

5 CHAPTER



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MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE



Multilingual Competence

Multilingual competence is the ability to use multiple languages appropriately and effectively for communication. Much like literacy, it is rooted in four interrelated skills — listening, speaking, reading, and writing — and in the capacity to understand, express, and interpret ideas, emotions, and knowledge in diverse contexts. Importantly, multilingual competence goes beyond mechanical mastery of vocabulary and grammar. It emphasizes the ability to navigate across cultural and historical settings, to adapt communication according to context and need, and to develop intercultural awareness.

Knowledge

This competence requires knowledge of vocabulary and functional grammar of different languages and an awareness of the main types of verbal interaction and registers of language. Knowledge of societal conventions and the cultural aspect and variability of languages is important.

Skills

Essential skills for this competence consist of the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, sustain and conclude conversations and to read, understand and draft texts, with different levels of proficiency in different languages, according to the individual's needs, individuals should be able to use tools appropriately and learn languages formally, non – formally and informally throughout life.

Attitudes

A positive attitude involves the appreciation of cultural diversity, an interest and curiosity about different languages and intercultural communication. It also involves respect for each person's individual linguistic profile, including both respect for the mother tongue of persons belonging to minorities and/or with a migrant background and appreciation for a country's official languages as a common framework for interaction.

Montessori Perspective: Language as a Tool for Communication and Thought

Each experience that was great enough, beautiful enough, brought forth words which were accepted and treasured. Thus were words a monument. To people who lived, rejoiced and suffered. They forged beautiful words out of the silence. Such is language in all its majesty and greatness. We must be imbued with a feeling for the greatness. We must open our eyes to receive the gift and be worthy of all that is handed on to us. You must be worthy if you are to be guides and custodians of the souls of the future. Words are not pebbles or little pieces of glass. They are the diamonds of immortal souls. Language must be transmitted with reverence for all that has taken place in order to create it.

Maria Montessori, London Lectures, Lecture 17

Language has always been central to the human story. From the earliest communities, people needed a way to satisfy their fundamental needs and to cooperate with one another. Out of this necessity emerged spoken language, a tool of both survival and connection. Language was, from the very beginning, a shared agreement: certain sounds were linked to objects, actions, or ideas, and this collective understanding made communication possible. Over time, these agreements expanded into written systems, bringing new layers of complexity and precision. Symbols were created to represent sounds, spelling conventions were established, and languages continued to evolve as societies changed, invented, and refined their worlds. Thus, language is more than a system of words; it is a living testament to human collaboration, cultural identity, and the ongoing creation of meaning.

When Montessori education introduces children to language, it does so through a story of humanity. Language is presented not as an isolated school subject but as a human invention that made cooperation, culture, and civilisation possible. In this way, the Montessori approach aligns naturally with the EU's vision of multilingual competence. Both perspectives acknowledge language as a social tool — dynamic, historical, and deeply tied to human relationships.

For children aged six to twelve, who are in the second plane of development according to Montessori pedagogy, this intersection is especially meaningful. At this stage, children are eager to explore culture, history, and the interconnectedness of human societies. Their reasoning mind seeks to understand *why* and *how* things came to be, and language becomes both the subject of exploration and the medium for expressing discoveries. The EU's framework for multilingual competence provides a contemporary lens through which we can understand and support this developmental need, while Montessori education offers concrete strategies and materials that allow children to live this competence in practice.

This chapter will explore how the EU's competence of multilingualism can be meaningfully implemented within Montessori education for children aged six to twelve. It will first examine the theoretical foundations of language learning in the elementary plane, then consider the practical approaches Montessori classrooms use to foster language development and finally highlight how these practices correspond with the EU's broader aims of multilingual and intercultural education.



Language in the Elementary Years and the European Union’s Multilingual Competence

As children enter the second plane of development, their relationship with knowledge changes profoundly. They are no longer content with gathering facts; instead, they seek to understand relationships, causes, and consequences. Their questions shift from *what is* to *why* and *what if*. This intellectual expansion drives creativity and helps them refine what has come before, while also shaping their capacity to make sense of the world.

In this developmental stage, language itself becomes an object of inquiry. Elementary children are curious not only about *using* language but also about how it works. They wonder why words follow a certain order, whether other languages arrange them differently, or how the same sound can carry different meanings in different words. This natural fascination reflects their growing reasoning powers and their desire to explore the deeper structures of human communication.

Montessori education nurtures this curiosity by presenting language as a human invention, a cultural achievement that has evolved across centuries. Children are not asked simply to memorize grammar or spelling rules, but to see language as a living, changing creation — something built and refined through cooperation, agreement, and cultural history. This approach makes language study meaningful and engaging, inviting children to view themselves as participants in an ongoing human story.



At the same time, the elementary years are a period when children begin to develop a moral sense. They become aware that words carry responsibility, that every “I” who speaks or writes is accountable for what is expressed. Language is presented not only as a tool of thought but also as an ethical choice. Children learn to pause, to reflect before speaking, and to recognize that language can inspire or harm, uplift or diminish. The classroom becomes a training ground for dialogue, responsibility, and empathy.

The European Union’s definition of *multilingual competence* mirrors and enriches this Montessori perspective. According to the EU, multilingualism involves the ability to use different languages effectively and appropriately across contexts. It is not restricted to mechanical skills, but extends to listening, speaking, reading, and writing in ways that allow the individual to interpret and express ideas, emotions, and knowledge. Moreover, it emphasizes the cultural and historical dimensions of language, acknowledging that each language is shaped by the societies that use it and that competence involves intercultural understanding.

In this light, the Montessori approach and the EU’s competence framework converge. Both emphasize that language is not only a technical skill but also a human responsibility, deeply intertwined with culture, identity, and communication. For the child aged six to twelve, this means that language learning should be more than a progression of grammar lessons. It should be an imaginative, moral, and cultural exploration that equips the child to engage with multiple languages, to appreciate their diversity, and to use them responsibly within a broader society.



Practical Implementation of Multilingual Competence in Montessori Elementary Education

The European Union defines multilingual competence as a mix of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Montessori education for children aged six to twelve offers a natural framework to develop these through meaningful, interconnected learning. Language is central, and the curriculum allows children to explore and compare multiple languages, enhancing both proficiency and appreciation of linguistic diversity. From speaking to reading and creative writing, students build the knowledge, skills, and attitudes described in the EU framework. Let's have a look at how language is organized and how it can be combined with other languages in the classroom.

We introduce children to the importance of spoken language through the history of humankind, emphasizing how creative people were in developing language. Children discover that words carry culture, memory, and imagination. Through storytelling, and discussions, they encounter new vocabulary, explore different varieties of language use, and reflect on the lineage of their native language and where it comes from. In their “big work,” children can investigate how many countries recognize English as an official language and consider the historical idea of a single, universal language. These activities develop listening and speaking skills in authentic contexts while also fostering awareness of multilingual connections and the creative nature of language.

Children learn the story of how writing began with the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. They see the signs each culture used, compare them, and notice that every writing system has its own story. They also explore the tools people used, like papyrus, parchment, and early printing presses. Through this, children understand that languages are different but connected. They begin to see how multilingualism has always existed and become curious about where their own language comes from and how it links to others.

In the classroom, children see that spoken words can be preserved through writing. The environment encourages them to start practicing building words and writing messages not only in their mother tongue but also in other languages. Using Montessori materials like sandpaper letters and the moveable alphabet, they explore different alphabets from the story of written language—Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek, Roman—and realise that every language carries ideas worth writing down. This way, children develop their reading and writing skills while understanding that language can exist beyond speech and across cultures.



Children progress toward reading fluency by first seeing adults as reading models and then practicing with cards, texts, and stories. When learning English, they focus on English letter sounds and decoding the letters. Once they master the alphabetical code, they can read independently. The classroom environment supports this by offering materials on the shelves—cards, texts, and literature—not only in their mother tongue but also in other languages. This allows children to practice reading across languages, interpret meaning, follow written instructions, and engage with increasingly complex texts.

In Montessori elementary classrooms, children explore words, their forms, and how they work in sentences—prefixes, suffixes, synonyms, antonyms, and parts of speech. This study can be introduced as a research project, comparing words and grammar across languages in the multilingual classroom. Children see patterns, similarities, and differences, deepening their understanding of language structure while developing skills in reading, writing, and expressing ideas clearly in more than one language.

In the Montessori classroom, language is a tool for children to express their ideas and creativity. They write stories, poems, research projects, and gradually discover their own voice. Children also create their own books, which they share with classmates on the

classroom shelves, write class newspapers and newsletters for parents, make posters, and prepare invitations for outings. They keep daily journals where they record their work, thoughts, and reflections.

In a multilingual classroom, these activities can take place in different languages. Children can write stories, reports, or journals in English, their mother tongue, or other languages introduced in the classroom. They compare how words, sentence structures, and expressions differ, which deepens their understanding of language itself. Writing across languages helps them communicate more broadly, express ideas in multiple ways, and connect with different cultures, supporting the EU's goals for multilingual competence and lifelong language learning.

In the Montessori classroom, language learning combines knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a flexible, multilingual environment. Children gain **knowledge** of vocabulary, grammar, and cultural conventions, and develop **skills** in speaking, reading, writing, and interpreting language through activities such as word study, sentence analysis, and publishing their own texts, books, or newsletters. The environment and materials can be adapted to include multiple languages according to the children's needs, allowing them to explore and express themselves across languages. Through this approach, children also cultivate **attitudes** of curiosity, respect, and openness toward linguistic and cultural diversity, fully reflecting the EU's vision of multilingual competence.

Fluency, Culture, and Confidence in Language Learning

In the Montessori Elementary classroom, language learning is not simply an academic subject but a living, dynamic process that connects the child to culture, humanity, and the wider world. Children in the second plane of development (ages 6–12) are naturally curious about how people in different parts of the world live, think, and communicate. This curiosity becomes a fertile ground for multilingual exploration — where language learning is approached not through rote memorization or correction of mistakes, but through meaningful, joyful discovery.

Even though English often serves as a shared bridge for global communication, Montessori education encourages the study of additional languages to broaden children’s perspectives. Each language carries with it a unique way of understanding the world — its own rhythm, humor, and cultural symbols. Through stories, songs, geography, and cultural studies, children experience how language is intertwined with daily life, traditions, and history. This interdisciplinary approach, typical of the Montessori method, helps children see that learning another language is not just about vocabulary — it is about connecting with people and understanding the beauty of human diversity.

Fluency in Montessori classrooms is not defined by perfection, but by confidence and communication. Children are encouraged to use language freely, to express themselves, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. Whether they are presenting a research project in another language, greeting a visiting family in their mother tongue, or labeling a map in Spanish, these experiences help them see language as a living tool — flexible, creative, and deeply human.

This process also builds resilience and self-assurance. When children experience that their efforts to communicate are valued — even when imperfect — they develop a sense of linguistic courage. They understand that language serves connection and collaboration, not judgment. In this way, Montessori education helps children grow into confident multilingual citizens who use their voices to bridge cultures, share ideas, and celebrate the shared story of humanity.

English as a First Foreign Language: Building Fluency and Multilingual Competence

Communicative Approach over Accuracy

Across Europe, English is widely taught as the first foreign language in many schools, reflecting its role as a global lingua franca. In teaching English, the emphasis often shifts from absolute accuracy to communicative fluency—the ability to use the language effectively to express ideas, interact with others, and understand meaning in real contexts. In this approach, mistakes are not seen as failures but as natural steps in the learning process. Creating a classroom environment where children feel safe to experiment, take risks, and speak without fear of judgment is essential for building confidence and fostering real communicative competence.

One Face – One Language Principle

An essential principle in teaching English—or any foreign language—is that it should be introduced through **full immersion**, ideally by a teacher who uses only that language in the classroom. The “one face—one language” approach ensures that children consistently associate the language with communication and meaning, rather than translating back and forth from their native language. This method supports natural language acquisition, encourages thinking directly in the foreign language, and helps children develop fluency more effectively.



Language learning also becomes richer when it is embedded in **cultural experiences**. Teachers who are native or fluent speakers bring authentic cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and traditions into the classroom, providing children with a living context for the language. Stories, songs, celebrations, and real-life interactions allow learners to see the language as a tool for understanding people and their world, rather than as an abstract school subject.

Cultural Immersion and Translanguaging

At the same time, the classroom can benefit from **translanguaging**, a pedagogical strategy in which children are encouraged to draw on all their linguistic resources to make meaning. Translanguaging allows learners to discuss ideas in their mother tongue while experimenting with English, gradually transferring understanding and expression into the target language. This approach reduces anxiety, validates children's linguistic identities, and supports the development of multilingual competence. By combining immersive teaching, cultural experiences, and thoughtful use of translanguaging, schools can create environments where children not only **learn English fluently** but also develop the curiosity, confidence, and skills to embrace **additional languages**, fulfilling the EU's vision of multilingual competence.



Storytelling in the Montessori Elementary Classroom

Storytelling is one of humanity's oldest and most effective ways to pass knowledge across generations. Listening to and sharing stories engages the brain, integrates different subjects, and enhances cognitive abilities. It also strengthens language skills, enriches vocabulary, and fosters literacy. In addition, storytelling promotes a sense of community, as children learn together, listen attentively, and share interpretations, highlighting the social dimension of learning.



Storytelling is woven throughout all subject areas in the Montessori elementary classroom. It also provides a powerful foundation for language development and multilingual learning. Listening, retelling, and participating in stories help children expand their vocabulary, understand grammar intuitively, and articulate complex ideas. When foreign languages are introduced through storytelling—ideally by teachers who speak exclusively in that language—children acquire language in meaningful contexts, connecting words to culture, emotions, and lived experiences. This approach fosters fluency, encourages experimentation without fear of mistakes, and nurtures a positive attitude toward learning multiple languages. By combining oral traditions, cultural experiences, and immersive language use, Montessori classrooms support children in developing the linguistic skills, curiosity, and intercultural understanding that are central to multilingual competence in a diverse and interconnected Europe.

The Story of Communication of Signs: Written Language as Human Achievement



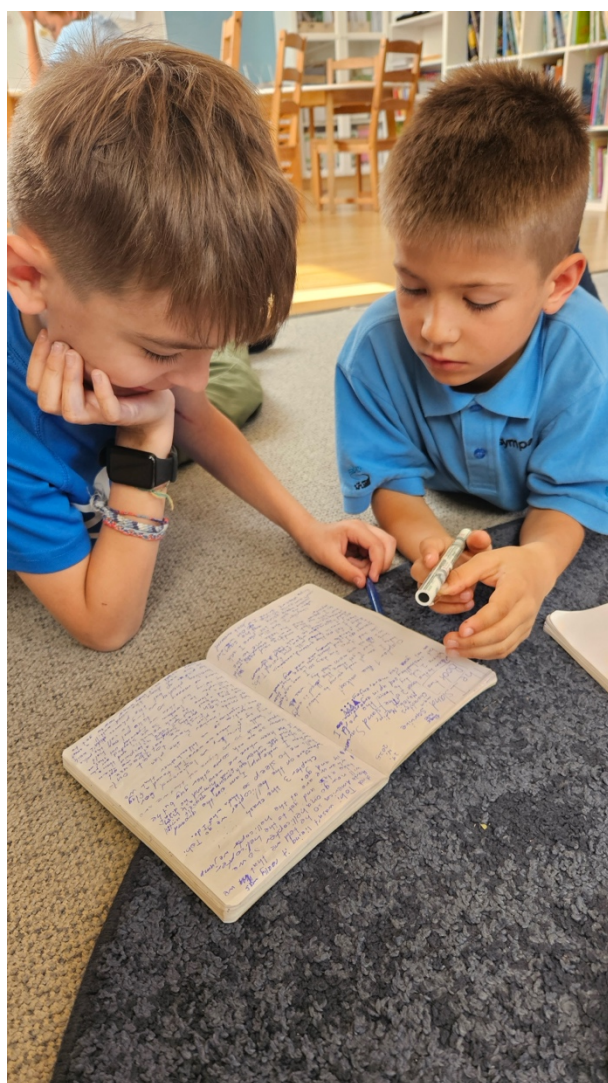
Language is one of humanity's greatest tools, allowing ideas to be defined, shared, and preserved across generations. In Montessori elementary classrooms, the **Story of the Communication of Signs** introduces children to the history and development of written language as a remarkable human achievement. The story is presented to show that written language did not emerge fully formed but **evolved over time**, shaped by the needs and creativity of different communities. Writing allowed people to memorise information, maintain records, and communicate across distances. It also spread through interaction and cooperation—through travel, migration, and the meeting of different peoples. This narrative emphasises the contributions of often-unsung heroes from the past, whose innovations continue to benefit us today. Children learn that language and writing are products of adaptation, collaboration, and human ingenuity.

Montessori teachers adapt this story to reflect the history of the **local written language** while also introducing examples from other linguistic traditions. For instance, the development of alphabets derived from the Mediterranean tradition can be compared with logographic systems like Chinese or Japanese, highlighting that written communication evolved differently across cultures. Children explore changes in alphabets, scripts, and writing tools—from stone, clay, and wood to papyrus and paper—

learning how these innovations made literacy more accessible. They also investigate printing techniques and other inventions that allowed ideas to reach wider audiences, reinforcing the understanding that solutions to human needs vary across time and place.

The story naturally lends itself to **hands-on, multilingual learning activities**. Children enjoy experimenting with different writing systems, practicing their own names in various alphabets, and exploring calligraphy with brushes, ink, or clay. They may invent their own symbolic languages, create pictogram stories, or experiment with codes such as Morse code or sign language. Activities like weaving patterns or drawing timelines of communication inventions reinforce both the historical and practical aspects of writing, while encouraging creativity, fine motor skills, and an appreciation for diverse forms of expression.

This approach also fosters **multilingual awareness**. Children begin to notice that spoken languages differ in sounds and structures—some languages may use 300 phonetic sounds, while others have as few as 15 to 40. They learn that writing systems reflect cultural adaptation, migration, and contact between peoples. By exploring multiple languages and scripts, children develop respect for linguistic diversity and curiosity about how humans across the world communicate ideas differently. The story of writing, therefore, becomes not only a lesson in literacy but also an entry point to **multilingual competence**,



encouraging children to appreciate language as a living, evolving tool shaped by culture, history, and human collaboration.

Story from the classroom

Multilingualism as a bridge

In the little Spanish Montessori school where I once worked, the hallways echoed with English—even though we were deep in the heart of Spain. In my 6–12 classroom, we had an even mix of local Spanish children and expatriate families from all over the world. Yet, despite their curiosity and kindness, they existed a bit like oil and water: close, but not quite blending. The Spanish students were still finding their footing in English. The expat students, meanwhile, knew hardly any Spanish. They worked side by side, exchanged polite smiles, and helped one another when they could, but language cast a soft, invisible wall between them.

*Then one morning, I told *The Story of the Alphabet*. Some children listened with familiar delight, others leaned in as if hearing a secret for the very first time. When the story ended, something subtle shifted in the room—as if a door had quietly opened.*

The first to walk through that new door was a British boy. He approached me with bright eyes and said, “I want to learn Japanese. I want to go there someday, and I want to be ready.” Perfect. We wrote out a little language study contract together—his goal, his study period, and the amount of time he would practice each day on the computer. Quietly, without fanfare, he began.

At first, no one noticed him slipping into language practice during his work cycle. Until—one afternoon—two Spanish girls came to me. They were shy but determined.

“We want to learn Polish,” they whispered.

“Polish?” I asked, surprised.

They nodded. “We want to talk to our classmate. She doesn’t speak Spanish... and we don’t speak English yet.”

Their reasoning was so beautifully simple. So off they went—with their own study contracts—to begin daily Polish practice. They made me promise not to tell anyone; they wanted it to be a surprise for the Polish-speaking girl. Soon after, one of the oldest expat boys approached my desk. “I want to learn Spanish,” he said. “I want to understand our diving instructor better.” Another contract. Another language. Another spark.

Then a child asked to learn the language spoken by their grandparents. Another chose a language just because it sounded beautiful. Each new decision added a thread to a growing tapestry.

And slowly—almost imperceptibly at first—the room began to change.

Students who barely exchanged words before were now sharing how their lessons were going. They peeked at each other’s screens, traded discoveries, laughed about confusing phrases, and celebrated when someone unlocked a new level in their language app.

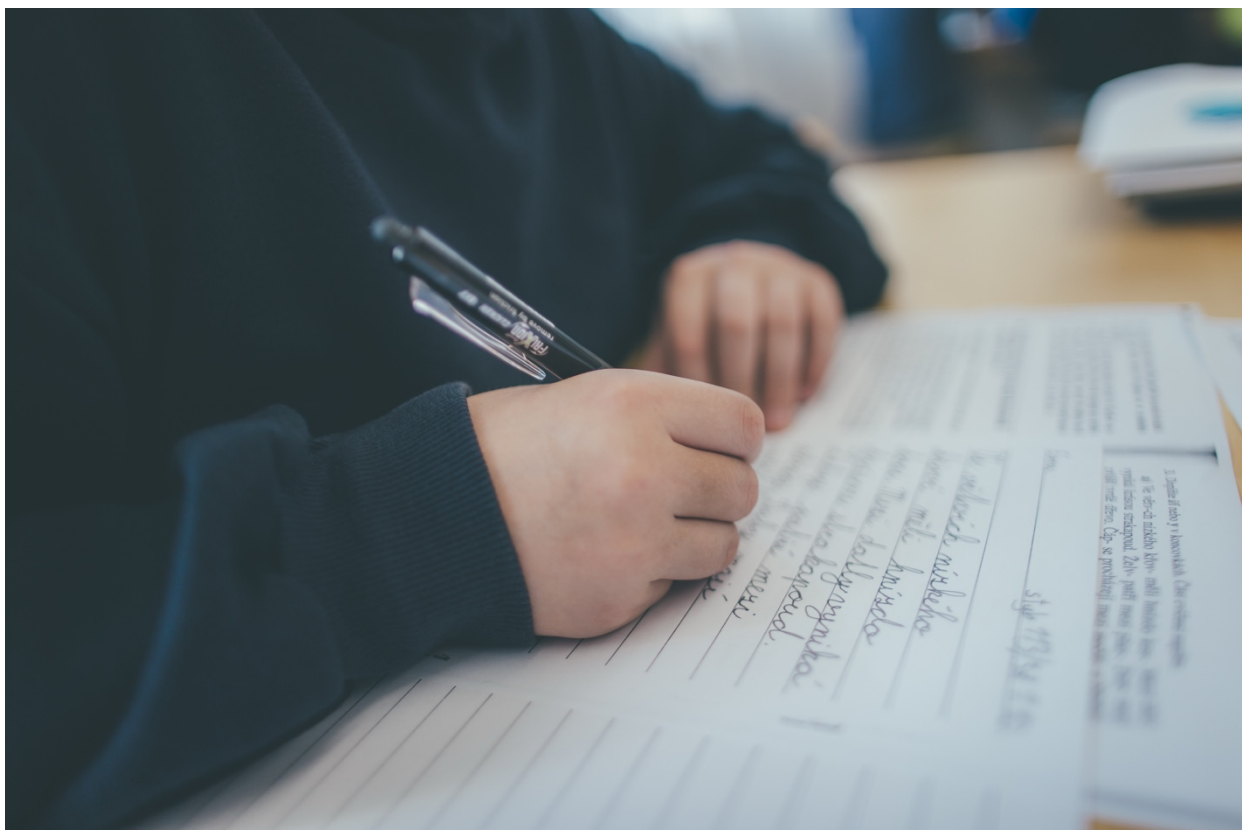
The once-parallel groups began to meet in the middle. A shared curiosity about languages, ignited by one ancient story, became a gentle glue drawing them together. Multilingualism wasn’t just a competence anymore—it was a bridge. A bridge built child by child, word by word, through their own joyful work.



AMI teacher Guna Petermane experience

Writing as the Graphic Expression of Thought

In the Montessori classroom, writing is explored as a dynamic tool for thinking, communication, and self-expression, not just copying letters. Children connect the history and cultural development of written language with hands-on experiences, transforming ideas, questions, and observations into text. They practice writing across subjects using command cards, non-fiction projects, math problems, descriptive exercises, and fiction, while learning to read, interpret, and analyse texts. The environment supports multiple languages, allowing children to express themselves in their mother tongue and others. Through these activities, writing becomes a meaningful way to communicate, reflect, and develop literacy, creativity, and multilingual awareness.



Story from the classroom

The Magic of Command Cards

In the Jolly HOMESCHOOL classroom, command cards are everywhere—on shelves, tables, and in little baskets. They are written in Slovak and English, each one tied to the current topic. Today, Mia picks a card that tells her to “Open your atlas and write 10 proper nouns in your notebook.” She pauses for a moment, unsure what to do. Instead of waiting for a teacher, she walks over to her friend Alex and asks for advice. Together, they flip through the atlas, find interesting countries and cities, and Mia writes them carefully in her notebook.

Meanwhile, her classmates are also busy: some are opening books, reading the first sentence aloud, and copying it into their notebooks and doing the parsing of the words; others follow a sequence of steps on their cards, practicing math or science experiments. Each command card is a small adventure. Children learn not only the topic at hand, but also how to be independent, solve problems, and collaborate with peers.

Can you imagine having these cards in more than two languages for your international students? How much richer the learning could be, as children explore ideas and instructions in multiple languages!

Jolly HOME SCHOOL, Slovakia



Promoting Multilingualism Through the Classroom Library

Variety of books in Multiple Languages

A rich classroom library is a powerful tool for fostering multilingual competence in Montessori elementary education. By providing a diverse collection of books, encyclopedias, and dictionaries in multiple languages, children are exposed to a wide range of vocabulary, sentence structures, and cultural perspectives. Shelves dedicated to different languages allow students to explore texts both in their mother tongue and in foreign languages, supporting natural language acquisition and reinforcing connections between languages. Access to dictionaries, bilingual books, and reference materials encourages children to independently investigate words, meanings, and grammatical structures, promoting curiosity and autonomy in language learning.



Exposure to Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The library also provides opportunities for cross-cultural exploration: stories, folktales, and non-fiction texts from different linguistic traditions help children understand that language is both a tool for communication and a window into diverse worldviews. Reading in multiple languages strengthens comprehension skills, nurtures empathy, and encourages children to appreciate the richness and variability of human expression. By integrating multilingual resources into daily classroom life, teachers create an environment where languages are living tools, used for learning, discovery, and self-expression, rather than abstract subjects to be memorised. In this way, the classroom library becomes a central hub for promoting fluency, literacy, and intercultural understanding.

Library Activities Supporting Storytelling and Writing

The classroom library naturally complements storytelling, writing, and oral traditions as part of a holistic approach to multilingual learning. Stories read aloud or explored independently in different languages reinforce vocabulary, sentence structures, and cultural understanding introduced through oral narratives. Children can retell these stories, act them out, or adapt them into their own written or artistic creations, linking reading comprehension with expressive skills. Access to books in multiple languages allows them to compare linguistic structures, explore translations, and develop awareness of similarities and differences between languages, strengthening both fluency and multilingual competence. Furthermore, integrating the library into group activities—such as shared readings, research projects, or collaborative storytelling—fosters dialogue, cooperation, and social learning, mirroring the oral traditions that underpin human communication. In this way, the library not only supports individual learning but also cultivates a rich, culturally aware, and linguistically diverse classroom environment, where children experience languages as dynamic tools for thinking, creativity, and connection with the wider world.

Fostering Multilingual Competence Through Montessori Education

Montessori education offers a natural and holistic framework for promoting the European Union’s vision of multilingual competence. Through storytelling, oral traditions, and the history of written language, children engage with language as a living, evolving tool—one that reflects culture, history, and human creativity. Practical writing activities, from command cards and non-fiction projects to fiction and descriptive writing, provide children with meaningful opportunities to express their thoughts while reinforcing reading comprehension. A thoughtfully curated classroom library further extends these experiences, exposing children to multiple languages, diverse texts, and cultural perspectives. Across all these activities, the focus is on communication, fluency, and understanding, rather than mere accuracy, encouraging children to take risks, explore ideas, and collaborate. By integrating these practices, Montessori classrooms cultivate not only literacy skills but also curiosity, empathy, and intercultural awareness, equipping children to navigate a multilingual Europe with confidence, creativity, and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.



The World is a classroom

Maria Montessori dreamed of a *nazione unica* — one united human nation, where education would help children recognize their shared belonging to humanity. She envisioned schools not as isolated institutions, but as gateways to the world, where children could understand that every culture, language, and way of life contributes to the great story of humankind. In the Montessori Elementary classroom, this vision becomes tangible. Here, the world itself is our classroom.

When we open our classroom doors — both literally and symbolically — we invite the world in. International projects, exchanges, and collaborations give children a living experience of what it means to belong to a global community. Through initiatives such as Erasmus+ mobility or online connections like eTwinning, children are not only learning about geography or languages — they are *living* them. They might write letters to pen pals in another country, discovering new alphabets and idioms, or participate in a joint science project where they share experiments and data with another Montessori school abroad. Sometimes, they travel, visiting their partner schools and experiencing firsthand the rhythm of daily life in another culture — cooking, singing, learning, and laughing together.

These encounters are not mere additions to academic learning; they are part of Montessori's *Cosmic Education*. In Cosmic Education, every child discovers their role in the interconnected web of life. When a child meets peers from another country, listens to how they celebrate holidays, or learns how they solve classroom challenges, this connection deepens. They begin to understand that diversity is not a barrier but a gift. Language differences become a



source of curiosity rather than division, and every encounter becomes an opportunity for empathy, adaptability, and collaboration.

A Montessori child who works on an international art project learns not only to express themselves creatively but also to appreciate how art reflects local traditions and shared emotions. A student who engages in a collaborative research project online is developing both critical thinking and digital literacy. When children plan their own mobility visit, they learn organization, communication, and respect for the customs and expectations of others. Every moment becomes a lesson in global citizenship.

In our classrooms, the children's enthusiasm often grows with each new exchange. They prepare small gifts, write introductions, or practice basic words in another language before their online calls. They want to understand — not just to be understood. As guides, we witness the transformation: shy readers become confident speakers, and hesitant writers begin to express themselves with purpose because they know someone, somewhere, is reading their words. They are no longer working only for themselves or their teacher; they are communicating with the world.

This way of learning is deeply rooted in Montessori's belief in peace education. By fostering understanding through direct experience, we are helping to build a future generation that is open-minded, compassionate, and connected. When children grow up knowing friends in different countries, they begin to see the planet as a shared home. This, perhaps, is the most profound lesson of all.

In a Montessori school, the world is not something distant to be studied from maps and textbooks. It is something to be experienced, explored, and respected. Through international projects — big and small, physical and digital — we honor Montessori's vision of *nazione unica*. We raise children who not only know about the world but who *feel* part of it, ready to contribute their ideas, creativity, and kindness to the great, ongoing story of humanity.

Story from the classroom

Erasmus children exchange in Turkey

In our Montessori Elementary classroom in Lithuania, children began an international project on environmental awareness with a Montessori school in Turkey. At first, they were both curious and nervous — it was their first time learning with children from another country. Before the first online meeting, they practiced short introductions in English and even learned a few Turkish words like merhaba (hello) and teşekkürler (thank you). When the two classes finally met online, the screens filled with excitement and laughter. The children shared who they were, what they loved, and the environmental problems they noticed in their own surroundings — forests full of litter, or rivers in need of care.



In their second online meeting, conversations deepened. Lithuanian children spoke about recycling, while their Turkish friends shared ideas for saving water and sea life. Slowly, the shy voices grew stronger. Children who had been quiet at first began to speak proudly, realizing that their ideas mattered. It was a moment of transformation — from nervous speakers to confident communicators united by a shared purpose. When the Lithuanian children later visited their friends in Turkey, they stepped into a world both new and familiar. The language, food, and traditions were different, yet inside the Montessori classroom, the shelves, materials, and spirit of learning felt just like home. Together they cooked, played, and worked on environmental projects — planting, recycling, and designing posters that spoke the universal language of care for the Earth.

By the end of the week, the children no longer saw themselves as “Lithuanian” or “Turkish” but as members of one shared world. They learned that language may differ, but kindness and curiosity connect us all. What began as a project about the environment became a lesson in empathy, courage, and global citizenship — a reminder that the world itself is a classroom.

Montessori akademija, Lithuania

Preparing Multilingual environment

A multilingual Montessori classroom is not only a place where multiple languages are spoken but a living, breathing community that values language as a means of connection, thought, and exploration. The prepared environment allows children to use and hear more than one language naturally in their daily work, developing understanding before accuracy, communication before grammar, and belonging before perfection. Adults play a crucial role in shaping this environment. Ideally, each language present in the classroom is represented by a fluent, trained Montessori guide who uses it authentically and consistently. The two guides for two languages plan together, support one another, and ensure that both languages are used for real purposes—giving lessons, supporting work, solving everyday situations, and engaging in conversation. The classroom thus reflects unity within diversity, one community with many voices. In such an environment, language becomes visible, audible, and alive. The materials and labels in the classroom are bilingual, grammar symbols and nomenclature cards exist in more than one language, and books and resources reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the community. Children’s work is displayed in all the languages spoken in the classroom, reinforcing that understanding and expression are valued equally regardless of the language used.

Every child brings a unique linguistic and cultural identity, and understanding each child’s background is essential. Some children may use two or more languages at home, while others may encounter the second language only in school. The teacher’s task is to build upon what is already secure—strengthening the dominant language and gradually expanding exposure to the other. Consistent dialogue with families helps maintain a realistic picture of the child’s development and ensures that both languages are supported beyond the classroom walls.

Montessori pedagogy aligns naturally with the principles of second language acquisition. The learning process begins with meaningful experiences—experiments, storytelling, and real-life observation—from which vocabulary and expression emerge organically. Repetition across varied contexts, rather than drills, helps the child internalize new language. Freedom of choice allows children to decide in which language they wish to

read, write, or record their work, building autonomy and confidence. Collaboration within mixed-age groups further supports natural language growth, as older children model vocabulary and sentence structure for younger peers.

In the multilingual classroom, communication always precedes academic language. The focus is first on comprehension, listening, and spontaneous speech rather than formal grammar. Real conversations, storytelling, and group discussions provide authentic opportunities for communication. Instead of interrupting or correcting errors, adults rephrase the child's words, maintaining trust and encouraging self-expression. This supports the development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, upon which deeper academic proficiency can later be built.

The adults themselves are also language learners. When one guide models one language and another guide the second language, both showing curiosity and willingness to learn from each other, they demonstrate that language learning is a lifelong process. This mutual openness builds a culture of humility, respect, and curiosity that children naturally absorb. Because multilingualism extends beyond the classroom, collaboration with families is key. Parents can maintain exposure to both languages through reading, songs, travel, or simple daily conversation. The school can guide families by sharing ideas, bilingual materials, or organizing events that keep both languages alive in the child's world.

Ultimately, a multilingual Montessori classroom is a place of peace and cultural understanding. It honours each child's linguistic and cultural identity while inviting curiosity about others. Words, stories, songs, and traditions from different languages weave together into the life of the community, allowing children to experience diversity as something beautiful and natural. When language becomes a bridge rather than a barrier, the classroom becomes a model of the interconnected world we hope our children will one day help to create.

How multilingual competence is visible in Montessori Elementary classroom?

Essential knowledge (students know about)

An appropriate range of vocabulary	Children expand vocabulary naturally through thematic studies (e.g. geography, zoology, botany) in multiple languages — labeling maps, naming animals, and using scientific terminology in both English and the second language. Picture cards, classified nomenclature, and bilingual materials support vocabulary building in context.
Functional grammar	Using the same Montessori grammar symbols and sentence analysis materials for both languages helps children see universal grammatical patterns. They compare sentence structures, verb tenses, and parts of speech, realizing that while words differ, functions remain constant.
The main types of verbal interaction	Children participate in daily routines, conversations, and presentations in both languages — from morning greetings and grace and courtesy lessons to discussions about their Great Work. They also engage in dialogues during Going Out experiences, where they must adapt language use to real-life contexts.
Different styles and registers of language	Through role-play, drama, and storytelling, children explore how tone and expression shift depending on audience and situation. For example, writing a formal letter to a local museum contrasts with composing an informal note for a friend.
How language and culture vary in different contexts	Cultural studies, songs, festivals, and traditional stories reveal how languages express identity and values. Children see that idioms, gestures, and greetings carry cultural meaning that differs from one community to another.
The role of language in their own and other cultures	Through comparing languages, children learn that language preserves history, traditions, and worldviews. Projects like “Languages of the World” maps or

	“Proverbs from Different Cultures” highlight how people express shared human truths in diverse ways.
Societal conventions	Grace and Courtesy lessons, conducted in multiple languages, teach children polite forms of communication and appropriate expressions for different situations (e.g., thanking, apologizing, making requests).
Core skills (students should be able to)	
Understand spoken messages in the foreign language	Listening activities such as storytelling, songs, and conversations with native speakers help children develop comprehension. Teachers use rich oral language supported by gestures, images, and materials.
Initiate, sustain, and conclude conversations	In pair or group work, children practice real dialogues — for example, asking for help, expressing opinions, or conducting interviews in the target language. Role-play scenarios (e.g., at a café, on a trip) simulate authentic exchanges.
Read, understand and produce texts, including digital texts, appropriate to their needs	Children read bilingual books, simple articles, and cultural stories, and later write reflections or short compositions. Digital tools may be used to research topics in another language or create multimedia presentations.
Use tools appropriately and engage with languages formally, non-formally and informally	Dictionaries, word cards, language apps, and bilingual displays encourage independent language exploration. Informal interactions, like chatting with a visiting parent in their mother tongue, make language living and relational.
Monitor and adapt their own communication to the requirements of the situation	Children learn to switch between languages depending on their audience and to choose appropriate expressions for formal or casual contexts, for example, when presenting to classmates or speaking with guests.

Appreciate how cultural differences influence language use and communication	Through comparing customs and expressions (e.g., greetings, humor, gestures), children gain sensitivity to cultural nuances. Class discussions and reflections help them appreciate diversity and avoid stereotypes.
Attitudes (students value)	
Learning new languages	Language learning is presented as an adventure — exploring new worlds and discovering connections between people. Curiosity and enthusiasm are fostered through stories, songs, and hands-on materials.
Cultural diversity	Classroom environments include books, art, and maps from around the world. Festivals and shared cultural events celebrate diversity and unity.
The role of languages in learning about their own and other cultures	Through reading literature, studying history, and exploring traditions in different languages, children see that language is a key to understanding others and oneself.
Intercultural communication	Exchange projects, pen pals, and interactions with families from diverse backgrounds provide authentic experiences of communication across cultures.
Respect for each person's individual linguistic profile	Every child's home language and background are acknowledged and respected — classroom displays may include greetings and labels in all represented languages.
Respect for the mother tongue of persons belonging to minority groups and those with a migrant background	Teachers invite families to share their languages and traditions. Children learn songs, phrases, or stories in classmates' languages, reinforcing inclusivity and belonging.