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# Dealing with linguistic diversity in the classroom: a challenge for teachers



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**Dr. Xavier Pascual Calvo**

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
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This article is part of a reflection on a model of education whose aim is to familiarize students and teachers with the linguistic and cultural diversity present in our classrooms. Given the notable divergence between the language and culture of the school and the languages and cultures of a growing number of its pupils - the divide between schools and families -we would like to reflect on some educational strategies to bridge this gap. One of the key strategies is to understand the importance of representing the language knowledge of pupils in the classroom and to embrace this linguistic diversity as a learning resource for all classmates.

These ideas stem from a project developed for the Council of Europe's European Centre of Modern Languages involving pupils whose first language is different from the school's. This project, carried out in several primary schools over a period of three years, showed the impact on pupils when first exposed to the existence of other languages and cultures, not as a result of teaching a foreign language to all children, but via direct contact with the large number of languages and cultures specific to some of their classmates. The project provided many positive outcomes, from a sense of inclusion for all class members to the realization of the value of parents' knowledge as a collective resource for the positive visibility of plurilingualism. In addition, the project highlighted enhancements in the bilingualism of some students, and showed how to transform the monolingual and monocultural classroom into a more open, multilingual and multicultural space.

## **Linguistic diversity should be considered a wealth, not a problem**

As teachers, we should take into account the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of the pupils, the variety of languages spoken and the multiplicity of their cultural affiliation. In an educational environment often marked by practices anchored in a monolingual system, this is a great challenge for a teacher. The child who leaves the language of her family outside school does not understand why this language is not entitled to be used in the classroom. She often feels that the language of her family is considered to be some kind of problem at school. It is well known that negative representations of bilingualism among children of immigrant origin particularly

affect their language skills. Rather than refer to heterogeneity we prefer to speak of diversity, a notion that is both broader and more positive. The latter makes it possible to consider the plurality of languages and cultures as a wealth rather than a problem. Moreover, the notion of diversity has been adopted by the Council of Europe in numerous works in the field of language education policies (Beacco and Byram, 2003).

### *Making plurilingual children feel welcome at school*

As mentioned before, this article intends to provide teachers with pedagogical strategies to avoid language and cultural discrimination of pupils who have a different language from that of the school and seeks to encourage the consideration of diversity as a learning resource.

First, the notion of linguistic variety must be emphasized. Every child experiences this variation even before entering school, since he encounters his "mother" language in exchanges with multiple persons and in various situations. As such, from birth, even the monolingual child hears different ways of speaking. Later, upon entering school, he will have to face new challenges presented by the language of schooling. But at school, the variety of dialects spoken is rarely taken into account. It seems important to us here to insist on the fact that a language is always pluralistic, that no one speaks a language in the same way because no one lives it in the same way. Plurality exists within a single language spoken by the same person, for example a child who speaks with his parents at home or answers a question asked by his teacher is not in the same linguistic context as when he is playing with his classmates in the yard.

What teachers will notice first of all in the bilingual talk of children of immigrant origin will be the deviations from the norm in the language of schooling. The greater the pupil's competence in the language of the school, the less developed his dominance of his native language may appear. However, these deviations are merely traces of an interlanguage, the journey towards mastery of a language. They do not always reveal competence in the other language of the bilingual child, since the latter has no place in the school and, in general, teachers have no knowledge of these languages and rarely have a bilingual or plurilingual experience that could have made them aware of what it means to be bilingual or plurilingual. The lack of training in language varieties, the importance given in the curriculum to the priority of teaching the national language (Young and Helot, 2003), and more recently the introduction of learning a foreign language at the age of six in many European countries, often prevents teachers from thinking about the different languages and learning processes existent at school.

It is generally accepted that the teacher, as the person responsible for the transmission of knowledge and know-how to pupils within the institutional framework of the school, must ensure that the pupil feels comfortable at school, creating a climate of trust in which exchanges are facilitated. It is therefore a

question of recognizing the pupil's own linguistic and cultural knowledge, in order to understand his identity.

*What can be done to make students benefit from this linguistic diversity?*

It is obvious that schools cannot teach all languages to all pupils, even in primary schools, but there are pedagogical approaches that allow the different languages present in a classroom to be taken into account. These models are known as the Awakening to Languages (Candelier, 2003a) or Education and Openness to Languages at School (Perregaux, 1998; Perregaux et al., 2003) and can be considered as a complementary learning model. They make it possible to integrate family languages and cultures as pedagogical resources within a classroom and to legitimize them in the eyes of pupils and teachers.

Key to the integration of languages and family cultures are the parents. Our studies show that it is through the participation of parents that teachers and their students have discovered the linguistic and cultural diversity existing in their school community and have been able to transform this diversity into knowledge.

Parental involvement in the project also contributed to the development of a more global vision of languages and cultures among teachers. Through this experience, they have been able to recognize the value of bilingualism, regardless of the languages of which it is composed, and improve their understanding of the schooling of bilingual children in their classrooms.

We observed how teachers developed a transdisciplinary and inclusive approach in class, enabling them to decompartmentalize languages and create a link between disciplines, thus reducing the usual gap between them. This inclusive approach to education addressed all children in the class, with no one being excluded from the group.

The aim of awakening languages and cultures is not only addressed to bilingual children, but it is opened up to all, monolingual and bilingual, in order to build plurilingualism, a culture common to the whole class. The co-intervention of parents and teachers arouses in children an awareness of the richness of linguistic and cultural plurality which does not remain superficial nor rooted in a stereotyped vision.

All teachers should allow the classroom to move from a monolingual to a plurilingual space, using multilingual signs to decorate the walls, including bilingual books in the library, etc. Languages and cultures should be considered in terms of collective resources and placed on an equal footing. The bilingualism of pupils who speak a language other than that of the school must be valued to allow them to find their place in the classroom.

Scientific research shows that it is easier for a child to become bilingual or plurilingual when all their languages are valued and when making connections between languages is encouraged. It is important that parents keep using their family language(s) with their children and that teachers use family languages to help children establish connections between the language(s) of their environment.

It is easier for children to engage in the languages that are taught at school when their own languages are recognised, because these languages are practised in the family environment and by the children. Placing value on childrens' different languages and cultural backgrounds boosts the self-confidence and self-esteem necessary for educational and professional success.

Parents' participation in school activities establishes a relationship of mutual confidence between schools and families, and helps children to dedicate themselves to their schooling.

We should give future citizens the opportunity to construct positive representations of the multiple identities of their peers and their families so that they can be proud of who they are and so that they feel accepted and understood by those around them. This is a necessity if we want to live together in peace.

To allow everyone to build their own identity based on their family life and relationships within and outside school, it is vital that the school takes up the challenge. For today's school is not only a place where one acquires knowledge, it is also the place where one pools one's skills and one's knowledge and where one learns to live together not by sharing a single language but by embracing several to build common values.

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