capital” (p. 12). To them, the specificity of the concept of pluricultural competence is based on the three following aspects:

- its inclusion in a particular family and occupational path, which implies a particularly important investment over time;
- a high degree of familiarity with otherness, which implies an ability to make choices, to manage risk optionally and to employ diversified strategies within partly compatible social and cultural logics;
- a relationship with the educational establishment leading to autonomous conduct with respect to school orthodoxy. (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 1997, p. 27; 2009, p. 21)

They explain that the path of an individual cannot be just considered at the individual level, but must include the previous generations, especially in a multicultural society where geographical and professional mobility becomes increasingly common and frequent. One can emigrate into another country or another region of the world for personal or professional reasons, or cross over borders every day to work in a neighbouring region across the border while living in his or her own country. Certain families are very attached to their heritage language and/or traditional customs (e.g. cooking) and they will try to conserve it by passing it down from generation to generation. These personal and life experiences transmitted from past generations constitute, according to these authors, a “capital” which can be inherited by subsequent generations.

On the other hand, the duration of contact with “otherness” is not directly related to the degree of familiarity with it, but if the contact with another culture for two weeks were to be repeated in time, then there will be more occasions that will allow the individual to become familiar with this “otherness” and to develop strategies to better manage his or her relations with it.

From interactive communicative competence to pluricultural competence, the three concepts mentioned above are all very similar, yet at the same time all very different. All three speak of the competence of an individual who is able to interact with people who do not share his or her culture and

manage his or her relationships with them. They also show the existence of an “ethnocentric” perception that remains on both parties, that each individual can learn whether or not to mitigate, depending on the situation. Some of these concepts provide details on the types of competence to be acquired while others describe the aspects that define the specificities of the competence in question.

Another term that has been coined, *transcultural competence* (Biell & Doff, 2014; Domenig, 2001), has been pointed out by Byram and Wagner (2018) to be more of a “a practical aim that can be reached through education. It entails the crucial skills required for students to decenter from their taken-for-granted and unquestioned world perspectives in order to see how others see the world and how others see us” (p. 145). But unlike the above terms, it is not closely linked to the idea of mediation, that is to be “able to act as a mediator between people of two or more different cultural and linguistic contexts, using one’s intercultural skills and attitudes” (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 145).

In the rest of this article, we shall adopt the term *pluricultural competence*, because it is in our opinion the most complete for our research purposes and it is this very concept that specifically spells out all the aspects of communication between cultures as mentioned above. It is noteworthy that it is also very term that has been adopted in the latest version of Council of Europe’s (2018) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

3 Research questions

In this article, we are interested in understanding how one acquires the necessary pluricultural competence that enable the speakers of different cultural backgrounds to understand one another, particularly in the context of foreign language teaching and learning.

As Coste (2015) notes, the setting up of a plurilingual competence and an intercultural competence is not done purely or mostly through the learning of foreign languages at the university, since the majority of foreign language classes focus mainly on the learning of the target languages *per se*. Even if some teachers do bring culture into the classroom, either by treating specific areas of the related foreign culture(s) to the students, or by pointing to differences between the students’ own culture and that of the target culture, it is not by understanding intellectually the content (*savoir*) that one will acquire an intercultural competence.

Focusing on the context of French-speaking university students who have chosen, of their own will, to learn an Asian language (Japanese, Korean or Mandarin) for mainly or purely internally motivating reasons (either being interested in a residential language course or having considered devoting part of their future professional careers in the country of the target language that they are studying), the aim of this study is to analyse their pluricultural competence according to a number of factors, such as their family situations, their contacts with other languages and cultures and their year of study. Correspondingly, the underlying research questions for this paper are as follows.

Research Question 1: Do self-motivated foreign language learners have the pluricultural competence for the corresponding target culture(s)?

Research Question 2: While it seems natural for foreign language learners to be open and understanding towards persons from the target culture, are they also open and understanding towards persons from other cultures in general?

Research Question 3: What are the main factors that are likely to determine the pluricultural competence of these students?

4 Methodology

The study was conducted at three universities in France offering at least one of three Asian languages – namely Japanese, Korean and Mandarin – in two stages.

In the first stage, to investigate research questions 1 and 2, we administered a questionnaire in two parts (see Appendix 1): part one of the questionnaire contained personal questions such as the language they were learning, the name of their institution, their year of study, their first language(s), the first language(s) of their parents, if they had any contact with persons of other language or cultural

background, and so on; the second part required students to respond to 18 statements relating to their ideas, attitudes and open-mindedness levels when faced with situations of interaction with other cultures. The respondents were asked, for each statement, to choose the best one of five choices, namely *I totally agree, I partly agree, I do not know, I partly disagree, I totally disagree*. While we are aware that it is not possible to accurately assess pluricultural competence of students using such a scale, we would also like to clarify that our purpose in this study is not to quantitatively measure students' pluricultural competence. In fact, we are of the opinion that pluricultural competence should not be assessed using a scale in the first place, and we would merely want to observe the tendency of responses in order to pick out representative students for a follow-up interview, and to delve further into their responses. The questionnaire was sent via Internet to French-speaking university students learning an Asian language (either Japanese, Korean, or Mandarin) at one of three universities in France, most of whom are in their first undergraduate year (known in France as the *Licence I* year). The choice of first year students was deliberate, as higher-level students are more likely to come into contact with the target culture and more factors would then come into play.

The second stage, focusing on research question 3, consisted in semi-structured interviews that were conducted with some selected students (see Appendix 2). The selection of students for this stage was done in a way that ensured there were students of different categories based on their responses. The interview questions required students to talk about their family and professional paths as well as their past experience of contact with another culture or other cultures. This is to investigate the factors impacting their acquisition of the various aspects of pluricultural competence, as mentioned by Coste, Moore & Zarate (1997/2009) and described above.

Both the questionnaire and the interviews focused on the four subtypes of sociocultural/pluricultural competence of Byram and Zarate (1997) mentioned above. The objective here is not so much to observe if each learner possessed such or such a subtype of competence, but to see if there are any existing relations between certain factors and the acquired pluricultural competence.

5 Questionnaire results and analysis

More than 400 responses (437) were obtained, and most came from students at three universities, namely Université Bordeaux Montaigne (UBM), Université Paris 7, and Inalco (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales). The breakdown of responses according to universities is as follows: UBM - 44.4 %; Inalco - 37 %; Paris 7 - 18.8 %, others: 0.2 %.

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by university

	UBM	Université Paris 7	Inalco	Others
Respondents	193	161	82	1
% of total	44.0 %	37.0%	18.8%	0.2%

The vast majority of the students were in their first year at the university (L1 - 69.7%), but there were also students in their second year (L2 - 14.2%), third year (L3 - 9.4%), fourth year (M1 - 6%) and fifth year (M2 - 0.7%). The reason why the first-year students make up the greatest segment is because many students take up the foreign language courses in their first year of study at the university.

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents by year of study

	L1	L2	L3	M1	M2
No. of respondents	290	59	39	25	3
% of total	69.7%	14.2%	9.4%	6.0%	0.7%

The breakdown of languages that the respondents were studying was as follows: 69.5% Japanese, 10.8% Korean, and 19.7% Mandarin. The imbalance in the distribution seems to come partly from the fact that the researcher conducting this study knew more colleagues teaching Japanese in these

universities, who helped to encourage their students to respond to the questionnaire. It is also partly due to the fact that some colleagues teaching Korean and Mandarin did not respond to the researcher's call to convey the questionnaire to their students.

Table 3. Breakdown of respondents by language studied

	Japanese	Korean	Mandarin
No. of respondents	289	45	82
% of total	69.5%	10.8%	19.7%

Two-thirds of these students never learned their target language before entering the university. The remaining one-third had learned it before through correspondence courses, in junior or senior high schools, in language schools or through private lessons, in an association, in the country of where the target language is spoken, or through self-taught lessons, especially through the internet, by watching movies and television series, and so forth.

For 9% of the respondents, the target language is their heritage language and they learned it either in a family environment or in an institution. The question of students' heritage language seemed important because for those students whose heritage language is one of the three Asian languages, this means that their parents have chosen to pass on their mother tongue to these students, especially to those who learned it at a young age in a family context. In other words, these students have become familiar with otherness in a natural way and over time. In addition, the frequency of contact with the corresponding target culture could sometimes considerably increase.

When asked what other languages they have already learned, the languages mentioned included English, Spanish, German and Italian, taken while they were in the (junior or senior high) school system, while some have also learned one of the other two Asian languages under study.

Regarding their mother tongues, 82.5% claimed to have French as their mother tongue and 13.7% declared that French was one of their two mother tongues. Those who did not have French as their mother tongue had learned it at various ages, but the two trends that emerged were that this was during their early childhood days (before the age of 5) and during their adolescence.

As for their parents, the majority of them had French as their mother tongues. Some of the languages mentioned for their parents included (in alphabetical order): Arabic, Bambara, Berber, Breton, Chinese, Creole, English, German, Hausa, Japanese, Korean, Khmer, Italian, Lari, Lingala, Malagasy, Mina, Moorish, Nigala, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Wolof. Knowing that this is not an exhaustive list, we are seeing a real linguistic and cultural diversity that exists in France.

For approximately half of them, French alone is – or French together with their mother tongue are – the only language(s) they speak.

70% of the students responded positively when asked if they have (had) frequent and prolonged contact with other cultures. In fact, some students could enter multiple answers to this question, while the country or region given in the "Others" section is very varied. The nature of these contacts is distributed as follows (by decreasing order of percentage):

- a) I have had the experience of living abroad. (66.3%)
- b) I have a close foreign friend / close foreign friends. (43.8%)
- c) A family member lives abroad. (34%)
- d) A family member comes from another culture. (29.6%)
- e) One of my parents is / my parents are from another culture. (20.9%)
- f) A friend close to my parents comes from another culture. (11.1%)

Regarding the experience of staying abroad, the details are as follows:

- a) I often organize short stays abroad (weekends, holidays, etc.) (46%)
- b) I took part in a language stay abroad organized by my school. (48.1%)
- c) I went abroad for a university exchange. (13.9%)
- d) Because of my parents' work, I spent a lot of my childhood abroad. (5.1%)
- e) Others (27%)

Many have had an experience of linguistic stays one or more times during junior or senior high school days and/or mobility in the country where they continue their language training through academic exchanges. Or some have family members that bring them several times to foreign countries during holidays, mostly in Europe, but also in the USA, Canada, Japan, China, and other countries.

The results of the first part of the questionnaire show the linguistic and cultural diversity in which a large number of students are immersed daily and would faithfully reflect the answers given in the second part. The majority of them think they are open and understanding not only towards the culture they are studying but also towards other cultures. According to their responses, few of them have an ethnocentric perception; in fact, the majority say they are open to other cultures and think that there would be mutual comprehension with someone from another culture provided they respect each other's culture. This is valid in particular for naturalized French citizens. Three quarters of the students recognize that they have the right to preserve their culture of origin, but in return that they must also respect the French culture.

On the other hand, what strikes us particularly in the rest of the results is that 67% of the respondents think that they have to comply completely with the customs of the country in which they are in. However, being open to other cultures and respecting them should not be confused with the process of acculturation. Byram and Zarate (1997) note as follows:

The language learner... is not a social subject condemned to systematic imitation of all things native. In the contrary, he travels **with a stock of cultural resources which he is not obliged to renounce during his period of expatriation**. Language learning must mean learning to take on a new social status, that of representative of one's country of origin (which status others will bestow on him, irrespective of his own wishes), that of newcomer to a community whose conventions and rituals he will have to learn, and that of cultural intermediary (intercultural speaker) between the communities with which he is connected. (p. 73; emphasis added by us)

Indeed, all learners should be able to assume these three statuses at the same time without eliminating any, or replacing one with another.

Another surprising result is that one-third of the students also believe that it is enough to store knowledge about another culture to understand it. Having knowledge of another culture does not allow one to acquire in reality a *savoir faire* competence in the face of the other culture, nor to be able to renounce attitudes and ethnocentric perceptions (*savoir être*), nor to have an ability to develop an "interpretive system that updates" beliefs and practices of a culture (*savoir apprendre*). This is reminiscent of the attitudes observed with some foreign language teachers today, who still consider that it is entirely sufficient to give bibliographical references on the corresponding foreign culture(s) to students for them to read them on their own (Suzuki, 2014).

What one can conclude from these questionnaire results is that, while the learners generally think that they can be open and understanding towards people of the target and other cultures (see Research Question 2 above), they may not have fully acquired pluricultural competence yet (see Research Question 1 above).

6 Interview results and summary

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 4 students: a student in Korean (Nathan); two students in Chinese (Lucie and Anna); a student in Japanese (Elias), all enrolled in first year at a university in France. This is a qualitative empirical study in a relatively short period of time (4 months in all) and therefore it was intended for a large number of interviews to be conducted, other than the ones with selected students in relation to the results of the questionnaire. We first wanted to select some plurilingual students with "a high degree of familiarity with otherness" (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009: 27). Only 4 students were chosen in relation to their answers to certain questions such as questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 13, which seem to us to correspond enough to this sought-after profile [of students with "familiarity with otherness"]. While the answers of Elias and Anna are quite similar, some of Lucie's absence of answers gave us the desire to discover in depth her ideas and her percep

tion of intercultural communication. Only Nathan's profile did not seem to correspond exactly to his plurilingual profile despite his frequent and deep contact with otherness, so when we chose him, thinking that he would provide a counter-example to the profiles of the other three students, hence giving a range to the possible profile types among the students. The results and discussion of them are presented below.

6.1 Interview results

6.1.1 Nathan

Nathan is a French student who is learning Korean at a Parisian university. Before deciding to learn Korean, he studied engineering under the pressure of his parents because he comes from a bourgeois family in the province in which all the men are engineers from generation to generation. Nathan unfortunately failed twice and after 5 years, he quit his engineering studies. To the despair of his parents, he decided to go to Paris to study Korean. Following this, his parents stopped funding him for his studies. He was forced to work in a fast food restaurant to finance his studies. He lives in a multicultural African neighbourhood of Paris and he tries to speak some common words in an African dialect with some customers in the area. He had long been attracted to Asian languages. He is also fascinated by the Korean alphabet. He speaks English fluently and has learned Spanish as a second foreign language in junior or senior high school. In addition, his maternal grandparents are of Spanish origin, his mother understands Spanish and his father speaks English and Russian. His contacts with other cultures are mainly through the Internet (YouTube, games, etc.).

6.1.2 Anna

Anna has been a nurse by profession for 5 years and who is learning Chinese. Before embarking on a bachelor's degree course, she already had a year of Chinese lessons in an association and then 2 years of introductory evening classes in Chinese at the current institution. She also has a three-week stay experience in Taiwan. During the school curriculum, she learned German as the first foreign language, and then as the second foreign language for 7 years in junior and senior high school, as well as English as the second foreign language and then as the first foreign language. She also completed several three-week language stays in England and Ireland with a foster family while she was in Grade 8 and Grade 11. In terms of contacts with other cultures, being passionate about Asian cultures, she often went on trips of 2 or 3 weeks, several times a year, during which she always practiced her English. She claimed to have watched a lot of Asian movies and TV series with English subtitles, and that this has allowed her to improve her English as much as possible. She also learned Korean at a language school for a year. Her parents are French, their mother tongue is French, and her maternal grandparents are French citizens of Polish origin. They do not speak any foreign language. She has always had an interest in languages, and when she travels to Asia, she will "always try to say some words in the language of the country". Because her father had a passion for martial arts, she claims: "I spent my childhood watching martial arts movies ... And since I was young, I have been immersed in it". She has a Chinese boyfriend, a native speaker of her target language, whom she met in an association that she goes to. It is her activity within this association that pushed her to deepen her studies of Chinese.

6.1.3 Lucie

Lucie is an 18-year-old Malagasy girl enrolled in the Mandarin course. She has two mother tongues: French and Malagasy. She studied English in Grades 5 to 12 and she continued thereafter. She also learned German from Grade 8. Her father is a French-Malagasy mixed-blood and her great-grandfather was Chinese from Guangdong. Part of her family is of Chinese origin. She also self-taught a little Korean. Lucie has always spoken French at home with her parents, although her father speaks

both French and Malagasy. As she has always lived in a very mixed community with French, Malagasy and Chinese cultures, she was constantly in touch with at least these three cultures. There is apparently a hierarchy between cultures in Madagascar. The French language/culture is valued everywhere, for example in the television news (also in Chinese) and in series or on posters (also in Chinese). Chinese also gives a good image in the Malagasy society with mining and raw materials exploitation. She also says that 50% of the Malagasy population is not educated, so those who have studied tend to use French.

6.1.4 *Elias*

Elias is an 18-year-old French student of the Japanese language. He went to a Breton school for his kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 years, before returning to a French school. He says it was a deliberate choice of his parents, particularly his mother who is very attached to language learning. In junior or senior high school, he learned English and Spanish. His mother needs to be fluent in English and German as part of her job: import-export sales. His father is Breton and his entire paternal family lives in Brittany. The latter learned Breton during evening classes, but he always spoke to Elias in French. His paternal grandparents spoke French and Breton. One of his uncles also went to Breton school, and is now fluent in Breton, translates plays, and is an ardent defender of the Breton language. Elias would like to resume his studies of Breton later because he considers that to be the “roots” of his family. He has an experience of a language stay for one week in Grade 9 in Taiwan and the following year he also returned to Taiwan for 3 months, all of which gave him the opportunity to learn a little Mandarin Chinese. “Ever since this trip, [Chinese and Japanese are] two languages that are dear to me!”, he exclaims. He discovered Japanese culture through manga and anime on television, and then on the Internet. His interest extended to Japanese cooking and calligraphy, which he practiced for 5 years, and kendo for 1 year. He went on a trip to Japan with his mother in 2013 for 4 weeks. “My mother always told me, she who studied languages, that it is important to see, to go to the country where the language is spoken and to see how life is ... This trip was really ... it was something that marked me.”

6.2 *Discussion*

Three main factors that are likely to determine the pluricultural competence of foreign language learners can be identified from the above interview results: (1) their prior plurilingualism; (2) their contact with “otherness”; and (3) their intercultural perception.

6.2.1 *Prior plurilingualism*

The first thing we can observe in this initial study is that these four students, passionate not only about their language and culture learning experience, but also by Asian languages and cultures in general, are all already plurilingual to begin with. Foreign languages, even if the choices are limited and imposed by the school system (2 foreign languages in the secondary education in France) and the virtual world (social networks, games, movies, videos on Internet) ubiquitously (on computer and/or smartphone) have given many opportunities to practice different languages.

However, their relations with languages are all quite different from each other. Unlike Lucie and Elias, Nathan and Anna did not have the benefit of a family environment conducive to the development of a “linguistic capital”. In Nathan’s case, his parents and grandparents do speak foreign languages, but that is not to say that they tried to pass it on to him. He still has some family members in Spain, but “does not see them often”. What matters in his family tradition is to carry out the engineering profession. That’s why his language learning is essentially in the classroom: English for the past eight years, Spanish in high school and Korean at the university. He says he has always been interested in languages, including languages other than European languages. “I speak French. And just French and English, it’s interesting to see people saying things differently. It allowed me to open new horizons

of thinking.” He also added, “It’s a new way of designing and building what we say and it’s really interesting!” It is true that he did not inherit “linguistic and cultural capital” through a family network, but he is building his own capital mainly through the internet. He watches a lot of “popular science videos” in English and he also devotes time to Internet games. He says he meets people with whom he ends up making friends with by spending time playing together. As for his choice to learn Korean, the language that has always fascinated him, finally proved to be a way to escape the family’s grip on the traditional career of an engineer. This personal choice allowed him to gain his intellectual and financial independence.

Anna, too, did not benefit from any family environment favourable to the inheritance of a linguistic capital. Her maternal grandparents are of Polish origin, but they have chosen not to transmit their native language and culture to their descendants. Her two languages, English and German, were learned in the school setting. But her mother sent her for three-week language immersion stays in English-speaking countries for 4 years, spending the day at a language school and the evening with a host family. In terms of language proficiency in English, she says watching films and series in English and her travels to Asian countries have allowed her to make good progress. These stays seem to have contributed to her awareness of otherness. On the other hand, her family environment played an important role in the choice of the language that Anna has been learning for 5 years: Mandarin. In recounting her story, she realized, through the process of ethno-linguistic decentralisation (Perregaux, 2006), that her interest in the Chinese language went far back in time. It dates back to her childhood when she watched a lot of Chinese martial arts movies with her father.

Lucie, born and raised in Madagascar, in a society where cultural crossbreeding is important, had two influential factors in the development of her languages: her family and social environments. Firstly, her family plays a huge role because she inherited French from her father who has two mother tongues, just like Lucie: French and Malagasy. And if she did choose to learn Mandarin in a university curriculum, one cannot ignore the fact that her great-grandfather was a Cantonese Chinese and that she lived with his family in an environment where three cultures were present concurrently: Malagasy, French and Chinese.

As for Elias, he was immersed in a family environment where the interest in languages is quite developed with his uncle, a defender of the Breton language, his paternal grandparents had two mother tongues – French and Breton – while his mother speaks fluent English and German for her work. The heritage of the Breton linguistic and cultural capital has been passed down for at least three generations. Elias began the start of his schooling years in a Breton school because his parents wanted him to reconnect with his “roots”. Apart from English and Spanish which was learned at school, Elias has a great interest in two Asian languages: Mandarin and Japanese. While his mother instilled in him a taste for languages and cultures the choice of these two Asian languages comes from his own interests and experiences.

What we can draw from this observation is that Elias and Lucie have become included “in a particular family and occupational path, which implies a particularly important investment over time” (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009, p. 21; see also Section 2.3 above). In both cases, the influence of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the family is heavy. In particular, the mother of Elias, who is herself multilingual and has an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, sensitized her son from an early age to the values of plurilingual and pluricultural education. However, can we believe that it is sufficient to inherit two languages and cultures from one’s parents or to grow up in a multilingual-multicultural society? Can we not say that an individual who discovers his own passion for one (or more) language and culture sometimes has more awareness of otherness than the one whom the heritage language and culture has been passed on to? It is often realized that not all persons of mixed race from two different languages and cultures will have any particular interest in these languages and cultures, nor are they more aware of otherness. Linguistic and cultural capital is not only an object of inheritance transmitted in a family context, but it must also be constructed by an individual with a major interest in a particular language and culture.

6.2.2 *Contact with “otherness”*

The second factor that interests us concerns “a high degree of familiarity with otherness, which implies an ability to make choices, to manage risk optionally and to employ diversified strategies within partly compatible social and cultural logics” (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009, p. 21; see also Section 2.3 above). This can be seen in the case of Lucie, who grew up in contact with the three languages and cultures represented in her daily life in Madagascar. We can therefore see that it is her social environment that has forged her sensitivity to otherness at a very young age. While being already bilingual in French and Malagasy, she began learning Mandarin, a language that is very present in the Malagasy society, and is one of the languages of her ancestors.

Language courses abroad lasting 2 or 3 weeks are sometimes offered by schools, in which Anna and Elias were able to participate. This can sometimes be an initiatory trip that gives these students the desire to start learning the language spoken in a country or region. This is how Elias started learning Mandarin. As for Anna, her fascination for Asia pushed her to travel in this region very frequently (3 or 4 times a year) for a duration of 2 or 3 weeks per trip. Moreover, in having a Chinese life partner, she has no doubt succeeded in becoming familiar with cultures other than her own and in fulfilling her plan to manage her relationship to otherness in the long term – just like Elias, who had been immersed in a Breton environment since his childhood days and has discovered a kind of passion for Chinese and Japanese languages and cultures through travel, reading, sports and traditional arts.

These three students were, for their part, impregnated in a way with the presence of several languages and cultures by their family environment and/or by their social environment. The case of Nathan could have been different, he who was born as “the son of ...” the bourgeois family of the French province which seeks above all the preservation of the family tradition. He, who always says he is passionate about cultures and languages, especially Asian ones, has created his plurilingual/pluricultural capital all by himself via the Internet. Are his virtual contacts enough? It probably depends on the nature of the contacts that he has made. In any case, Nathan has daily and actively sought out virtual contacts with people from other cultures, some of whom are becoming “genuine” contacts.

6.2.3 *Intercultural perception*

The terms “sharing”, “respect”, “mutual understanding”, “open-mindedness”, “dialogue”, “prejudices”, “prioritization of cultures” were all observed during interviews with of these four students. Regardless of their “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1990; Byram & Zarate, 1997), they all seem to have a sensitivity to connect with other cultures and a more or less thoughtful attitude about how they will apprehend communication with people from other cultures (the *savoir être* competence).

For Nathan, living in a multicultural neighbourhood with African tendencies in Paris seem to contribute to his “penetrating into the culture” and “getting immersed” in the culture of the Other. The latter gives an example of his part-time job at a restaurant in this neighbourhood, explaining that he calls some of his clients “my aunt”. Because if he addresses them as Madame, “They do not understand!”.

Similarly, the open attitude towards persons of other cultures was developed in a family environment for Elias who says “My parents always told me not to be prejudiced”, and even his own experience of contact with people from other cultures like Anna “has allowed him to understand their cultures” and this represents for him “a wealth”.

All have insisted that one needs to “dive into culture” and “be in touch with it”, to live, see, experience this culture in order to understand it.

When they are in a situation of conflict or misunderstanding with someone who is not from the same culture as theirs, everyone seems to have the strategies to deal with it. For Nathan, if we find ourselves in this kind of situation, it’s because “we do not make enough effort to communicate” or “we do not use the same words in the same way”, so it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the conversation and try to understand what caused the misunderstanding. For Anna, too, “dialogue” seems to be her main communication strategy, especially in the event of conflict. She explains: “If

we try to understand each other, I think we can reduce conflict”; “We must explain to the person why we think like that, why we act like that”. Such an attitude is explained by Coste (2015, p. 80) in the following manner:

il est permis de penser que, dès lors que des comportements, des normes de conduite, des représentations sociales sont en jeu, on a affaire à des expériences de la rencontre interculturelle qui suscitent beaucoup plus une prise de conscience, une réflexion, voire des verbalisations et des explicitations. [Translation in English: It is permissible to think that, when behaviours, norms of conduct, social representations are at stake, we are dealing with experiences of the intercultural encounter which give rise to much more awareness, reflection and even verbalizations. and explanations.]

When asked if they agreed with the statement “When you are abroad, you have to comply completely with the habits and customs of the culture of the country where you are”, one third of the respondents have responded positively. Our four interviewees seem to be aware of a new status, “that of a newcomer to a community whose conventions and rituals he will have to learn” and “that of cultural intermediary (intercultural speaker) between the communities with which he is connected” (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 11). For the first, they say: “I like to adapt myself” (Nathan) or that it is necessary to adapt to the local culture in order not to shock, because “it is as if we are guests in this country for me” (Anna). However, they are well aware that they do not need to give up their own culture: “It is important to contribute something” and “it is also good to affirm who we are” (Nathan). In the same way, Anna expresses the caveat: “We must not deny who we are, or where we come from. I am not Asian, I cannot practice Confucian values, but I can adapt them more or less.” Assuming a role as a cultural intermediary does not mean giving up one’s cultural capital; on the contrary, without keeping one’s cultural capital or identity, individuals hardly have the competence to understand each other.

7 Conclusions

The four students with whom interviews were conducted in this seem to have more or less a “high degree of familiarity with otherness” (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997, 2009). These experiences of many frequent contacts with other cultures sensitize them to the differences of customs, values and convictions, and these plurilinguists mobilize all their cultural capital forged in all these experiences of otherness in order to act accordingly and appropriately in the face of another culture.

As for the factors that are likely to determine pluricultural competence, the testimonies of our four interviewees confirm what the authors of the plurilingual and pluricultural competences have identified, namely a family and/ or social environment. Nathan's case seems particularly interesting in the sense that he has engaged a lot of contacts with people from other languages and cultures through the internet. Since the Internet is a completely integrated tool in today's society, can it not be considered as a multilingual and multicultural social environment that encourages us to come into contact with others and to maintain these links in the long term? However, the mere fact of having contact with otherness does not allow for open and tolerant attitudes (Carton, 2015). Whatever the environment that we grew up in, reflective attitudes and a critical look at oneself and one’s own culture as well as other cultures can help to develop skills to adjust one’s – sometimes ethnocentric – perceptions and representations, to manage conflict situations and to build trusting relationships with other people from other cultures.

Indeed, the “early” experience of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism differs significantly according to the family and personal trajectory. Thus, among the respondents of this study, Elias seems to have acquired tools of reflection during a language and intercultural training provided by his mother and know how to better exploit his cultural assets by adopting a sufficient distance from his own culture. We will conclude our reflections with his sentences: “Our culture is not superior, but it is different. There is no subculture [...] It is not something that I accept or that is justified and justifiable!”

The results presented here are from our first study in the research on the teaching and learning of intercultural/socio-cultural/multicultural competences. As much as the testimonies of the four students are only part of the analysis of the results, more work will be done in future works to develop further interviews with these students. At the same time, we believe that the findings will be useful to future research on intercultural mediations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Questionnaire on intercultural communication with students learning an Asian language in higher education in France

Part A

Answer as sincerely as possible to this series of questions concerning you (tick for each question the answer that corresponds to you):

1. What language are you currently learning? (a) Chinese (b) Korean (c) Japanese
2. What year of study are you enrolled in? (a) Bachelor's Degree 1st year; (b) Bachelor's Degree 2nd year; (c) Bachelor's Degree 3rd year; (d) Master's Degree 1st year; (e) Master's degree 2nd year; (f) PhD
3. In which university are you learning this language? (a) Bordeaux Montaigne; (b) Inalco; (c) Paris 7; (d) Others, please specify: _____.

4. Did you learn this language before enrolling at the university? (a) Yes; (b) No (→ If no, please skip to question 6).
5. If you answered yes for Q4, answer 5.1 and 5.2 below.
- 5.1. Please specify: (a) the name of the establishment where you learned it; (b) for what duration; and (c) for how many hours per week.
- 5.2. Is this language your heritage language (i.e. the mother tongue of your parents or one of your parents?) (a) Yes, I learned it at home; (b) No, but it was spoken at home; (c) No, I learned it in an institution.
6. What other languages did you learn before? Specify (a) the language(s); (b) for what duration; and (c) for how many hours per week.
7. What is your mother tongue? / What are your mother tongues? (a) French; (b) French and another language: please specify: ____; (c) Others: please specify: ____.
8. If your mother tongue is not French, at what age did you start learning French?
9. What is (are) the mother tongue(s) of your parents?
10. Do they speak other languages? If yes, which ones? (a) Yes: please specify: ____; (b) No.
11. Do you have or have you had, at any point in your life, frequent and/or prolonged contact with other languages and/or cultures? (e.g. a family member is from another culture) (a) Yes; (b) No.
- 11.1. If yes, what is the nature of these contacts?
 - (a) One of my parents is / My parents are from another culture. Specify which culture: ____.
 - (b) A family member comes from another culture. Specify which culture: ____.
 - (c) A family member lives abroad. Specify where: ____.
 - (d) I have a close foreign friend / close foreign friends from another culture: (Specify which culture: ____)
 - (e) A friend close to my parents comes from another culture. Specify which culture: ____
 - (f) I have had the experience of living abroad. (please answer 11.2).
- 11.2. If you answered (vi) for question 11.1, what is the nature of this or these experience(s)? You can choose more than one.
 - (a) I often organize short stays abroad (weekend, holidays, etc.)
 - (b) I took part in a language study organized by my school.
 - (c) I went abroad for a university exchange.
 - (d) Because of my parents' work, I spent a lot of my childhood abroad.
 - (e) Others (please specify): ____
- 11.3. Give details of your overseas stays from question 11.2 (location, age, duration, circumstance, etc.)

Part B

Answer the following questions by indicating the number corresponding to your degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. (1 = "I totally agree"; 5 = "I totally disagree"). There is no right or wrong answer. Rely on your first impression.

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| a) To understand another culture, it is enough to store knowledge about it (by reading, by courses given at the university, by internet). | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| b) To understand the culture of my interlocutor, it is better to speak your language. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| c) I love the language and culture I study, so I think I have enough tolerance for the people it comes from. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| d) I also think I have enough tolerance towards the people of another culture than mine. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| e) I think my language is the most beautiful and my culture is the best in the world. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| f) Wherever I am, I want to claim my culture, my religion, my eating habits, etc. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| g) When you are abroad, you have to know how to comply completely with the habits and customs of the culture of the country where you are. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| h) When a foreign in front of me eats something that I am unfamiliar with, I may think it is bizarre. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| i) It's been 15 minutes since we started talking as a group, but one person still has not said a word. She probably has no ideas. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| j) I think you can never understand 100% someone from another culture. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| k) I do not feel very comfortable with people from other cultures. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| l) If you do not make yourself easily understood with someone from another culture, it's because he / she does not have a very open mind. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| m) If two people who do not share the same culture try to respect each other's culture, they will come to understand each other. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| n) I think I'm pretty observant when I'm in the presence of people from other cultures. | 1 2 3 4 5 |

- o) If I do not feel comfortable in the language of my interlocutor, I prefer not to speak. 1 2 3 4 5
- p) I think that all naturalized French or immigrant parents should not claim their culture of origin because they have become French first and foremost. 1 2 3 4 5
- q) For me, someone who speaks a language with a very pronounced accent is not a legitimate speaker. 1 2 3 4 5
- r) People should not be discriminated against because of their accent, their eating habits, their cultural differences. 1 2 3 4 5

Thank you very much for your participation.

Would you agree to leave your name and contact information for an in-depth interview regarding your responses?

Thank you in advance.

Last and first names :

E-mail address :

Telephone number:

Appendix 2

Interview guide

First of all, thank you for accepting this interview. All information collected is only used for research and is anonymised.

So, you are learning [name of language] at [place of study] now and you have already learned for [duration] / have never learned this language beforehand. Your mother tongue is [name of language], but you also learned [name of language] and [name of language] during your school career. The L1 of your parents is [name of language] and they speak / do not speak (of) other languages. You also come into contacts with other languages and cultures ...

1. Could you speak a little about yourself regarding the teaching and/or learning languages so far?
2. Tell us a little more about your experience of contacts with other languages and cultures.
3. Have you had experiences of a misunderstanding or bad memory that occurred with someone else's culture? If so, could you tell me about it?
4. What did you do at that time? Why?
5. Intercultural communication, what does it represent for you?