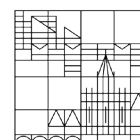


POLICY REPORT **3**

# DOES MULTILINGUALISM BRING BENEFITS? WHAT DO TEACHERS THINK ABOUT MULTILINGUALISM?



Universität  
Konstanz





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**MULTI MIND!** is a research and training network that seeks fundamental breakthroughs in multilingualism research by adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective with the following main scientific themes: language learning, cognition, and creativity, language processing and the multilingual brain, multilingual cognition and society, language impairment in multilingual children, and multilingualism in migration and refugee settings

## INTRODUCTION

This policy report addresses the possible benefits of multilingualism for the individual and the society as well as the perceptions of teachers about multilingualism. Given the increased linguistic diversity within classrooms in Europe and beyond, it is important for teachers, educators, and professionals working in educational settings, such as kindergartens and schools, to understand the benefits of multilingualism. This report includes evidence from previous research as well as from several studies within the framework of the project “The Multilingual Mind – MultiMind.”

## KEY FINDINGS

### Does multilingualism bring benefits?

- Languages are tightly linked to each other, they can support understanding and learning of further languages
- Multilingual children are influenced by the grammar of their first language when listening to their second language
- Multilingualism increases brain plasticity and can be an advantage for further language learning
- Multilingualism brings benefits at the social level

### What do teachers think about multilingualism?

- Teachers’ attitudes towards multilingualism and the integration of heritage languages in the school environment differ across European countries
- Teacher training on multilingualism can result in more positive teacher attitudes towards multilingualism



# DOES MULTILINGUALISM BRING BENEFITS?

## BACKGROUND & CHALLENGES

A large proportion of individuals living in Europe is multilingual; multilingualism is a priority for the European Union, as evidenced by the recommendation for children to learn two further languages apart from their mother tongue (COM(2017) 673). Foreign language learning in Europe is very widespread; a recent study shows that even in the UK a large portion of adults (80%) who were raised in monolingual households have learnt a foreign language and more than half of them use those foreign language(s) in their daily lives (Castro, Wodniecka, & Timmer, 2021).

Whilst foreign language learning of high prestige languages, such as English and French, is promoted in many countries from primary school onwards, support of the heritage languages of multilingual children is often neglected.

Although the type of multilingualism and language combinations vary, most teachers across Europe have multilingual students in their classroom. The Council of the EU released on 22.5.2019 a document on a comprehensive

approach to the teaching and learning of languages. According to this, member states should “value learners’ linguistic diversity and use it as a learning resource, also involving parents and other carers and the local community in language teaching.” Member states are encouraged to “advance research on and recommend the use of innovative, inclusive, multilingual didactics, such as the use of digital tools, integrated content and language learning, and renew initial teacher training”. It also states that “the entire language repertoire of learners can be valued and promoted in school and also used as a pedagogical resource for further learning for all students” (Council of the European Union, 2019). However, this goal has not yet been reached.

Four projects within MultiMind have addressed the benefits of multilingualism in the individual and the society (Avila-Varela & Sebastian-Galles, 2021; Bosch & Foppolo, in press; Castro, Wodniecka, & Timmer, 2021; Castro, Bukowski, Lupiáñez, & Wodniecka, in prep; Pereira Soares et al., 2021, 2022).

## DEFINITION OF TERMINOLOGY

**First language:** A language acquired from birth in a naturalistic way.

**Heritage language:** A language acquired from birth in a naturalistic way within the family while growing up in an environment where another language is spoken by the majority of the population (e.g., Italian acquired by children of Italian origin living in Germany).

**Second language:** A language acquired after exposure to the first language.

**Foreign language:** A language learnt in a classroom environment, which is different from an individual’s first language and also from the majority language (e.g., English learnt in a classroom environment in Greece, where the majority language is Greek).

## DOES MULTILINGUALISM BRING BENEFITS?

### KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

#### Languages are tightly linked to each other, they can support understanding and learning of further languages

When young multilingual children hear a word in one language, they activate similar sounding words in the other language(s) they are acquiring (Avila-Varela & Sebastian-Galles, 2021). This indicates that languages are tightly linked to each other and can activate each other in the developing multilingual mind. Therefore, even if only one language is being used in the classroom, all other languages are active in the mind of multilinguals and can support their understanding and further language learning.

#### Multilingual children are influenced by the grammar of their first language when listening to their second language

Multilingual children process sentences in a very efficient way; similarly to monolingual children, they rapidly anticipate upcoming words by relying on linguistic cues. However, multilingual children can be influenced by the grammatical properties of their first language when listening to their second language (cross-linguistic influence) (Bosch & Foppolo, in press; Bosch, Chailleux, Yee, Guasti, & Arosio, 2022).

#### Multilingualism increases brain plasticity and can be advantageous for further language learning

When learning a new language, individuals who have acquired more than one language from an early age display early signs of multilingual language acquisition at the brain level in comparison to learners who have acquired a second language later on. Juggling two or more languages in the brain leads to functional brain adaptations (Pereira Soares et al., 2021, 2022, under review). A long life of multilingual experience can lead to delays of the symptoms of dementia (Vega-Mendoza, Alladi, & Bak, 2019).

#### Multilingualism brings benefits at the social level

Multilingual speakers seem to express fewer stereotypes and prejudices than monolingual speakers. The reduced expression of stereotypes and prejudices observed in multilingual speakers appears to derive from multilinguals' cognitive flexibility (Castro, Bukowski, Lupiáñez, & Wodniecka, in prep.). This indicates that multilingualism may have benefits not only at the individual level but also at a more global societal level.

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The students' linguistic repertoires can be a valuable resource in the classroom. Educators should support and capitalize on the languages of their multilingual learners from a very early age by including all languages of the students as often as possible in the classroom. In terms of vocabulary this could for instance be activities in which students are asked whether they know similar sounding words in their heritage languages or other languages and similarities between languages can be analyzed.

Teachers working with multilingual children should be aware that all grammars are active in the multilingual mind. Therefore, cross-linguistic influence is part and parcel of growing up multilingually. However, cross-linguistic influence does not impede language comprehension. Teachers can point out cross-linguistic differences between the languages spoken by students in the classroom to increase their metalinguistic awareness and support their language learning.

Supporting multilingual language acquisition from an early age can bring an advantage for further language learning because multilingualism has been reported to increase brain plasticity. This can have long-term effects and protect from the symptoms of dementia.

Maintaining and supporting multilingualism in children and language learners can benefit the classroom and society in general by reducing stereotyping.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: DOES MULTILINGUALISM BRING BENEFITS?

It is important to support the languages of multilingual learners from a very early age within the family, kindergarten and schools because multilingualism brings advantages to the individual and the society.

Using the students' linguistic repertoires, including their heritage languages, can be a valuable resource in the classroom.

Raising awareness of cross-linguistic differences between the languages spoken by students in the classroom can benefit the students' language learning.

Lexical acquisition in two or more languages is highly dependent on the input in each language the students receive (Rinker, Bloder, & Plötner, 2022). These can result in reduced vocabularies in each or one of the languages which may hinder school-related competencies (i.e. reading skills). However, adequate educational support and programs that foster both or all languages can lead to an adequate and sufficiently large and differentiated vocabulary.

## WHAT DO TEACHERS THINK ABOUT MULTILINGUALISM?

### BACKGROUND & CHALLENGES

The benefits of fostering multilingualism in the classroom are numerous: it gives multilingual students a chance to use all of their linguistic resources, it values all languages in the classroom, it helps maintain the heritage language(s) and cultural identity of all students, it increases students' well-being, and it fosters intercultural perspectives within the classroom (e.g. De Houwer, 2020).

Teachers are the most important individuals outside of the family for supporting multilingualism (Morys, 2014). Their attitudes towards multilingualism and the role of language(s) in different school subjects have an impact on teaching behaviour in linguistically heterogeneous contexts (Morys, 2014). International studies have shown that even within multilingual environments, the subjective beliefs of teachers are formed by their own set of linguistic and cultural experiences and are influenced by gender and their own multilingual background (Hachfeld et al., 2012; Morys, 2014; Pulinx et al., 2015).

There is a knowledge-action-gap. An important challenge is how to transform knowledge into action in the classroom. Whilst many teachers have a basic knowledge about multilingualism in the classroom, there is a gap between this knowledge and the actual behaviour towards multilingual students. An additional challenge is how to reach teachers after they have completed their formal training.

A questionnaire for primary and secondary education teachers across Europe within the project 'The Multilingual Mind' has brought a comparative European perspective on teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism.

### KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

#### **Teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism and the integration of heritage languages in the school environment differ across European countries**

In primary schools, there are notable differences between countries in teacher attitudes towards multilingualism. Support of heritage languages in Greece is more highly regarded than in Italy and the Netherlands. 70.2% of Greek teachers believe that children should have the opportunity to learn the heritage language at school compared to 26.3% in Italy and 14.3% in the Netherlands (Bosch, Olioumtsevit, Santarelli, Faloppa, Foppolo, & Papadopoulou, 2021).

In secondary schools, a large percentage of teachers in Belgium (77.3%) and Germany (52.9%) believe that heritage languages should not be used in school. In contrast, only a minority of primary school teachers in Italy (17.6%), the Netherlands (25.8%) and Greece (only 4.2%) have this view (Bosch, et al., 2021; Rinker & Ekinici, in prep; Pulinx et al., 2015). The country's context seems to have influenced the results. This may be related to the recent refugee/migration influx and the adaptation of teacher education (Bosch et al., 2021).

#### **Teachers who participated in training on multilingualism showed more positive attitudes towards multilingualism**

Teacher training in the area of multilingualism is a strong predictor of positive attitudes towards multilingualism as has been shown in the responses in the questionnaire. This is regardless of the country of residence, as primary school teachers who received training on multilingualism have had significantly more positive attitudes than those who did not receive any (Bosch, et al., 2021).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: WHAT DO TEACHERS THINK ABOUT MULTILINGUALISM?

- Viewpoints reflecting outdated recommendations on multilingual upbringing (e.g. first learn one language correctly, then another one) need to be adapted to the current evidence base on multilingualism and the multilingual classroom.
- Teacher training can lead to more positive attitudes on multilingualism. Mandatory continuing education workshops can improve the teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism. However, attitudes and beliefs are very hard to change as they are deeply ingrained in a person's history and development. Intensive and interactive workshops are effective in challenging outdated attitudes towards multilingualism (Bellet, 2022).
- School commitment and policies towards multilingual practices can play an important role in the behaviour of individual teachers. If the entire school commits to a heterogeneous or multilingual approach, all languages used by the students can be adequately fostered. Local / state governments can play a pivotal role in paving the way towards such changes in school policies.

### Further reading

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The complete reference list can be accessed here: [www.multilingualmind.eu/policy-reports](http://www.multilingualmind.eu/policy-reports)



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