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Edited by Marge Scherer and the Educational Leadership Staff

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All Languages Welcomed Here

by Orhan Agirdag

> *In classrooms across the world, multilingual learning environments help students feel at home and accelerate language learning.*

Have you ever received an unexpected phone call from a teacher who was deeply worried about the achievement of his language learners? Did you ever meet a principal who was desperately exploring ways to improve the relationship between her school and the parents of her language learners?

Indeed, not only in the United States, but also in various places around the world, educators are challenged by the difficulties of schooling language learners. One proposed solution has been bilingual instruction. Although a substantial body of research suggests that bilingual instruction is beneficial for language learners (Baker, 1996), other studies dispute these positive effects (Rossell, 2004). Even if we were certain about the purported benefits of this approach, schools often have difficulty implementing it.

For instance, it would not be feasible to provide bilingual instruction at a highly heterogeneous school in which students come from a great many linguistic backgrounds. With growing immigrant populations, this picture of linguistic diversity is becoming increasingly familiar to many educators. Schools can more easily implement bilingual instruction in relatively homogenous areas, such as the southwest region of the United States where large numbers of Spanish speakers live and where instruction in English and Spanish is feasible. It is less clear, however, how to provide bilingual instruction in places where students speak dozens of languages.

Legal constraints can also hinder the implementation of bilingual education. In some countries (such as Turkey), the law only permits instruction in the official language. Other countries (such as Belgium) only allow bilingual instruction for language learners as an educational experiment. In addition, more and more countries are reducing the amount of existing bilingual instruction (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). For example, in 2004, the Netherlands stopped subsidizing almost all forms of bilingual instruction, which reduced the existing bilingual education to a few, mostly privately funded, programs.

Language Learning in Flanders

I conducted my study on the schooling of language learners in Flanders, which is located in the northern part of Belgium and has Dutch as its official language. After World War II, Flanders rapidly developed into a multicultural society, with a high number of immigrants coming from southern Europe, Turkey, and Morocco. Immigrant pupils,

therefore, are often speakers of Turkish and Arabic, although their linguistic competence in Dutch is usually high. Nevertheless, one rarely uses the term *bilingual* in Dutch to refer to immigrants' linguistic backgrounds. Instead, the common expression is *linguistically different* (*anderstaligen*) or *linguistically deficient* (*taalachterstand*).

To date, the educational achievements of second- and third-generation immigrants remain far behind those of their Dutch peers (Sierens, 2006). In fact, the educational inequality between immigrants and natives in Flanders is one of the highest among all countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006). Although such factors as differences in socioeconomic status and tracking in school can explain this inequality, immigrants' linguistic backgrounds are still perceived to be the main source of their learning difficulties.

There is no bilingual instruction in Belgium, even in the two official languages—Dutch and French (Manco & Crutzen, 1999). The overwhelming social pressure for Dutch monolingualism has also hindered the few experiments in bilingual Dutch/Turkish education. This focus on linguistic assimilation may be related to a far-right-wing presence in Flemish politics. The linguistic assimilation of immigrant children has become, according to the Flemish minister for education, the top priority of the equal opportunities policy in education (Blommaert & Van Avermaet, 2008).

Language and Identity

Even in the absence of bilingual instruction, language learners should have the right to feel at home in school. Cultural discontinuity between students' home-based and school-based experiences can have a negative effect on their academic performance, well-being, and sense of belonging at school. The larger the gap between these two experiences, the greater the disadvantage of cultural discontinuity (Gay, 2000).

When students have to leave their primary language at the school gates, they also leave a part of their cultural identity behind. As Cummins (2001) noted, "To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child" (p. 19). Therefore, educators must try to close the gap between language learners' identities, which are intricately tied to language, and the school culture.

Teachers and administrators often express willingness to create a supportive learning environment for all students. However, they do not always command the tools necessary to realize such an environment. The literature about multilingual school settings is often of little help because the subject is highly complex and the arguments are more politicized than practical (Gersten, 1999). For many educators, the question of what they can realistically do remains unanswered.

To move toward a supportive school setting for all students, educators can create a linguistically plural learning environment, even without bilingual instruction. Plurilingualism in school—that is, making all students' languages visible and valuable—is advantageous for various reasons. The presence of students' home languages in school not only affirms language learners' identities, but also reduces linguistic barriers, opening doors for educators to build improved relationships with the learners' families and communities.

The recommendations that follow are based on my research in Belgium, but they are meaningful for educators in other countries as well. For this reason, I use the term *language learners* instead of *English language learners*.

Three Practices to Avoid

Insisting on a Monolingual Classroom

First, educators should strive to avoid *ethnocentric monolingualism*, that is, expressions of the superiority of one group's language over another (see Sue & Sue, 2008). Ethnocentric monolingualism is harmful, not only because it stigmatizes language learners, but also because it fails to recognize the value of various linguistic backgrounds.

One obvious expression of ethnocentric monolingualism is forbidding students to use their native language in school. In many schools, teachers may even formally punish students when they "catch them" speaking their home language with peers. School staff members and teachers may tend to use punitive practices because they often believe that speaking the home language slows the process of language learning, assuming it is in *competition* with the language that students are supposed to learn.

However, sociolinguistic research has found quite the reverse. Repeatedly, studies have shown that proficiency in the first language is positively related to proficiency in the second language (Cummins, 2000), suggesting that students' proficiency in their native language accelerates language learning. By extension, excluding students' home languages from the classroom does not assist them; rather, it may actually hinder their learning process.

Banning Home Languages Outside School

Another form of monolingual ethnocentrism is advising language learners to speak only in the majority school language outside school, such as at home with their parents and siblings. Educators may be unaware of the advantages that come with maintaining one's primary language. For example, speaking the native language provides

students with better access to family and community networks, which function as social capital. Various studies have shown that family and community resources assist the educational progress of language learners (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Restricting Praise to Second-Language Proficiency

Although it is crucial that language learners receive feedback as they make progress, educators should avoid praising only the students' new linguistic skills. Language learners might also be excellent musicians, outstanding athletes, or accomplished speakers of their home languages. If we want to promote their schooling, we should avoid reducing students to the sole status of language learners.

Five Practices to Adopt

The key element to promoting plurilingualism is to acknowledge and value language learners' linguistic backgrounds in close cooperation with both students and their parents.

Welcome Languages in the Classroom

Teachers should create an instructional climate that makes room for all students' languages. They can do this in different ways, such as by hanging posters on the wall that list significant words (such as *welcome*) in different languages.

Teachers can also reinforce plurilingualism in managing students' classroom behavior. For example, during my research I met a teacher who complained about the disruptive behavior of a Turkish-Belgian student in her class. Neither discipline nor praise seemed to improve his conduct. One day when I was observing in the classroom, I asked the boy, in Turkish, to be less noisy and to settle down and pay attention. This worked. Teachers can promote plurilingualism—and benefit, perhaps, from higher levels of student engagement—by learning a couple of key phrases, such as "Please quiet down" and "Nice job!" in languages that are commonly found in their classrooms.

Teachers can also strengthen plurilingualism through comparisons with countries familiar to many of their immigrant students. For example, in geography, the teacher might compare the rather complicated linguistic situation of Belgium with that of Morocco, where Arabic and Berber are widely spoken.

Ask Students to Share Their Languages

Teachers should encourage students to bring their home languages into the classroom. For example, every day the teacher could ask a different student to share a significant word or sentence in his or her native language with the entire class. Both classmates and teacher could discuss this word or sentence: How does the student pronounce the word and what does he or she think about it? Afterwards, educators will notice that words like *friend* will have an effect on students' interactions beyond the classroom.

For example, at one of the schools in which I was doing research, I overheard Turkish-Belgian, Moroccan-Belgian, and Dutch pupils calling one another *kardas* on the school playground. *Kardas* is Turkish for *brother* or *friend*; it is often used to refer to friendly relationships with non-Turks. Now it has become a significant marker of interethnic friendship among pupils.

Have Students Help Their Peers

Teachers should encourage language learners from the same linguistic backgrounds to cooperate with one another to improve their progress. For instance, when a concept is unclear for a language learner, the teacher might call on another student from the same linguistic background to explain it. This is especially helpful when it comes to abstract concepts in math, such as *multiplication* or *mean*. After all, students often learn better from their peers than they do from their teacher.

Expand the School's Cultural Repertoire

School administrations should make the cultural repertoire of the school more plurilingual. Schools can easily do this by exposing students to subtitled movies, expanding the school's library of bilingual books and books written in different languages, providing materials in students' languages through the Internet, and helping students learn various songs in different languages.

One school in Antwerp reaches out to immigrant families by providing a welcoming message on the school Web site in 12 different languages. The message explains the school's system of communicating with parents using pictograms, which signal upcoming field trips, whether payment is required, and what their child should bring. The pictograms also indicate to parents when they are expected at school and for what reason.

Involve Parents

To realize an effective plurilingual learning environment, schools must involve students' parents. For example,

teachers can call on parents to teach some aspects of their language to the whole class, including the teacher. In a French primary school, parents from more than eight different linguistic backgrounds taught students how to introduce themselves, count to 10, greet people, and say thank you in their languages (Helot & Young, 2002).

School-parent cooperation is crucial. Parental involvement in language learners' education often lags because of linguistic barriers. But when schools consider home languages not as obstacles but as assets, the "language wall" around the school breaks down.

A Word of Advice for Supporters

Supporters of plurilingualism tend to focus solely on policymakers and school administrators as they make arguments for plurilingual schools. The underlying assumption is that if they can convince policymakers and administrators to create a linguistically plural environment, language learners and their parents will welcome it with open arms. My research suggests that this may not be entirely true.

Language learners, their parents, and their teachers are not always passionate supporters of plurilingualism. The benefits of this approach are not always obvious to them, given that the broader society is often oriented toward monolingualism. Students may question why they should learn how to say *friend* in Arabic, for example, when they want to learn English instead. And parents may wonder why schools are presenting their children with languages other than the majority language.

Therefore, supporters of linguistic pluralism should clearly communicate why a linguistically diversified environment is preferable, because when language learners and parents are not convinced of the benefits of linguistic pluralism, their support for such projects will be weak. As a result, excellent projects on paper may fail dramatically in practice.

Learners and their parents should be aware of the benefits of plurilingualism—that it can close the gap between pupils' cultural identities and the school culture, reduce linguistic barriers, improve the school's relationship with parents and community members, and affirm rather than stigmatize language learners. Parent-teacher conferences and organizations, open houses, school newsletters, and Web sites are excellent channels for communicating this information.

Teachers should also understand these benefits because they often have to implement a heavy curriculum and, rightly, do not wish to devote time to something that may be of little help. Advocates of plurilingualism should clarify that a linguistically plural learning environment is not just based on a need for political correctness, but is rather a practice that actually facilitates language learning.

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Author's note: Professor Mieke Van Houtte and Piet Van Avermaet contributed valuable advice and input on this topic.

Originally published in the April 2009 issue of *Educational Leadership, 66*(7), pp. 20–25.

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