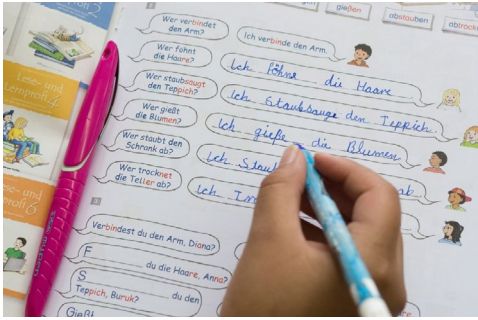


Rethinking language education in schools



“In order to benefit from language learning you don’t need to be a baby, a genius or perfect.”

Dr. Thomas Bak¹

The context

The European Union (EU) has long promoted language learning and linguistic diversity across Europe, with the view to increase mutual understanding and provide access to other countries and cultures². Since 2002, the EU has supported the principle that every citizen should be offered the opportunity to learn at least two foreign languages from a very early age – the ‘mother tongue plus two’ objective³. This is also reflected in the European key competence framework⁴. Fifteen years on, it is necessary to question if these definitions and recommendations are still appropriate in the context of societal changes such as new migration, globalisation, economic and technological change. We must ask:

- › If language learning is to increase mutual understanding and provide access to different countries and cultures, which languages should we learn in an increasingly globalised world?
- › What is the value of learning several languages when English is widely spoken and translation becomes increasingly automated?

An increasing number of young people in European school systems speak a different language at home than in the classroom. In 2015 and 2016 alone, more than 2.5 million asylum applications were made in European Member States, of which close to 550,000 were by children under the age of 14⁵. More than one in ten 15-years old learners in European schools were first or second generation migrants⁶. We must ask:

- › How relevant is the ‘mother tongue plus two’ recommendation for those young people whose mother tongue is different from the language of schooling?

Language education in Europe today

The linguistic landscape in Europe has always been diverse and complex, which makes it difficult to introduce meaningful indicators for language competences at EU level. Several Member States have more than one official language or large populations of speakers of minority languages (that may be labelled ‘minority’, ‘regional’ or ‘migrant’ languages depending on the context). According to data from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015, shares of 15-year old learners with a different home language range from more than 80% of learners in Malta and Luxembourg to less than 2% in Hungary and Poland.

In some countries, the linguistic diversity is to a large extent due to **first or second generation migrants**. Countries with significant shares of migrants with different home languages include Luxembourg (39.8%), Austria (15.1%) and Sweden (11.8%). Malta (84.4%) and Luxembourg (44.9%) are countries with two and three official languages respectively, whereas Cyprus (14%) and Spain (12.7%) have regions with different languages. Education systems must respond to this diversity.

¹ Reader at the University of Edinburgh, www.ed.ac.uk/profile/thomas-bak, Presentation in the context of the fourth thematic panel of languages and literacy, January 23-24, 2017

² ec.europa.eu/education/policy/multilingualism_en

³ See e.g. EC (2008), Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment, COM(2008)566 final

⁴ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences of lifelong learning.

⁵ Eurostat, indicator: migr_asyappctza (accessed 30.03.2017)

⁶ EC (2016), Pisa 2015: EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe, 6. December 2016

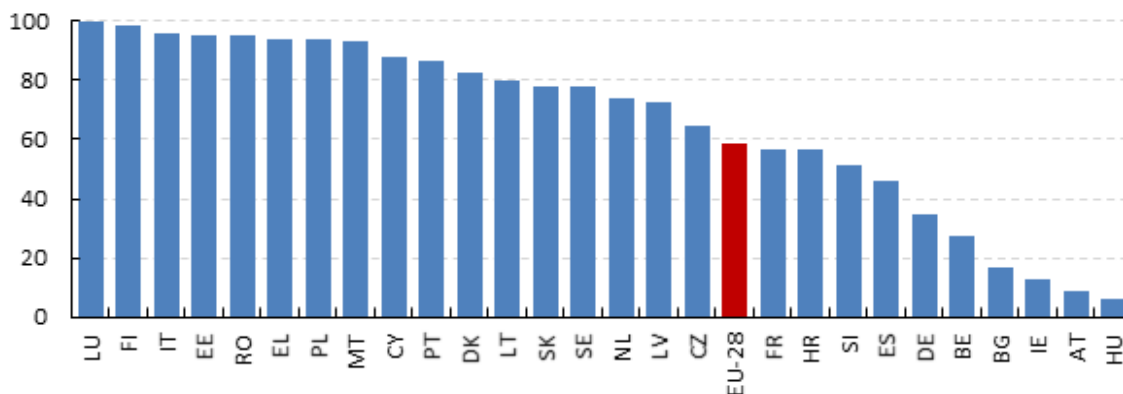
Share of 15-year old learners who speak another language at home (%), 2015

	Total	Of which non-migrants	Of which migrants		Total	Of which non-migrants	Of which migrants
MT	86.6	84.4	2.2	DK	7.6	2.2	5.4
LU	84.6	44.9	39.8	Si	7.4	1.7	5.7
CV	20.0	14.0	6.0	IE	7.1	n/a	7.1
AT	18.7	3.6	15.1	NL	6.9	1.7	5.1
ES	18.4	12.7	5.7	FI	5.9	2.8	3.1
IT	16.4	11.7	4.7	EL	5.6	1.8	3.8
BE	16.3	6.9	9.4	EE	5.6	4.4	1.2
SE	15.4	3.6	11.8	LT	5.0	4.8	0.3
DE	11.6	2.4	9.2	CZ	4.6	2.4	2.2
LV	9.7	8.8	0.8	HR	2.7	2.1	0.6
UK	8.7	1.4	7.4	RO	2.7	2.7	n/a
FR	8.4	2.9	5.5	PT	2.4	0.9	1.6
BG	7.9	7.9	0.0	HU	1.8	1.8	n/a
SK	7.7	7.7	0.0	PL	0.9	0.9	n/a

Source: Own calculations based on PISA 2015 data, PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education, Annex B1.7

In the area of **foreign language learning**, many Member States are putting the ‘mother tongue plus two’ objective into action. In 2015, 59% of learners at lower secondary levels studied two or more modern foreign languages. National official languages count as “foreign” in the Eurostat data, that is why shares of teaching two foreign languages are highest in Luxembourg (100%) and Finland (98.4%). It is also very high in Italy (95.8%), Estonia (95.4%) and Romania (95.2%) and lowest in Hungary (6%), Austria (8.8%) and Ireland (12.7%). In upper secondary education, the global share across the EU-28 is lower, (44.1% in 2014)⁷, which is primarily due to the fact that learners in vocational tracks learn less languages than students of general upper secondary tracks (34.5% and 51.2% respectively). However, in many cases the second foreign language is dropped after just a few years, unless it is chosen as part of the secondary school leaving certificate.

Share of learners at lower secondary level who study 2 or more foreign languages (%), 2015



Source: Eurostat, indicator educ_uoe_lang02, no data for the UK, data for DK and EL from 2014

⁷ Eurostat, indicator educ_uoe_lang02

Re-thinking language learning

Understanding and addressing today's societal, economic and technological challenges requires 're-thinking' some concepts of language learning, including literacy, multilingualism and mother tongue.

RETHINKING LITERACY

Literacy is the most basic of foundation skills and a prerequisite for cognitive progress across the curriculum⁸. We often think that learners can reach different levels of competence of literacy, with a critical threshold being functional literacy, i.e. the ability to participate fully in society through reading and writing. With an increasing number of multilingual learners who hold uneven sets of competences across multiple languages, however, we may want to 're-think' literacy as a continuum. Young people may hold a repertoire of languages, styles, registers and genres, all at different levels of competence⁹.

RETHINKING MULTILINGUALISM

Designing school systems which address the needs of multilinguals can benefit all learners. The increasing number of multilingual children challenges us to fundamentally rethink language learning. For multilingual learners, this implies that teachers must take the linguistic repertoire and diversity of all learners into account to avoid exclusion. For monolingual learners, there must be a focus on gaining functional literacy and on highlighting the importance of language learning for reasons relevant to their own context¹⁰.

RETHINKING MOTHER TONGUE

Mother tongue is a gendered concept, which imposes certain normative views and values relating to family and identity. Increasingly multilingual and hypermobile populations have blurred the distinction between mother tongue, language of schooling (language of host country) and foreign languages (modern and classical languages, world languages). We may want to 're-think' the 'mother-tongue plus two' recommendation as an entitlement for each learner to be supported in the acquisition of the language of schooling, to have any existing language competence recognised and encouraged and to learn additional languages. Further, concepts such as 'home language', 'family language', '1st/2nd language' etc. might be more appropriate in this context.

Making the case for change

Current attitudes and practices in schools are not conducive to equal treatment of multilingual children, but change is necessary for at least four reasons:

- From a **human rights perspective**, the discrimination of learners based on their language violates article 2 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies non-discrimination grounds including a child's language¹¹.
- From an educational **equity and inclusion** perspective, ensuring that bilingual and multilingual learners, in particular those who had less access to learning the language of schooling, have equal opportunities to thrive alongside their peers is a priority for any education system. Effective multilingual teaching and learning has
- the potential to close the achievement gap of migrant students compared to 'native' learners, while enhancing the cultural and civic education of all learners¹².
- From a **public health perspective**, various clinical studies in the area of neuroscience show the positive effects of bilingualism, independent of the languages involved. Positive effects are sustained over the life-course and relate to increased cognitive abilities beyond linguistic skills¹³.
- Finally, there is an **intrinsic value** of supporting learners to develop and maintain the linguistic repertoire of multilingual children with the view to value the identity of each multilingual learner.

⁸ See e.g. Council of Europe (2015), *The Language dimension in all Subjects – A Handbook for Curriculum Development and Teacher Training*, October 2015

⁹ See also Le Pichon, E. (2016), *New Patterns of Migration and Society. New Needs for Language Teaching*, input paper to Thematic Panel on rethinking literacies and language learning, Brussels 11.07.2016

¹⁰ See also Tinsley, T. (2017), *The cost of linguistic exclusion: language skills as a key competence for all*, input paper to Thematic Panel on languages and literacy, Brussels 23./24.01.2017

¹¹ UN (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted 20.11.1989

¹² EC (2015), *Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

¹³ (See Next page)

Key questions – ‘Food for thought’

There is a variety of ways in which schools, teaching staff, parents and the wider society can create culturally and linguistically inclusive environments for all learners¹².

Giving learners a voice can provide insights which facilitate a better understanding of education systems, current educational practices and the interaction of race, language and other characteristics on these experiences. Effective participation processes should be in place to give all learners a voice.

Changing the public perception of language learning and multilingualism is a major challenge. Schools, teaching staff and parents should have the opportunity to update their perceptions with the newest research evidence. Teachers can update their knowledge through continuous professional development, communities of practice and networks of exchange with the scientific community. Whole schools and communities can be trained in supporting multilinguals. The Swedish National Centre for Swedish as a Second Language, for example, builds bridges between school practice and

the scientific community by providing analysis and training on the integration of newly arrived migrants to whole municipalities¹⁴. Learners and parents should be exposed to positive message about the cognitive advantages of all language learning and multilingualism.

Teacher education is a key priority to support teachers in gaining linguistic awareness and help them acquire strategies for supporting learners in multilingual settings. This includes all stages of teacher education, from initial teacher training through the induction period to continuous professional development. The EU-funded Edina project currently develops a multi-modular programme for teachers’ professional development to improve the reception, observation and transition of newly arrived migrants¹⁵. Language teaching across the curriculum should be integrated as a transversal competence into all teacher training. Innovative language teaching practices include translanguaging (the use of different languages for communication and learning)¹⁶, content and language integrated learning (see below) and the use of creative subjects for language learning.

Case study: Content and Language Integrated Learning in multilingual classrooms

Multilingual classrooms present both challenges and opportunities to learner development. Children with no or limited knowledge of the language of schooling often need special assistance to progress across the curriculum¹⁷.

To provide this assistance, teachers can draw on the approaches developed for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) used in the area of foreign language teaching. Research evidence suggests that CLIL is an effective way to support language and subject learning, with benefits for education and other outcomes¹⁸. Many countries provide for CLIL in their curricula. In Belgium Flanders, for example, 20% of teaching in French, English and German can be provided in CLIL¹⁹.



¹³ (See *Previous page*) See also Mehmedbegovic, D. (2016), What every educator needs to know about cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Moving towards ‘language hierarchy free’ policy and practice, input paper to Thematic Panel on languages and literacy, Brussels 26/27.09.2016 and Bak, T. (2017), The cognitive costs and benefits of multilingualism and language learning, presentation fourth Thematic Panel on languages and literacy, Brussels 23./24.01.2017

¹⁴ www.andraspraksu.se/english

¹⁵ www.edinaplatform.eu/the-project

¹⁶ Garcia, O. /Wei, L. (2014), *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan

¹⁷ EC (2015), *Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

¹⁸ Scott, D./ Beadle, S., (2014), *Improving the effectiveness of language learning: CLIL and computer assisted language learning*, EC report, 25.04.2014

¹⁹ EC (2015), *Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union: p. 69

The basic principle of CLIL is that “all teachers are language teachers”. In multilingual classrooms this implies that non-language school subjects are used for both subject and language learning. The subject matter determines which aspects of a language are being learnt²⁰. A CLIL science lesson on ecosystems, for example, will convey knowledge on the subject matter, but also check any previous knowledge students hold in the subject, practice the relevant language and vocabulary, before consolidating and applying this new knowledge in class.

Practical tools for teachers to implement CLIL include i.) the adjustment of speech and language to ensure understanding of all learners, ii.) the use of group work and interactive elements to support language use, iii.) scaffolding of instruction to aid comprehension²¹.

Testing and assessment exerts a strong influence over the value assigned to language teaching and learning. This is problematic where such assessments are monolingual and in the language of schooling. New ways of assessment should be considered including assessments that take place in different modes of observation and appraisal. ‘Systemic and learning-oriented approaches’, such as the Learning Oriented Assessment developed by Cambridge English learning assessment, aim to promote informal and formal assessments to comprehensively understand learners’ progress²².

Finally, **foreign language learning** should be driven by the needs, circumstances and interests of the individual learner. Starting from the languages(s) spoken at home, the immediate social environment and the language of schooling, education systems must provide learners with the opportunity to expand their language repertoire through languages of international communication, of fellow European citizens across the border and of international commercial partners, and of domestic and foreign academic and popular literatures²³.

²⁰ www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/clil-a-lesson-framework

²¹ EC (2015), Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

²² www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-and-validation/fitness-for-purpose/loa

²³ EC (2017), Background paper, Meeting of the EU School Policy Networks on the review of the key competence framework, 04.-05.04.2017

Further information

For further information on the activities supported by the European Commission on the theme of multilingualism and the integration of migrants, please direct inquiries to the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture:

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