

THE CURRENT PROBLEMATIC OF "SAVOIR-ÊTRE" ("EXISTENTIAL COMPETENCE") IN DIDACTICS OF LANGUAGES-CULTURES

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Abstract

We have come to realize that beyond the question of knowledge and know-how, the question of *savoir-être* (French expression translated as "existential competence" in the Common Framework European for languages, CFER), however it may be described, cannot be dismissed in didactics of languages-cultures (DLC), not only because in school didactics it is part of the educational goals, but also because for all learners it has a direct impact on communicative and

actional skills in a foreign language-culture. The goal of this article is to propose a conceptual model of *savoir-être* that is sufficiently simple, without being simplistic, to be used regularly in the language-culture classroom jointly by the teacher and learners within the methodological framework of the action perspective and its reference pedagogy, project pedagogy. This model is then implemented in three concrete proposals concerning each of the three fundamental didactic operations: teaching, learning and assessment.

Key words: *savoir-être* (existential competence); competences; social action-oriented approach (SAOA); project-pedagogy; democratic citizenship

This article is an English translation of the French original entitled "La problématique du *savoir-être* en didactique des langues-cultures", [*Études en Didactique des Langues*](#) (LAIRDIL, Laboratoire Inter-universitaire de Recherche en Didactique LANSAD, Université de Toulouse III), no. 43, December 2024, pp. 91-117.

Acronyms

FFL: French as a Foreign Language

CECR: *Cadre Européen Commun de Référence* (CECR 2001)

CEFR: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2001)

SAOA: Social Action-Oriented Approach

General introduction

For my contribution to this 43rd issue of the journal *EDL Études en Didactique des Langues*, I have chosen to cross three of the four angles proposed by the coordinators, namely the "epistemological", "reflexive" and "pedagogical" angles. To this end, I will deal successively with the following themes:

- A critical analysis of this notion as described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2001), where no proposal is made to operationalize it in terms of the three fundamental didactic activities announced in the subtitle of this document, "learning, teaching, evaluating" (chap. 1).
- Explaining the emergence of this notion and the importance it has assumed in pedagogy, at the crossroads of professional competences and educational goals (chap. 2).
- The necessary contextualization of the implementation of this notion in relation to current methodological developments in language-culture didactics (DLC), characterized by various combinations of the communicative approach (chap. 3.1) and the social action-oriented perspective, SAOA (chap. 3.2).

In the final chapter 3.3, I make four concrete proposals for integrating the *savoir-être* work into the language-culture classroom.

1. *Savoir-être* in the CEFR 2001

The authors of the call for papers for this issue of *EDL* immediately cite the CEFR 2001, which is understandable because this document is still an essential reference in DLC for the assessment of "communicative language competences", and because it has taken up the trilogy of knowledge, know-how and interpersonal competences for "general competences", which was already well known at the time in general pedagogy. The titles given to this issue, "*Savoir être ou ne pas savoir être*" ("*Savoir-être* or not *savoir-être*"), suggest that the notion and its introduction into DLC is not without its problems, and we shall see that this is just as understandable.

1.1. An "insane" notion?

In the CEFR, *savoir-être* appears as an original French expression with an English equivalent "existential competence":

- Existential competence (*savoir-être*, see 5.1.3.) may be considered as (...) (p. 11)
- 5.1.3 "Existential" competence (*savoir-être*) (p. 105)
- Savoir-être* (existential competence [...]) (p. 133)

For this chapter 5.1.3, the quotation marks for "existential" and the addition of the French expression in brackets suggest that the French version is the original.

This existential competence, or *savoir-être*, appears in the list of "*The general competences of an individual (chap. 2.1.1)*":

The general competences of language learners or users (see section 5.1.) consist in particular of their knowledge, skills and existential competence and also their ability to learn: (...) (p. 11)

And it is defined for the first time in chapter 5.1.3. as follows:

Existential competence (savoir-être, see 5.1.3.) may be considered as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction. This type of competence is not seen simply as resulting from immutable personality characteristics. It includes factors which are the product of various kinds of acculturation and may be modified. (CFER, pp. 11-12)

Further on in the CEFR, in chapter 5.1.3 (pp. 105-106), *savoir-être* is again defined by extension using six components. The first five are "attitudes", "motivations", "values", "beliefs" and "cognitive styles". "Personality traits" is the sixth component, illustrated by the following examples:

- *loquacity/taciturnity*; • *enterprise/timidity*; • *optimism/pessimism*; • *introversion/extroversion*; • *proactivity/reactivity*; • *intropunitive/extrapunitive/impunitive personality (guilt)*; • *(freedom from) fear or embarrassment*; • *rigidity/flexibility*; • *open-mindedness/closed-mindedness*; • *spontaneity/self-monitoring*; • *intelligence*; • *meticulousness/carelessness*; • *memorising ability*; • *industry/laziness*; • *ambition/(lack of) ambition*; • *(lack of) self-awareness*; • *(lack of) self-reliance*; • *(lack of) self-confidence*; • *(lack of) self-esteem*.

On reading this expression "existential competence" and this somewhat surreal enumeration of its components –even shocking in its moralizing connotations–, we understand the vigorous criticism formulated in 2009 by the French didactician of French as a foreign language (FFL) Louis Porcher:

For a good thirty years now, no training course or exchange of ideas has taken place in the course of any language didactics meeting without the endless trilogy of knowledge, know-how and savoir-être being proclaimed as the alpha and omega of the discipline. However, it has to be said that this is pure flatus vocis, an abominable cliché that means nothing, one of those cases where language is left to speak for itself, automatically, to avoid thinking.

Knowledge and know-how, i.e. concepts and their application, certainly don't deserve any comment. They're right where they belong. But savoir-être makes no sense at all. Would a language teacher be qualified to pass on to anyone the ethical modalities of proper personal conduct? And in the name of what? Why, above all, should anyone dictate to others (from multiple cultures of belonging, by hypothesis) the right way to be? It's hard to see why language teaching should be charged with transmitting a savoir-être (Porcher 2014 p. 94; blog post dated 16/03/2009).

In an article entitled "La problématique éthique du 'savoir-être' en didactique des langues-cultures", Emmanuel Antier, teacher of FFL and author of a thesis on ethics (Antier 2017a), criticizes *savoir-être* in the CEFR and other Council of Europe publications from this same perspective: "From a moral point of view, one might moreover wonder in what way a language-culture teacher would be legitimized to interfere normatively with the identity of his learners" (Antier 2017b, n.p.).

There are two possible explanations for such a disastrous presentation of *savoir-être* by the authors of the CEFR:

-The first explanation is undoubtedly what Bruno Maurer and I have called the CEFR's "compilatory approach", which can be seen, for example, in the accumulation of grids "developed independently of each other¹, or in the treatment of the methodological question, which is reduced to "a simple compilation of the available options" (Maurer & Puren 2019d, p. 52, p. 79). This approach is systematic among the authors of the CEFR, and this is clearly explained in the "Avertissement" (Warning") of the French version of the CEFR, the CECR (*Cadre Européen Commun de Référence*):

To fulfill its function properly, it [the CECR] must meet certain criteria of transparency and coherence, and be as exhaustive as possible. These criteria are set out and explained in Chapter 1. On the subject of "comprehensiveness", let's say, for the sake of simplicity, that you should find in the Framework everything you need to describe your objectives, methods and results. (CECR, p. 5)

This approach leads them to define *savoir-être* in terms of as many conceivable components as possible, so as to get as close as possible to the truth of a concept they themselves describe as "difficult to define":

These personality traits, attitudes and temperaments are parameters which have to be taken into account in language learning and teaching. Accordingly, even though they may be difficult to define, they should be included in a framework of reference. (p. 12)

But, as B. Maurer, this kind of enumeration² does not in itself transform a notion into an operative concept, since "compilation does not produce anything that is not already present in the initial data" (Maurer & Puren 2019d, p. 83): such "series-compilation" actually corresponds to what can be described as "level zero of conceptualization" (cf. Puren 2022f, chap. 3.1.1, pp. 9-11).

Savoir-être does not even always appear in the list of competences. They are defined in terms of knowledge, know-how or skills and *attitudes* on several occasions, such as in the Warning on p. 4 and p. 5 (published only in the French version), or again, later in the text, on p. 104 :

¹ There are 24 for mediation alone in the CEFR *Supplementary Volume* (COE 2018).

² In the French version of the document, the CECR, the translator has even added "etc." at the end of several lists of the components of *savoir être*, including that of "personality traits".

Chapters 4 and 5 attempt to set out what a fully competent user of a language is able to do and what knowledge, skills and attitudes make these activities possible. (CEFR, p. 131)

–The second explanation is that, in the name of a convenient principle of methodological “neutrality”³, the authors of the CEFR refrained from addressing the question of possible ways and means of learning, teaching and even –*last but not least*– assessing these savoir-être, which enabled them to multiply the components without worrying about their coherence and applicability. This is what they write, for example, about what the Council of Europe has since consistently presented as one of the two main educational goals of language teaching along with plurilingual education, namely intercultural education⁴:

In an intercultural approach, it is a central goal of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. It must be left to teachers and the learners themselves to reintegrate the many parts into a healthily developing whole. (COE 2001, p. 1. Note again the moralizing tone).

That gives the unpleasant impression that the authors are conveniently offloading onto teachers and learners the pursuit of a goal they themselves don't know how it can be concretely pursued and evaluated, and without them really caring.

1.2. Lack of consideration for “collective savoir-être”

Right at the start of the CEFR, in Chapter 1.2 entitled “The aims and objectives of Council of Europe language policy” (pp. 2-4), the authors point out that for this institution:

[...] preparation for democratic citizenship [is] a priority educational objective, thus giving added importance to a further objective pursued in recent projects, namely “to promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility”. (p. 4)

and that these methods

help young people and indeed older learners to build up the attitudes, knowledge and skills they need to become more independent in thought and action, and also more responsible and cooperative in relation to other people. (CEFR, Notes for the user, 2nd p.)

The authors of the CEFR themselves add: “In this way, the work contributes to the promotion of democratic citizenship” (*idem*).

The first French edition, published in 2000, clearly displayed this primary aim on the cover (Fig. 1): “*Apprentissage des langues et citoyenneté européenne*” (“Language learning and

³ “(The CEFR) cannot take up a position on one side or another of current theoretical disputes on the nature of language acquisition and its relation to language learning, nor should it embody any one particular approach to language teaching to the exclusion of all others” (p. 18).

⁴ Cf. the following lines at the top of the “Language Policy Portal” on the Council of Europe website (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/home>): “Since the early 1960s, the Council has played a key role in bringing about positive change in the field of language education across Europe and beyond, broadening the early aims from a focus on modern foreign languages to the more holistic concept of plurilingual and intercultural education.”

European citizenship"). To the best of my knowledge, this reference does not appear in the English edition of the same year, nor in later English and French editions.

Figure 1

Cover page of the CECR French 2000 edition



It is therefore astonishing that "civic values" are not mentioned in the "values" component of *savoir-être*, and that the examples given are presented as personal values (cf. "3. values, e.g. ethical and moral", CEFR, p. 105). Throughout the document, however, we note the absence not only of the expression "civic action", but also, even more surprisingly, of the expression "social action", with "task" defined as individual:

A task is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. (CEFR, p. 10)

In fact, the "social actor" is defined in the CEFR in relation to the communicative approach: he/she only performs communicative tasks, his/her action being *de facto* limited, as we can clearly see in the descriptors of the proficiency scales, to communicative interaction between individuals *in a social context*, according to the expression used on page 9.

This educational goal for democratic citizenship has been constantly put forward by the Council of Europe⁵, but in the CEFR it is nothing more than a display: it is not taken into account in any concrete way, and on the contrary, it imposes what we might call a veritable "individualist paradigm", which is as consistent with the communicative approach as it is with the primary aim of the publication, which is to promote a model of assessment that can only be individual, namely language certification⁶. It's understandable that *savoir-être* should be defined in the personal domain as individual values, as they are in the two passages I quoted above at the start of

⁵ Cf. e.g. the COE 2017 document, or to date (15 05 2024) the "Education for democracy" page on the Council of Europe website, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/citizenship-education-school-europe-2017>, where the notion of complexity is also used.

⁶ Cf. B. Maurer's highly revealing survey of the CEFR's authors and other contributors in Maurer & Puren 2019d, in chapters 1.1.1 ("À la manœuvre, des organismes prétendument désintéressés", "In the driver's seat, supposedly disinterested organizations"), and 1.1.2 ("Le contrôle éditorial de quelques personnels de ces institutions", "Editorial control by some of these institutions staff").

Chapter 1, but this also happens to be the case in the public, professional and educational domains of action:

- *the public domain, in which **the person** concerned acts as **a member** of the general public, or of some organisation, and is engaged in transactions of various kinds for a variety of purposes;*
- *the occupational domain, in which **the person** concerned is engaged in his or her job or profession;*
- *the educational domain, in which **the person** concerned is engaged in organised learning, especially (but not necessarily) within an educational institution. (CEFR, p. 45)*

If the CEFR were to take effective account of the goal of education for citizenship, it would also have been necessary to consider, alongside individual "personality traits", what is known in social psychology as "collective identity". In educational science, as in management science, some even speak of "collective *savoir-être*". All teachers know from experience the importance of a "good atmosphere" and a "group spirit" among learners. The authors of two French as a Foreign Language (henceforth "FFL") textbooks for teenage beginners had the idea of starting by proposing activities designed to create a sense of collective solidarity among students: in one of these textbooks, this involves drawing up and displaying "class words", and in the other, creating a class mascot⁷. In this way, the authors of the CEFR once again demonstrate their dependence on the communicative approach, whose promoters have never spoken of anything other than "**learner-centeredness**" (emphasis added) and "**individual** learning strategies", whereas the priority, from the very first hours of class and for the entire course, is obviously to create a "**collective** teaching-learning strategy".

2. *Savoir-être*, at the crossroads of professional competence and educational goals

In the history of DLC since the mid-20^e century, there has been a "parallel evolution of innovation and design models in DLC and business management" (article subtitle Puren 2006f). This is not because managerial models have directly influenced didactic models, but because work in the context of a so-called "company", on the one hand, and precisely "undertaken" teaching-learning work in a language classroom, on the other, present similar issues that place them at the same times under the influence of the same dominant ideas in society. This is particularly true of current production models: in a language class, the teacher gets learners to produce language, so that they in turn can produce language for their own use (cf. Puren 2007c). Thus, the structural exercises of American audio-lingual methodology coincide with Taylorism; French audiovisual methodology with the "technological revolution"; the communicative approach with the "information and communication revolution"; and the action-oriented perspective with the project approach⁸.

Given the level of professionalism in business management research, it should come as no surprise that the most detailed descriptions of competence are always borrowed from authors who have published on the subject.

2.1 Competence in the professional domain

Guy Le Boterf is one of the best-known and most recognized experts on professional competence in France. As it happens, he is also the one who has proposed the most interesting definition for DLC today, because it is based on the notion of action, at a time when this discipline has

⁷ *Version Originale A1*, Paris: Maison des langues, 2011 ; *Sac à Dos 1*, Barcelona: Difusión-PUG, 2005).

⁸ For a defence and illustration of the value of keeping abreast of developments in management research, cf. Maurer & Puren 2019d, pp. 4-5.

integrated into its methodological resources the so-called "actional approach", which is a social action approach⁹:

*Being competent can be seen as the result of three factors: **knowing how to act**, which implies knowing how to combine and mobilize appropriate resources (knowledge, know-how, networks, etc.) and knowing how to implement relevant professional practices; **wanting to act**, which refers to the individual's personal motivation and the more or less incentive context in which he or she operates; **being able to act**, which refers to the existence of a context, a work organization, management choices and social conditions that make it possible and legitimate for the individual to take responsibility and risk.* (2000, pp. 94-95, emphasis added).

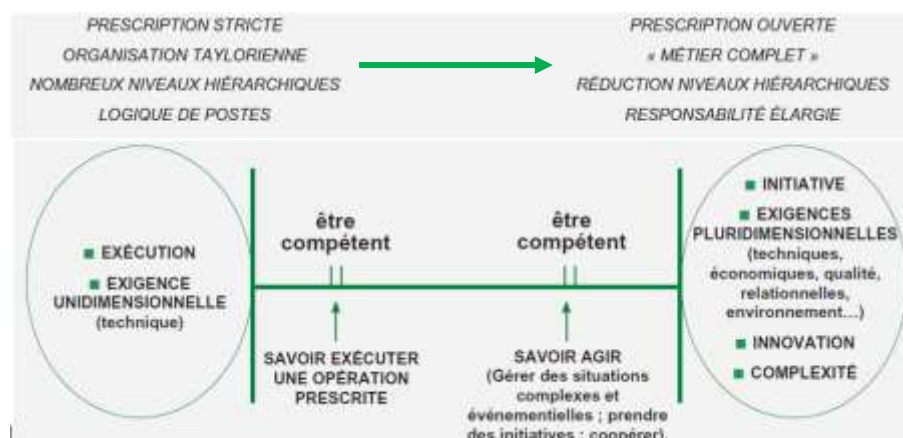
The individual competence of workers in companies have become more necessary as the complexity of tasks has increased, and can now only be effectively managed by more autonomous and responsible individuals. In the official document *Le Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (France Compétences 2023), the gradation criteria for classifying skills are as follows:

- the complexity of knowledge associated with professional activity;
- the level of know-how, which is assessed in particular according to the complexity and technical nature of an activity in a work process;
- degree of responsibility and autonomy within the work organization. (p. 22)¹⁰

These same criteria can be found in the evolution of qualification requirements in companies, as represented by Le Boterf (1998, p. 27) in the following diagram (Figure 2), which can be scanned from left to right (for this purpose, I have added the horizontal arrow between the two types of company):

Figure 2

"Le curseur de la compétence" in the workplace (Le Boterf 1998)



⁹ For this reason, this action-oriented approach is referred to as the "Social Action-Oriented Approach" (SAOA) in the English-language book that a anglicist colleague from Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir (Turkey) and I co-authored (Acar & Puren 2024).

¹⁰ I'll come back to the skills descriptor grid in chapter 3.3.4, which is based on these three criteria: "knowledge", "know-how", "responsibility and autonomy".

The concept of competence for action on complex issues in a complex environment takes into account this need for individual commitment, and this is what gives decisive importance to the personal personality of the actors themselves. As FFL didactician Jean-Jacques Richer explains so well in a 2014 article, calling on Guy Le Boterf and another specialist in managerial sciences, Erwan Oiry:

"Competence lies not in the resources (knowledge, skills, etc.) to be mobilized, but in the mobilization of these resources. Competence is a matter of "knowing how to mobilize" (Le Boterf 1994, p. 17). [...] Thus conceived, knowing how to mobilize enables us to move away from a purely cumulative conception of competence and adopt a dynamic, processual conception that strongly reintroduces the acting subject, giving competence an individual character that Oiry underlines as follows: "Competence is an attribute of the individual" (Oiry 2003, p. 81). (Richer 2014, § 25-26)

The same historical development can be seen in the educational domain as in the professional one.

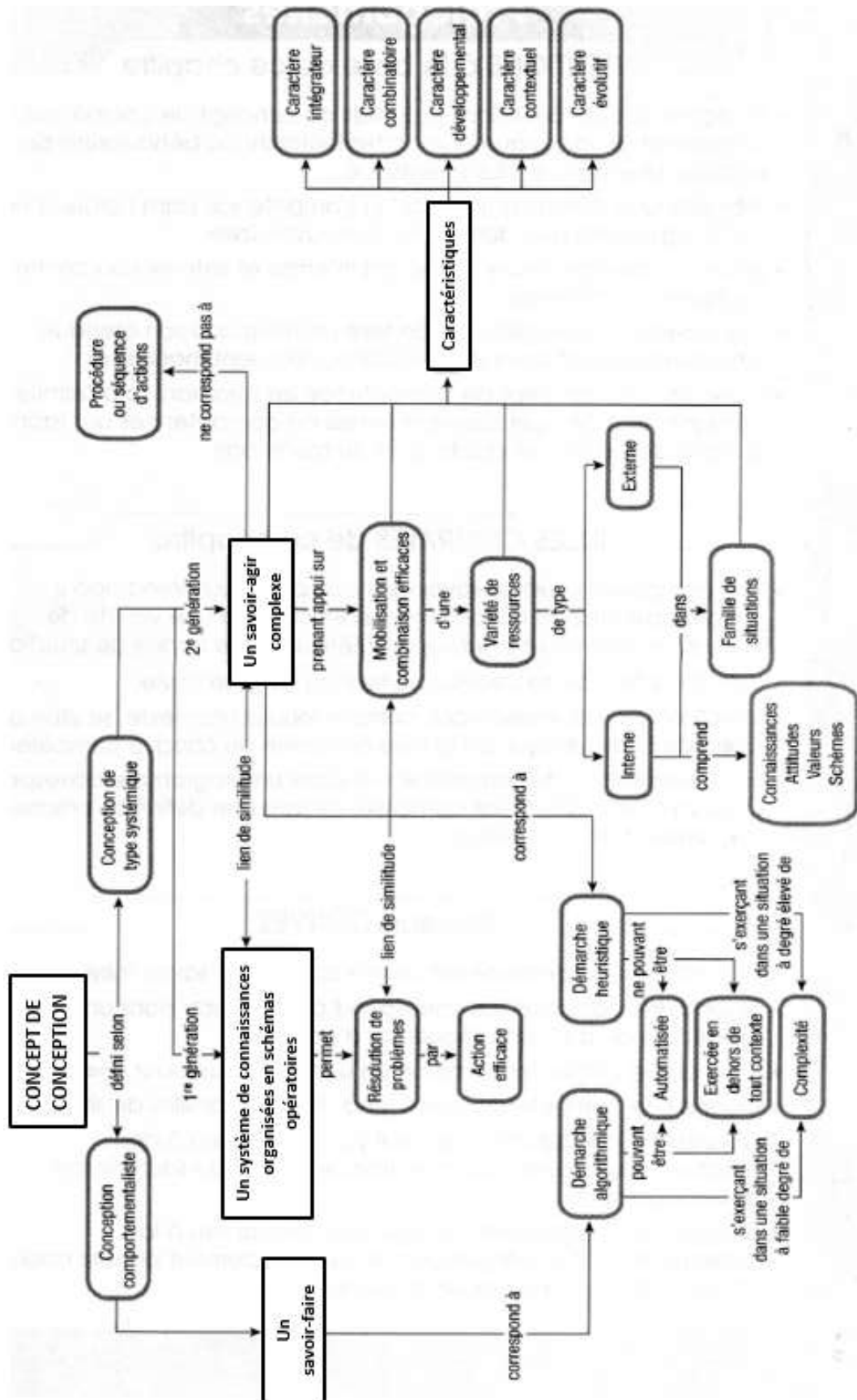
2.2. *Savoir-être* in the educational domain

In the field of education, too, actors have become aware of the growing complexity of social issues, and of the need for effective management to involve the individual as such. It is this personal dimension of competence that has led educationalists to add *savoir-être* as an educational goal alongside knowledge and know-how. For Canadian educational scientist Christiane Gohier, *savoir-être* is "a formula that enjoys consensus because it touches on a dimension of the person other than doing" (Gohier 2006, p. 173)¹¹. It is from this *savoir-être* that each individual draws what another Canadian specialist in the same discipline, Jacques Tardif, calls, in his definition of competence, "resources of an internal type". According to him, competence is a complex knowledge-action based on the effective mobilization and combination of a variety of internal (knowledge, attitudes, values and schemas) and external resources in a family of situations.

As can be seen below (Figure 3), for this definition of competence, which is found almost verbatim among many educational scientists, I use the one Tardif proposes in the "conceptual map" of what he calls the "second generation of the concept of competence (2016, p. 16):

¹¹ This article provides a brief history of this concept in the United States, Canada and Europe, and among researchers, school curricula and major international institutions.

*A "conceptual map" of the notion of competence in education
(Tardif 2006)*



Between the two "generations" of this concept, the same type of historical evolution can be seen in this diagram as in Le Boterf's diagram, and for the same reason, namely the acknowledgement of complexity (cf. "systemic-type conception", "complex know-how for action")¹².

3. *Savoir-être* in didactics of languages-cultures

In the field of DLC, "*savoir-être*", like knowledge and know-how, cannot be determined in isolation from any particular didactic configuration¹³. It is in fact at the service of different competences, since it is defined in relation to a complex action –the interrelated actions of teaching, learning and using a language-culture – which has evolved historically in line with changes in the use goal and use situation targeted. Successively, learners have been trained primarily to be able (1) to maintain contact with the foreign language-culture from home, at a distance, through the comprehensive reading of authentic documents, (2) to interact linguistically and culturally abroad with foreigners in the context of direct and punctual contacts, (3) to co-act permanently with foreigners in their common multilingual and multicultural society (Puren 2024a). In the CEFR, *savoir-être* is thus defined in terms of the use action of the communicative-intercultural approach, namely social interaction in language and culture:

Existential competence (savoir-être, see 5.1.3.) may be considered as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction. (CEFR, p. 12)

The social action-oriented action (SAOA) and its pedagogical model, project pedagogy (cf. Puren 2024a), have gradually gained ground in DLC the last twenty years. But many teachers were initially trained in the communicative approach; many textbook authors still implement it exclusively, even when they claim to be social action-oriented; and in any case, since communication remains an indispensable tool for carrying out social actions, the question that arises concerning the communicative approach is not that of its relevance, but that of the ways in which it can be articulated or combined with the SAOA¹⁴.

I shall confine myself here to the communicative approach (chap. 3.1) and the SAOA (chap. 3.2), but a complete analysis would have to take into account all available and potentially relevant didactic configurations (cf. Puren 052), each with its own methodology and its particular component of language competence and cultural competence (cf. Puren 073).

3.1. *Savoir-être* in the communicative-intercultural approach

What is commonly known as the "communicative approach" has been presented, particularly in French schools and in FFL teaching, as a language approach accompanied, for its cultural dimension, by the so-called "intercultural approach".

¹² For further comments on this diagram, see Puren 2016g, pp. 48-49, after the reproduction of the same diagram.

¹³ A didactic configuration is a coherent historical whole consisting of a use goal, a use situation, a corresponding learning-use action, implemented in a methodology according to pedagogical, linguistic, cognitive, cultural, methodological, epistemological and ideological models: cf. Puren 2024a.

¹⁴ Cf. the Puren 2018f article entitled precisely "*L'actualité de l'approche communicative dans le cadre de la mise en œuvre de la perspective actionnelle: une affaire de construction située et finalisée*" (« The topicality of the communicative approach in the implementation of the action-oriented perspective: a matter of situated and finalized construction»). This requirement for articulation or combination extends to the two other methodologies available, the "active methodology" (which is a methodology for the didactic treatment of authentic documents) and the "plurilingual and pluricultural approach" (cf. e.g. Puren. 2019g, 2024a).

3.1.1. *Savoir-être* and communicative language competence

The communicative language competence of the authors of the 1975 *Threshold Level* and that of the authors of the 2001 CEFR-CECR correspond to two different generations of communicative language competence, for the same reason as we saw above with regard to competence in the managerial and educational sciences. This reason is clearly apparent in the two sentences below, taken from the only paragraph in which the authors of the CEFR describe the new action-oriented perspective, and it is the inherent complexity of the action targeted in training:

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. (CEFR, p. 9)

In this passage, "acts of speech" in fact refer to the *Threshold Levels* of the 1970s, documents that were limited to lists of language functions and notions accompanied by examples of corresponding realizations, supposed to provide the linguistic material whose mastery alone guaranteed learners a minimum level of communication in everyday situations encountered by a visitor to a foreign country.

The following two passages from the CEFR confirm the evolution of communicative competence compared to these first versions of *Threshold Levels*:

*The communicative activity of users/learners is affected not only by their knowledge, understanding and skills, but also by selfhood factors connected with their individual personalities, characterised by the attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality types which contribute to their personal identity. These include: [...]*¹⁵ (CEFR, p. 105)

*Existential competence: e.g. a willingness to take initiatives or even risks in face-to-face communication, so as to afford oneself the opportunity to speak, to prompt assistance from the people with whom one is speaking, such as asking them to rephrase what they have said in simpler terms, etc.; also listening skills, attention to what is said, heightened awareness of the risks of cultural misunderstanding in relations with others.*¹⁶ (CEFR, p. 12)

These two passages clearly illustrate the recognition by the authors of the CEFR of the greater complexity of communication, and in particular the need to take into account *savoir-être* as both a cause and a consequence of this complexity.

The last element of *savoir-être* in the previous quote refers to intercultural competence.

¹⁵ This is followed by a list of the six components, illustrated with examples, that I introduced earlier in chapter 1.1.

¹⁶ This passage is in fact about "knowing how to learn", but we can see that the components of this learning competence are the same as those that can be imagined for communicative competence: this is a good illustration of the fundamental principle of end-to-mean homology, which applies in the communicative approach - and this is why it's called a "communicative" approach, to communication itself: essentially, learners learn to communicate by communicating with each other in class.

3.1.2. *Savoir-être* and intercultural competence

The extension of the management of language interaction to cultural interaction in the reference social situation of the communicative approach –travel in a foreign country, where you meet people you didn't know before and are going to leave very quickly– leads the authors of the CEFR to describe the first cited component of *savoir-être* in chapter 5.1.3. devoted to it, i.e. "attitudes", with examples relating solely to intercultural competences:

[*Savoir-être include:*]

1. *attitudes, such as the user/learner's degree of:*

- *openness towards, and interest in, new experiences, other persons, ideas, peoples, societies and cultures;*
- *willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system;*
- *willingness and ability to distance oneself from conventional attitudes to cultural difference.* (CEFR, p. 105)

And we also find an element of intercultural competence within learning competence:

*Ability to learn (savoir apprendre, see 5.1.4.) mobilises existential competence, declarative knowledge and skills, and draws on various types of competence. Ability to learn may also be conceived as "**knowing how, or being disposed, to discover 'otherness'**" –whether the other is another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge.* (CEFR, p 12, emphasis added).

3.2. *Social action-oriented perspective: "savoir être un acteur social"* (*"knowing how to be a social actor"*)

Moving from language interaction and inter-individual culture, even "in a social context" (CEFR, p. 9), to the social action of a citizen in a democratic society, where it's a question of acting collectively not only *in* society, but *on* society, necessarily requires different *savoir-être*. I'll begin by taking up the two points made above in chapters 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 about the communicative approach, namely language competence and cultural competence. I will then propose a specific notion for the SAOA, namely "savoir-y-faire".

3.2.1. *Savoir-être* and co-language and co-cultural competences

Communicative language action can be limited, as is most often the case, to interaction reduced to a simple exchange of information. In a social action-oriented approach, on the other hand, at some point in the interaction we must necessarily move on to *concertation*, since the immediate goal is collective decision-making on joint action, with the realization of the social action thus decided upon as a mediated goal. But this other linguistic action calls on other personal competences. It requires the ability to manage not just the dialogue, but the debate; not just to accept *differences*, but to manage *disagreements*¹⁷ and find compromises; not just to consult, but to decide together, which implies creating a common language, or "co-language"¹⁸.

As far as cultural competence is concerned, the aptitude for cultural discovery and the corresponding attitude of openness to cultural diversity, cited above by the authors of the CEFR, remain indispensable in the perspective of the SAOA within "multilingual and multicultural Europe" (CEFR, Notes for the User, 4th page). But, as became clear to me as soon as the CEFR was published :

¹⁷ In French: "*non seulement accepter les différences, mais gérer les différends* ».

¹⁸ For more on this point, see Acar & Puren 2024, chap. 2.1.2.3, "Communication and concertation").

[...] When it comes to [...] "doing things together" (co-act), we can no longer be content with assuming our differences: we must imperatively create similarities together. [...] Joint action requires the forging of identical conceptions, i.e. shared goals, principles and modes of action, because they have been jointly elaborated by and for collective action. (Puren 2002b, n.p.)

However, what I have proposed to call "co-culture", or a set of shared conceptions by and for collective action –given the pedagogical reference model of the SAOA, this is in particular the so-called "project culture"–, requires other *savoir-être* such as commitment, autonomy and responsibility, not only individual, but also collective.

3.2.2. Knowing how to act in/on the classroom and in/on society as a citizen

In the outside world, as in the micro-society of the classroom, the challenge is to know not only how to "live together", but also how to "make society" with others, and this citizenship education implies that the teacher works with learners to know how to "make class"¹⁹, giving this expression the same meaning as that of "making society". From an educational point of view of the SAOA, "knowing how to teach", for the teacher, just as "knowing how to learn", for the learners, means knowing together how to "make the classroom" based on citizenship values. I have suggested elsewhere that we speak of a "citizenship didactics" and define it as "the whole of the implementation of the teaching-learning-use process by the teacher and learners leading their common project as autonomous and responsible citizens" (Puren 2023c, p. 5). Project pedagogy, which is the natural pedagogical model of the SAOA, has been based precisely from its origins (Dewey and Kilpatrick in the USA, Decroly in Belgium, Freinet in France...) on this principle of homology between class society and outside society, and its systematic use in democratic citizenship training.

In project-based pedagogy, the notion of "citizenship *savoir-être*" is meaningless: "being a citizen" means, and only means, acting as a citizen, above and beyond, and even if necessary against personal attitudes, motivations, beliefs, cognitive styles and even values, components of *savoir-être* ("existential competence") listed in the CEFR on pages 105-106. In order to define what might be called "general citizenship competences of the social actor", as opposed to the "general individual competences of the learner or communicator" with which the authors of the CEFR are content (p. 11), it would seem appropriate to take up the concepts proposed for professional competence by Le Boterf and define them as : *knowing how to act*, wanting to act and being able to act as a citizen in the class-society and in the outside society.

Outside the education system, in adult education, citizenship competences are no longer educational goals –at least insofar as they are assumed to have been acquired by learners. They are, as they appear in Tardif's diagram, already available resources to be mobilized for effective collective teaching-learning-use. Aligning DLC language learning methods with citizenship values is based on the premise that recourse to these values enhances the effectiveness of individual learning in a collective context.

3.2.3. *Savoir-être* in action: *savoir-y-faire*

Like all competences, the competence referred to in the SAOA –the social know how to act– is a "situated" competency, i.e. one that is implemented by an actor in a given situation²⁰. It is in

¹⁹ In French, the expression "*faire classe*" –literally means "teaching". From an action-oriented perspective, it can also mean "*faire de la classe une société*", "turning the class into a society".

²⁰In the French expression "*savoir-y-faire*", the pronoun "y" ('*there*', in English) refers to the situation. A teacher can be said to "*sait y faire avec les enfants*" ("he has a way with young children", or "he knows how to deal with young children).

fact on the basis of a certain number of identical concrete performances in the same "family of situations"²¹ that we extrapolate to this actor the corresponding "competence", i.e. the ability to regularly repeat these same performances in the same type of situation.

In an article devoted to the concepts mobilized in the competency-based approach and SAOA (Puren 2016g), I devoted two chapters to the notion of *savoir-y-faire*, which I proposed to introduce into DLC by differentiating it from knowledge and know-how (chap. 3.2.3.3, pp. 52-54) and *savoir-être* (chap. 3.2.4.4, pp. 67-70). I defined *savoir-y-faire* as "the ways of doing things (attitudes, behaviors, operating modes") that are relevant and effective in relation to the environment (or to help it evolve)".

More precisely, *savoir-y-faire* corresponds to the area of intersection between technical know-how and personal know-how; in other words, it's the ability to apply one's know-how in a personalized way, adapting it to different situations, and in particular adapting it to the other people involved. Just think of what we mean when we say that a teacher "knows how to deal with young children" (p. 53).

This link between competence and situation can be found in the Spanish equivalent of the French expression *savoir-être*, which is not *saber ser*, as the Spanish translators of the CEFR, the MCER (*Marco Común Europeo de Referencia*, COE 2002, p. 137), have written, but, to respect the different values of the two Spanish verbs "to be" (*ser* and *estar*)²², *saber estar*, which translates into French not as *savoir-être*, but as *savoir se comporter* (know how to behave).

It's precisely on the basis of behavior and behavior alone that explicit collective work on classroom *savoir-être* be carried out.

3.3. Learning, teaching and assessing savoir-être

Introduction to chapter 3.3

In his blog post quoted in chapter 1.1, after posing the rhetorical question "why should language teaching be responsible for transmitting a *savoir-être*", Louis Porcher continued:

The word "to be", moreover, is so intimate, so personal and so cultural, that it goes far beyond simple language learning. The only suitable way of expressing it is obviously to say: "to know how to behave". It's a question of actual, concrete conduct, which can be explained and which makes it possible to clearly distinguish between what is recommended, acceptable and proscribed.

Didactics of languages does not move in the metaphysical sphere. It is a matter of identifiable, improvable behavior, on which every individual is in a position to act (Porcher 2014, p. 94).

This is the same idea defended by Dominique Groux, a French specialist in comparative education and DLC, who even reduces the components of *savoir-être* to behaviors alone: "*Savoir-être* corresponds to the ability to behave in ways that are adapted to the society in which we evolve" (2012, p. 174). And she continued:

What are these savoir-être we can work on with learners of FFL? These are above all behaviors that could be described as "intercultural", i.e. respect for others, acceptance of

²¹ See Figure 2, above, for the place of this notion in the competency diagram proposed by Tardif (2006).

²² Whereas *ser* refers to objectivity and being, *estar* refers to subjectivity and appearance. It's therefore logical that *estar* should always be used to express place, which is an element of contingency.

other people's differences, benevolent curiosity about other people's cultures, empathy and generosity (ibid.).

This quotation illustrates once again the necessarily close relationship, in DLC, between the conception of competence and the prevailing didactic configuration, which here is the communicative-intercultural approach (cf. the introduction to chap. 3 *above*).

The title of this chapter echoes the subtitle of the CEFR, and I'm going to present, in as many sub-chapters, four proposals for applying the three fundamental didactic operations of learning, teaching and assessment to *savoir-être*.

3.3.1. Use a conceptual model that can actually be applied on a day-to-day basis

The above quotation from D. Groux also illustrates the relationship between behaviors and other elements that need to be considered to determine and delimit work on *savoir-être*:

–We decided to carry out this work because we consider that these **behaviors** are sufficiently constant, or at least recurrent, to be able to attribute them to what are known in psychology as **dispositions**, which are tendencies to reproduce the same behaviors under the same conditions.

–It's also because we believe that awareness of certain recurring behaviours and training in different behaviours are likely to combat certain dispositions to create others, or at least to master these dispositions to adopt **postures** that enable other behaviours.

–Respect for others, empathy and generosity are neither behaviors, as D. Groux writes, nor dispositions, but values.

The concepts of "disposition", "posture" and "attitude" that I've just used are, like "behavior", are part of the conceptual frameworks used by social psychologists, frameworks that can be not only highly diverse, as I noted above, but also highly complex. But all psychologists necessarily distinguish, whatever their terminology, between what I'm calling here **postures**, which are deliberate behaviours, *i.e.* conscious, thought-out and controlled, and **attitudes**, which are spontaneous behaviours, *i.e.* immediate and unreflected, even unconscious. If the values are truly integrated, they strongly and constantly influence **attitudes**, just as much as personality and character traits. If they are not, they can still be consciously mobilized to display postures.

The authors of the French CECR use the term "attitudes" in both senses, as they do in everyday language. In the passage below, for example, attitudes correspond to spontaneous behavior:

*L'activité de communication des utilisateurs/apprenants est non seulement affectée par leurs connaissances, leur compréhension et leurs aptitudes mais aussi par des facteurs personnels liés à leur personnalité propre et caractérisés par les **attitudes**, les motivations, les valeurs, les croyances, les styles cognitifs et les types de personnalité qui constituent leur identité. (CECR, p. 84)*

(English translation: *The communicative activity of users/learners is affected not only by their knowledge, understanding and skills, but also by personal factors linked to their own personality and characterized by the **attitudes**, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality types that make up their identity.*)

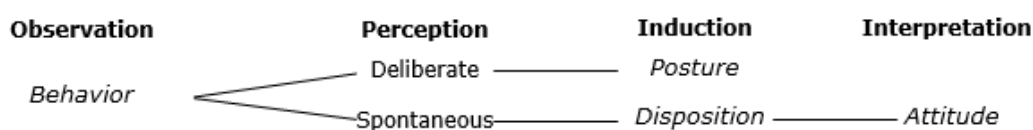
But it's deliberate behavior, on the other hand, when the authors of the French CECR write that "*en utilisant ces stratégies [d'évitement], l'utilisateur de la langue adopte une **attitude** positive par rapport aux ressources dont il/elle dispose*" (CECR, p. 53 ; English translation: "in using

[avoidance] strategies the language user adopts a positive **approach** with what resources he or she has"). Interestingly, it's not the term **attitudes** that is used in the English CFER, but **approach** ("user adopts a positive **approach**", p. 63), a term which in this context corresponds well to voluntary, even voluntarist, behavior.

Yet the distinction between posture and attitude seems to me to be absolutely essential if we are to deal satisfactorily with the issue of *savoir-être* in the classroom. I propose below (Fig. 3) a simple but appropriate conceptual model that can be used by teachers, who are not psychologists and do not have to assume this function:

Figure 4

Conceptual model for working on savoir-être in the language-culture classroom



This model reads as follows: any learner behavior observed by a teacher may be perceived by him or her as deliberate or spontaneous...

–If he perceives it as deliberate, he will immediately conclude that it is a "posture".

The term "posture" here does not have the negative meaning it may have in everyday language. Pedagogues Dominique Bucheton and Yves Soulé, for example, have proposed a "theoretical and technological model of teacher action in the classroom", including the *postures* of "controlling", "teaching", "supporting" and "letting go", which, when recalled in this order, can be seen to lie on a continuum between more and less teacher directivity. For these authors, expert teachers are those who are able to move quickly from one *posture* to another, depending on their objective and their analysis of the situation (Bucheton & Soulé 2009, § 54). In the same article, the authors also identify "a possible set of 6 *postures* (reflective, primary, playful/creative, scholastic, refusal, dogmatic) reflecting the main characteristics of the learner's commitment to the tasks" (§ 50).

–If the teacher perceives the same behavior in a learner as spontaneous, he or she will infer, under the same conditions, that it is a "disposition", i.e. a personal tendency to behave regularly in this way in the same type of situation. Attributing a posture to a learner is a matter of *statement*, whereas attributing a disposition is a matter of *extrapolation*, a generalization based on the observation of a certain number of recurring behaviors perceived as similar.

This attribution of a disposition to a learner is the limit that every teacher must respect: to go further, i.e. to *interpret* this disposition in terms of attitude (cf. the right-hand end of the model above), is solely a matter for the learner's personal decision in the classroom, who can be content, on the basis of the awareness of a disposition, to adopt the appropriate posture from now on, or attempt, through personal work on himself, to question and modify his attitude in order to reorientate his disposition. A teacher's attribution of a certain attitude to a learner is not only contrary to professional ethics, because it is a moral judgment –even if the judgment is positive– but it also has a perverse effect on classroom relations if the judgment is negative, because the learner will then inevitably feel that it is a criticism not only of his behavior as a learner, but of himself as a person.

3.3.2. Teaching *savoir-être* through the example of teaching behavior

A teacher's best strategy for working on *savoir-être* in the classroom –and it also happens to be the simplest, and undoubtedly the most effective– is to clearly display as a teacher the postures corresponding to the values he or she wishes to share: this is, as we say, "leading by example".

As we have seen, *savoir-être* are always determined by the didactic configuration implemented by the teacher: it is therefore not surprising to recognize in Dominique Groux's similar proposal the values promoted by the intercultural approach:

***By setting an example for their students,** teachers can instill in them a taste for generosity, a curiosity to reach out to others, to exchange and give. Sharing one's linguistic, cultural and social capital with learners, without counting the cost, is to give them recognition, to acknowledge them as an alter ego, to let them know that I'm interested in them and ready to share with them. In this way, they, in turn, will want to share with others in a generous way.* (Groux 2012, p. 174, I emphasize)

It's the same leading-by-example approach we find in C. Gohier's 2006 article cited above: "It's about [...] adopting a pedagogical posture that presupposes respect for the individual and the maximum development of his or her potential" (§ 43). In the same article, Groux picks up on an idea expressed by M. Paradis (2002) that is particularly well-suited to the action perspective, because it concerns precisely this collective commitment to action that the teacher asks of his learners: "[...] *savoir-être* in social work is something very simple: it's knowing how to be-with, that is, being present, co-responsible and committed" (p. 31)" (quoted § 45).

It is in relation to the didactic configuration of the SAOA that I will present in the next chapter a possible strategy for teacher intervention on learners' *savoir-être*: like teaching by example, it is also an indirect strategy.

3.3.3. Offering devices to develop learners' *savoir-être* of social actor

One of the functions attributed to teachers by specialists in educational science is that of engineer designing learning devices. These devices can be designed not only for the teaching-learning use of a foreign language-culture, but also for the know-how and *savoir-être* that are indispensable to all social actors. These devices then function as mediators between learners and these competences, and this is why I have taken up again in an article on mediation (Puren 2019b) this proposal sketched out in 1998 in a conference devoted to the theme "Modern languages as a tool for executive training" (Puren 1998f, with an afterword from 2009, "*Vingt ans plus tard*", "Twenty years later") :

More generally, by exploiting the homology between the micro-society of the classroom and the outside world, the language classroom can be seen and operated as a "co-cultural incubator", i.e., a culture of social action, i.e. [...] a place and a time where students, intensively and securely mediated by the teacher, have the opportunity to practice the competences they will later need in their professional and citizenship lives: adapting to other ways of working, working in groups, confronting the unknown, uncertainty and complexity, learning from one's own mistakes and the mistakes of others, producing while making the most of limited resources, designing and running group projects, self-evaluating individually and collectively, and so on. The language-culture teacher can then fully claim a role as educator in school teaching, and as trainer in vocational teaching. (2019b, p. 59)

In particular, the implementation of the SAOA pedagogical model, project pedagogy, enables the language classroom to make its contribution to training learners in an approach that is now

widespread in the public and professional domains, as well as in education (cf. Puren 2017a, in part. chap. 6.4, pp. 8-9)²³ . What corresponds to *savoir-être* in the *Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (France Compétences 2023, quoted *supra* chap. 2.1) are also two fundamental citizenship competences: responsibility and autonomy. With the difference that these two skills must be worked on in the classroom both as individual competences and as collective competences.

This dual dimension inevitably has important implications for assessment in the language classroom, which cannot be confined to the certification model, let alone individual certification.

3.3.4. Increasing the complexity of assessment methods

Reflecting on the assessment of *savoir-être* in DLC –and this, in my opinion, is one of the advantages of this notion– requires us to move away from the single, reductive model of individual certification that the CEFR has done so much to disseminate in our discipline, including in school didactics, where it has thus caused a regression in relation to a problematic that is necessarily far more complex (cf. Puren 2011e). It is immediately clear that there can be no question of "certifying" *savoir-être*, even if we limit ourselves to behaviours and dispositions, for the following reasons:

- Work on *savoir-être* can only begin with individual awareness, and continue with personal self-assessment, even if comments from the teacher or other learners can help.

- Once the problem has been recognized, it's the efforts made and the progress made that are important: this is **a process-oriented self-assessment, not a product-oriented one.**

- The educational goal of training for democratic citizenship (for pupils), or the use of acquired citizenship competences (for students and other adults), as well as the implementation of project pedagogy, require the consideration and evaluation...

(1) of *individual competences in relation to the collective*: participation, leadership, solidarity, conflict management, etc., but also

(2) of *collective competences* measured in particular by the quality of project management as well as the level of collective responsibility and autonomy. On this subject, please refer to the working dossier on the project pedagogy available on my website (Puren 2014b, chap. 19, pp. 19-24), and again to the *Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (France Compétences 2023), where on pages 22-23 we propose a grid describing levels 2 to 8 of competence in the following three areas: "Savoirs", "Savoir-faire", "Responsabilité et autonomie". The descriptors for this last area seem to me to provide inspiration for the joint elaboration, by teachers and learners, of descriptors of the individual and collective *savoir-être* to be worked on in class, as well as decisions concerning the different ways of working on them.

- The final characteristic of the possible ways of assessing individual and collective *savoir-être* is that they are to be selected out jointly, even if the teacher can make initial proposals that are then discussed and negotiated collectively. Essentially, it's a matter of setting aside time for learners, individually and collectively, to become aware of and periodically reflect on the agreed self-management objectives. For example, in a *Guide didactique pour un cours de FLE par projets* (*Teaching guide for a project-based FLE course*) designed to prepare Latin American students

²³ You can also consult the concrete proposals of a fellow Spanish teacher in her article entitled "*La pédagogie de projet en langues au service de la professionnalisation à l'université*" ("Project-based language teaching for professionalization at university"), Yannick Iglesias Philippot (2015).

for an academic mobility program in French-speaking universities, I proposed a "self-questioning guide" for periodic individual and collective use (cf. Puren 083, pp. 12-13).

General conclusion

The issue of *savoir-être* seems to me to be unavoidable at present in DLC, due to the emergence over the past twenty years of the SAOA, which proposes an educational goal of training learners in citizenship competences or exploiting learners' citizenship competences, and a goal of training for social action, which implies working on specific components of *savoir-être* in the classroom.

In this article, I've argued that this work should be strictly confined to behaviors, and I've made four concrete proposals in this respect, whose relevance and practicability I'll leave to the reader to judge according to his or her professional identity, audience and working environment. I have presented them here because I believe they are both necessary and realistic. But it is also essential that they be recognized by learners as legitimate and effective

– as *legitimate*, and this implies that their implementation must be carefully concerted between the teacher and the learners, in order to guarantee respect for each learner's personality and privacy: work on *savoir-être* doesn't have to be done in the classroom to the detriment of "*bien être*" ("well being", in French);

– and as *effective*, which implies that their real contribution to increasing practical competences, *i.e.* communicative and action competences, should be regularly evaluated collectively. In the title of one of the chapters of his 2012 book, Bruno Maurer announces that he is going to develop a criticism that seems to me to be very accurate: "When Europe dissolves language teaching in plurilingual and intercultural education" (chapter 1.2. p. 17). And he takes up this criticism in the conclusion of his book in the form of rhetorical questions:

Can we admit without debate that the more we affirm the central role of languages, the less we actually teach them? Consequently, is it acceptable to focus all research on intercultural competences, or savoir-être, to the detriment of linguistic competences, or savoirs, and communicative competences, or savoir-faire? (p. 152; quoted in Puren 2023c p. 8)

This is undoubtedly a necessary and salutary warning: *savoir-être* is indeed, in every sense of the word, a "problematic". But this warning should not dissuade teachers and learners, whatever precautions they take and maintain collectively, from integrating into their practices work on competences that are just as necessary as they are salutary in today's society. As we've seen, the notion of *savoir-être* can give rise to "insane" drifts in DCL, but I think it would be just as insane for a teacher to completely ignore this problematic.

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N.B. References have been left in the format of the French version of this article.

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