Equitable multilingual education

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Abstract

Equitable multilingual teaching and learning practices in education aim to create opportunities for all learners to acknowledge, celebrate and use their multilingual repertoires to enhance communication and facilitate learning. In this entry, we explore how such multilingual practices, aiming for equitable educational opportunities, represent a shift away from monolingual orientations to education. We offer a review of the various approaches educators can employ to maximize the use of learners' multilingual repertoires within educational settings. We consider the key issues regarding equitable multilingual practices in both school and Higher Education contexts in relation to how language education policies are constructed in schools and the role of English in Higher Education. In doing so, we raise timely questions about multilingual education and its relationship to access, equity and social justice.

Keywords

Equitable language education policy, language learning, language teaching, multilingual education, languages education, multilingualism, plurilingual education, plurilingualism, translanguaging.

Key Points

- Equitable multilingual teaching and learning practices aim to create opportunities for all learners to acknowledge, celebrate and use their multilingual repertoires to enhance communication and facilitate learning.
- Educators and learners are encouraged to engage reflexively when examining their relationships to the languages and cultures in their multilingual repertoires as well as their roles within multilingual teaching and learning.
- While some school systems and settings have explored the potential of multilingual teaching and learning practices, the way in which their language education policies have been constructed does not always result in equitable opportunities for all.

- Multilingual teaching and learning practices are increasingly being explored in Higher Education, in response to questions raised about globalization, the marketisation of Higher Education, and the rise of English Medium Instruction within the sector.
- Continued collaboration among educators, learners and researchers is encouraged to develop further equitable multilingual teaching and learning practices that are rooted in the realities of learners' multilingual repertoires and contextualized practices.

Introduction

Often termed the multilingual turn (Conteh & Meier, 2014), a shift toward the use of multilingual teaching and learning practices is occurring in educational settings globally. These practices aim to create equitable opportunities for all learners to acknowledge, celebrate and use their multilingual repertoires to enhance communication and facilitate learning. But why is this important? What does this mean for educators and learners alike? Which approaches can be used? What does this mean for different educational settings, such as schools and Higher Education contexts, and do they provide equitable opportunities for all? In this entry, we address these probing questions.

Key Research Insights

Research on what it means for an individual to possess different language varieties and cultural experiences has evolved, moving toward a more dynamic account. This marks a departure from earlier scholarship on bilingualism where an individual was acknowledged as bilingual only when a) they have a "native"-like control of two languages, b) they produce language that is complete rather than partial and c) they move between the two languages in a compartmentalized, monolingual manner (see Marshall, 2022). With developments in the field of bilingualism extending beyond traditional linguistic silos, many research perspectives have shifted toward a different view of what makes someone bilingual, leading to a proliferation of terminology, such as "multilingualism" and "plurilingualism". Although both terms are often used interchangeably, their convergences and differences are rooted in theoretical and/or etymological factors (Marshall, 2022; Piccardo *et al.,* 2022). In this entry, we use "multilingualism" to represent both "multi-" and "pluri-" terminological use. Broadly speaking, being multilingual means having varying levels of linguistic competencies as well as cultural experiences within an interrelated and dynamic multilingual repertoire. Additionally, individuals may use the languages in their repertoires in a combined, hybrid way (Marshall,

2022). Rather than viewing language acquisition as a sequential process involving a first language (L1), second language (L2), third language (L3) and so on, this perspective on multilingualism promotes the idea of "simultaneity", as it acknowledges all of a learner's linguistic resources at any given time (Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2022, p. 209). From this multilingual viewpoint, it is also crucial to note that the notion of the "native speaker" is problematic—instead of considering only certain forms of language and culture as "authentic" or correct, language should be rooted in learners' "lived experiences" (Holliday, 2018, p. 4).

As research perspectives on what it means to be bilingual/multilingual have become more dynamic, so too have understandings of languages education. Multilingual education can be broadly interpreted as an overarching approach to languages education. This includes bilingual/multilingual programs where instruction is provided in more than one language, multilingual/plurilingual pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning, and multilingual assessment (see Cummins, 2006; García & Flores, 2012; Saville & Seed, 2022). In this entry, we adopt a specific orientation to multilingual education that aims to promote the use of learners' dynamic multilingual practices within teaching and learning. This approach aligns with the conceptual turn in languages education toward multilingual/plurilingual pedagogies (García & Flores, 2012). Equitable multilingual teaching and learning practices aim to create opportunities for all learners to acknowledge, celebrate, and use their entire multilingual repertoires to enhance communication and facilitate learning.

Multilingual practices are crucial for equitable education as they support the development of a multilingual mindset to ways of life and cultural practices. Indeed, being multilingual can be seen as an advantage and a driver in shaping attitudes that embrace diversity and promote various worldviews (Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2022). Recent research has also shown significant academic benefits associated with being multilingual, particularly when developed from an early age (Filippi *et al.,* 2025). Given these documented benefits, multilingual practices play a crucial role in supporting equitable educational opportunities that foster learners' multilingualism. At the heart of this educational approach is "equality and equity, or social justice" (Hélot & Bonacina-Pugh, 2023, p. 15).

Learners, Educators and Possible Approaches

A crucial consideration for the use of multilingual practices is to encourage learners and educators to engage reflexively when examining their relationships to the languages and cultures in their multilingual repertoires and their roles within teaching and learning. Key

points to consider for all learners in educational settings include exploring their exposure to and interactions with different languages and cultures (experiences), as well as their beliefs and attitudes (evaluations) and their emotions toward these languages and cultures and language learning experiences, which contribute toward their multilingual identities (Fisher *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, educators are encouraged to engage in this reflexive practice and to see themselves as well as all their learners as either "being" or "becoming" multilingual, with dynamic and varying multilingual repertoires. Educational leaders also have a crucial role to play in positioning learners' multilingualism as an asset and encouraging educators to leverage these multilingual practices for equitable educational opportunities (Huckle, 2025).

In teaching and learning, educators' professional knowledge of languages and cultures should not be based on what is perceived to be "authentic" (Holliday, 2018, p. 4). Instead, educators and learners should draw upon their existing cultural and linguistic experiences, irrespective of their similarities or differences, to engage creatively (Holliday, 2018). Educators, additionally, should not be discouraged from using the languages of their learners in pedagogical activities in situations when they do not have such languages in their own repertoires. This is a departure from traditional views in education that classroom educators are expected to teach specific language(s) as isolated subjects and often seen as needing to possess "native"-like proficiency. Indeed, educators and learners can learn from each other through a process Li Wei (2014) refers to as co-learning. In co-learning, "[t]he teacher would become a learning facilitator, a scaffolder, and a critical reflection enhancer, while the learner becomes an empowered explorer, a meaning maker, and a responsible knowledge constructor" (Li Wei, 2014, p. 169).

Given that multilingual practices celebrate learners' unique and dynamic multilingual repertoires, teaching and learning in this context can take many shapes and forms. As Piccardo (2018, p. 16) astutely summarizes, there are no "recipes" for this type of education, as such practices are "embedded in a complex vision, in which situated practices are at the core". Also crucial to note here is that while discussions of multilingual teaching and learning have often focused on languages classroom contexts, these practices can also be applied to other educational contexts where explicit language teaching is not the primary goal (Preece & Marshall, 2020). For example, in the school setting, a whole-school approach to multilingual teaching and learning practices can be adopted. This involves acknowledging, celebrating and using learners' multilingual repertoires across various school subjects and activities beyond the classroom.

In educational settings, whether within or beyond the languages classroom, there are numerous opportunities to maximize the use of learners' multilingual repertoires through different avenues. These include: a) activating multilingual awareness, i.e. an awareness of learners' multilingual repertoires; b) using learners' language(s) as a springboard for further language learning; c) going in-between and across languages and cultures; and d) boundary transgressing to challenge conventional language boundaries. The list is by no means exhaustive, and educators may follow a variety of approaches. They are best placed to decide upon the most appropriate avenue(s) based on the needs and competencies of their learners. Figure 1 illustrates these different avenues, and Table 1 gives examples of the approaches related to these avenues.
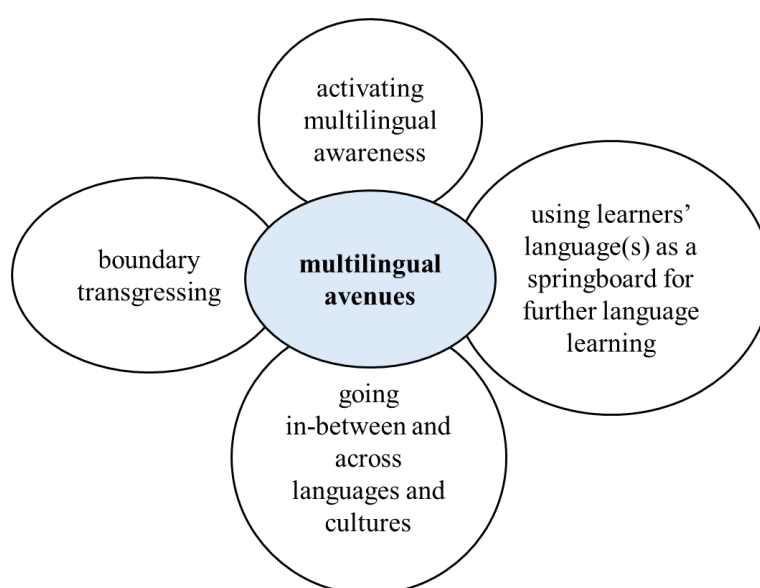

Figure 1: The different avenues to engaging with learners' multilingual repertoires.

Table 1: Different avenues and approaches for multilingual teaching and learning practices.

Avenues	Approaches	Brief description	Key references
Activating multilingual awareness	Awakening to languages	Exposing learners to many languages and cultures, irrespective of their place in the curriculum, to raise an awareness of learners' unique multilingual repertoires.	Candelier *et al.* (2012)
Using learners' languages as a springboard for further	Integrated didactic approach	Using the language(s) learners already have, including their knowledge about language and language skills, to support them in learning additional languages. For example, exploring	Candelier *et al.* (2012)

		cross-linguistic similarities and differences across all the languages learners have in their repertoires.	
language learning	Intercomprehension	Using a language as a springboard to learn another related language(s) and working on them in parallel. For example, knowing or learning French, which will then support the learners with learning Spanish and other Romance languages.	De Carlo and Garbarino (2022)
Going in-between and across languages and cultures	Mediation	To mediate between individuals who do not share a common language or dialect or variety to make comprehension possible.	North (2022)
	Intercultural speaker	Repositioning the goal of language learning from mastering flawless language skills or gathering extensive cultural facts to becoming intercultural speakers capable of navigating various cultural and linguistic perspectives and systems and making sense of similarities and differences between one's own culture and others' cultures.	Zhu Hua (2019)
Boundary transgressing	Translanguaging	Initially recognized as input and output in different languages within the same pedagogical activity, translanguaging has gained traction in the field of languages education and beyond in recent years. It has become an overarching term that encompasses a variety of theoretical and practical viewpoints that go beyond pedagogical contexts. Broadly speaking, translanguaging refers to a dynamic meaning-making process whereby multilingual speakers integrate and employ multiple semiotic resources including named languages and modalities (García & Li Wei, 2014). The term, translanguaging pedagogies, is used as an educational framework in various works.	Cenoz & Gorter (2021) García & Li Wei (2014)

School Settings—Are All Language Education Policies Equitable?

Much of the research on multilingual teaching and learning practices has centered around elementary and secondary school settings. Some studies have explored such practices in other settings and contexts including early years education, tertiary education, the promotion of indigenous languages and minority languages, migrant education, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) contexts and languages other than English (LOTE) contexts, to name a few examples (see Further Readings). An important issue that has emerged in the school-based debates is to what extent the way in which multilingual teaching and learning practices constructed in schools ensures equitable education practices for all, despite equity being central to such multilingual practices in theory. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how language education policies have been constructed in different school contexts.

Firstly, the ways in which multilingual teaching and learning practices are conceptualized in written language education policies vary across school systems. This can range from an explicit discourse around multilingual education and its relevance to all aspects of the school curriculum for all learners, to a less explicit discourse limited to supporting minority language learners to access the curriculum (e.g. Paulsrud *et al.,* 2020).

Secondly, what may be seen as the "declared language policy" (e.g. an explicit plan or policy about language use, usually written in a formal document), may or may not align with the "perceived language policy" (e.g. general beliefs about language practices) or with the "practiced language policy" (e.g. interactional norms that govern speakers' language choice) (Bonacina-Pugh, 2024, pp. 8–9). Essentially, the multilingual educational practices that are outlined or not in written curriculum policies are not necessarily the same as the policies constructed by educators in their school settings and classrooms through their beliefs or usual practices.

Thirdly, in some school settings where multilingual teaching and learning practices are encouraged, language ideologies remain that reinforce linguistic hierarchies and erase the recognition and use of learners' entire multilingual repertoires by promoting some language varieties over others (Phyak *et al.,* 2024). Researchers argue that there is a need to decolonize such multilingual approaches, addressing power dynamics, so that they embrace, rather than suppress, the "epistemologies, identities, and language practices of Indigenous and language minoritized communities" (Phyak *et al.,* 2024, p. 223).

Fourthly, many school settings still operate monolingual ideologies without any recognition of multilingualism. The limitations placed on learners' multilingualism within such

school settings have far-reaching consequences. Research has highlighted that this "raciolinguistic policing" negatively impacts how multilingualism is understood within the family context, i.e. family language policies (Curdt-Christiansen *et al.* 2023, pp. 407–408).

Thus, while there appears to be a turn toward multilingual teaching and learning practices in certain language education policies across the globe in school contexts (UNESCO, 2025), in reality, equitable opportunities for all learners are still not achieved.

Higher Education: Is the Use of "English Only" Equitable*?*

While much of the literature on multilingual teaching and learning has focused on languages education within the context of elementary and secondary schooling, there is a growing body of research examining the Higher Education context (Preece & Marshall, 2020). In Anglophone countries, globalization and Higher Education marketization have led to more linguistically diverse student populations in universities (Preece & Marshall, 2020). In such contexts where (academic) English is the dominant language, students who lack "native speaker" proficiency in English are still often viewed as being in deficit (Preece & Marshall, 2020). Furthermore, English has emerged as the language of choice for some universities worldwide, both in the Global North and South, resulting in the rise of English Medium Instruction (EMI) (Bhatt *et al.,* 2022). In contexts where English is not the most comfortable or familiar language for students and university staff, concerns have been raised about equity, access, coloniality and the devaluing of local languages (Bhatt *et al.,* 2022; Cenoz & Gorter, 2025). As a result, in Anglophone universities as well as in those offering EMI elsewhere, there have been calls to shift away from seeing multilingualism as a deficit ("language-as-problem") toward a "language-as-resource" perspective (Ruiz, 1984; Preece & Marshall, 2020). The shift emphasizes the importance of multilingual approaches in teaching and learning and of recognizing students' multilingual repertoires as legitimate assets (Preece & Marshall, 2020; Bhatt *et al.,* 2022; Cenoz & Gorter, 2025).

Conclusion: Future Directions

Equitable multilingual teaching and learning practices acknowledge, celebrate and use learners' entire multilingual repertoires to enhance communication and facilitate learning. This represents an important shift toward promoting equitable educational opportunities for all. However, the enactment of multilingual practices in educational settings can be more complex

than it appears—not all so-called multilingual approaches are equitable and in certain contexts, monolingual ideologies persist.

Critically examining the contexts within which learning takes place is thus important to understanding both the opportunities for and obstacles to the enactment of equitable multilingual practices within educational settings. It is crucial that multilingual teaching and learning practices continue to be explored through collaboration between educators, learners and researchers, taking into account the specific context of each education system, sector and setting. This approach can help further develop equitable orientations of these multilingual teaching and learning practices that are rooted in the realities of learners' multilingual repertoires and contextualized practices.

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