

## One Voice? Many Languages! – The value of multilingualism in our modern world

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As a child, I was fascinated when I first heard someone speaking French, enthralled when I tried to work out the meaning of words from a story book in German, and delighted when listening to a friend's grandmother singing *Funiculi, funiculà* with gusto, as she changed the bedlinen. Other languages were intriguing, exciting and exotic, and at that time, hearing other languages in our day-to-day lives was relatively unusual.

The world has changed. For young people reaching adulthood in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world in which they make friends, study and work is multilingual and culturally diverse. The soundscape is different; as we walk through the park and down the high street, we hear a polyphony of many different voices from Eastern Europe, from subcontinental Asia, from the Middle East, from Hong Kong, from Asia Pacific and from Africa, in addition to the voices of British indigenous languages and those of our nearer European neighbours, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Spain and Scandinavia. The way we live our lives varies among different communities; there are different traditions, beliefs and cultural norms. Diversity and variety are experienced in the way we eat, dress, celebrate and socialise. This is as much a reality in rural areas as it is in our towns and cities, and our lives are richer for it.

While it is increasingly normal for individuals to live in diverse neighbourhoods and to work with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds who bring with them multiple languages and a wide range of transnational experience, as a society we still seem unsure of how to navigate our multilingual communities, and how to value and make the most of the rich range of languages, cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding that such opportunities provide for us.

We know, and must confront, that not all members of our society share the same positive views towards linguistic and cultural diversity. Dr Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues, presented a report in March 2021 at the Human Rights Council<sup>1</sup> in Geneva raising awareness that in many countries three-quarters or more of the victims of online hate speech are members of minority groups. Women from these groups are often disproportionately targeted. To our shame, in November 2021, the BBC reported that online hate speech in the UK and the US had risen by 20% during the pandemic<sup>2</sup>. Once a society allows online abuse to become normalised through the internet via social media, the risk that virtual disrespect may convert to physical acts of bullying and violence increases exponentially.

What can we do as teachers to bring about social change? How can we foster positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures within our classrooms, our schools and in our wider community? Can we change the optics and make a compelling case that validates individual identity and recognises the true value of languages, cultural knowledge and intercultural communicative skills as cultural capital? Can we work together to create public messages about

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1 Dr. Fernand de Varennes, 23 March 2021, Report on the Outcomes of the 13<sup>th</sup> Forum on Minority Issues, Human Rights Council, Geneva

2 BBC Michael Braggs Newsbeat Reporter 15 November 2021 reporting on a study commissioned by Youth Charity: Ditch the Label.

the value of all our languages, and develop a deeper acceptance and understanding of the crucial contribution that languages make to building harmonious, cohesive societies where individuals and communities benefit and thrive.

The first important consideration is in our use and understanding of the terminology that describes all matters relating to multilingualism. What and who are we talking about? As teachers of languages, we are all too aware of the significance of accurate translation and the relative complexity of finding the closest and most appropriate vocabulary and idiom to convey meaning from one language to another. It stands to reason, therefore, that terminology is key in how we classify our languages, as it affects how we think about them, how we attribute social and cultural value to them, and how others perceive them.

If we explore the definition of the overarching term 'multilingualism', are we sure that we have a common understanding of the term and what it encompasses. Is the term multilingualism describing individuals and communities that regularly communicate in more than one language in their daily lives? Are we referring to acquired multilingualism, responding to the needs of global communication and international relations on the world stage? In other words, are we promoting 'multilingualism as a state of being/ a desirable brand', advocating the learning of other languages in addition to the first language for instrumental reasons related to the economy, diplomacy, security and social cohesion? Taking an alternative perspective, are there socio-economic/socio-cultural connotations around multilingualism that suggest barriers and problems to overcome? During the pandemic public health systems across the world acknowledged the issue of multilingual crisis communication, and struggled initially to meet the challenge of disseminating vital social resources and public health guidance to minority communities.

Hence, multilingualism was framed in the public sphere as a problem, when in actual fact, recognising that linguistic diversity requires multilingual approaches to providing information is the solution, and having such systems in place to reflect the needs of our modern world obviates any crisis from the outset.

Deconstructing the term multilingualism, we have a further conundrum to solve in how our education and political systems describe the different languages we speak. We encounter various terms: home languages, heritage languages, community languages, second languages, migrant languages, minority languages, additional languages, and, of course, modern and ancient 'foreign' languages. All of these terms can be confusing and unhelpful, and can carry with them perceptions of status, or lack of status. Languages that are majority languages may be seen as more powerful, more influential, and in the eyes of our young learners, more important. This can result in young people who speak more than one language in the home rejecting their 'home languages' and seeking to assimilate into the dominant language and culture by losing their bi- or multilingualism and opting for elective monolingualism. This is a loss for individuals, for families, for communities and for society as a whole. It also encourages those young people who speak the dominant language, in our case, English, to retreat into a false perception that everyone speaks their language, ergo, there is no need to learn other languages, as they are irrelevant.

Challenging individual and public perceptions, converting negative attitudes into positive behaviours, affecting cultural change and policy reform - all of these may seem to present intractable problems that we cannot hope to solve within the context of our classrooms. Yet, there are inspiring examples of the extent to which the classroom has become a transformative space, where multiple languages and diverse cultures are accepted, acknowledged and valued. It begins with willingness to adapt to a changing world, where notions of identity, nationality and citizenship

are redefined and evolving, as the tectonic plates of our geopolitical systems shift and realign. Communities are on the move, and within the classroom, we have the opportunity to create new communities and third spaces<sup>3</sup>, where children from different backgrounds, geographies and histories can explore their world and create new conceptual frameworks which take account of each other's languages and cultures.

Among the pioneers of fresh thinking about intercultural dialogue and multilingual approaches, the Language Friendly School<sup>4</sup> is an outstanding example of making significant change by taking very practical steps that can be realistically accomplished. Supported by leading experts in the field of mother tongue and multilingual education such as Professor Jim Cummins, University of Toronto, Canada, the Language Friendly School has articulated a vision where: *All children have access to a language friendly-learning environment where they feel accepted and valued for who they are.* The school aims to become linguistically and culturally inclusive and that means recognising all of the languages that children speak, and finding space for these languages with the school community. Research shows that children who speak more than one language benefit if they can use all of their linguistic repertoire in their learning. It may mean children talking together in a language that the teacher doesn't understand for some of their learning; it may mean children working from source material in different languages and working in a shared language. To be successful in this multilingual approach requires cooperation and the development of *a language plan involving all members of the school*: pupils, school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. It will certainly mean engaging with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds and developing a shared sense of a learning community where all languages and cultures are held in equal esteem.

There are many benefits to the multilingual approach. Research shows that learners who use their first language alongside the dominant language strengthen their cognitive skills. Working bilingually supports executive functioning and strengthens selective attention to particular aspects of problem-solving. Bilingual learners tend to have greater empathy and cultural awareness, recognising that individuals have multiple perspectives and may share a variety of points of view.

For the child who comes into the multilingual classroom only speaking one language and perhaps having quite limited experience of other cultures, the opportunity to learn about other ways of seeing the world and to hear a range of other languages, stories, songs and traditions, is enriching and inspiring. It enables learners to develop a sense of their own identity and to recognise that identity is not fixed but can be flexible and dynamic, growing richer with every language and culture that they encounter. When it comes to learning a new language (and I reject the term 'foreign') as part of the national curriculum, children who have been nurtured in the environment of a language friendly school are more prepared and excited to explore the new language and culture and extend their own repertoire. This cultural and linguistic curiosity should be sustained as they move into the secondary phase.

To conclude, I would like to turn to the insights of a great Lebanese-born French author, Amin Maalouf, who seems to capture the essence of what it is to be human and the role of languages and cultures in defining our unique identity within a shared sense of humanity:

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3 *Intercultural contact, hybridity and third space* 2012 by Claire Kramsch and Michiko Uryu in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*.  
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203805640-24/intercultural-contact-hybridity-third-space-claire-kramsch-michiko-uryu>

4 <https://languagefriendllyschool.org/>

*“What it is that makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?”* Amin Maalouf

So, we have one voice, but with that voice we can learn, use and love many languages. Our identity is shaped and transformed by our languages: our languages reflect our cultural experiences and our intercultural journey; they define us. There can be no greater wisdom to prepare us for life in our modern world than to recognise and promote the value of multilingualism.