



THE BENEFITS OF EMBRACING MULTILINGUALISM

Recent studies show that valuing students' multilingual backgrounds boosts self-esteem, social integration, and academic success. Recognizing their heritage helps foster a sense of identity and belonging, critical for mental health.

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When we think of multilingualism in schools in Central European countries, such as Poland, we might typically focus on the local language of instruction (Polish) along with widely taught foreign languages – predominantly English,

possibly also French, German, or Spanish. The latter are often introduced in primary or secondary school, with foreign language learning viewed as essential for broadening students' horizons, facilitating intercultural encounters, and enabling communication at home and abroad in a language other than their first. As a result, policymakers, educators, parents, and students tend to prioritize globally “big” languages like English – overlooking the regional or home languages that might be spoken by many students' families.

This exclusion can stem from a parental focus on the importance of attaining proficiency in the local or school language, sometimes at the expense of



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Multilingual signage at Liudger Secondary School in Burgum, located in the multilingual region of Friesland, the Netherlands



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nurturing their own linguistic and cultural heritage. Additionally, children may feel pressured to distance themselves from their family language out of a desire to conform to their peers. The lack of curricular recognition, appropriate teaching materials, and teacher training further marginalizes these languages.

However, numerous studies have shown that acknowledging and integrating students' full linguistic repertoire, both at home and at school, is crucial for their well-being, social integration, academic success, and identity development. When students receive recognition for their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it significantly boosts their self-esteem and helps them find a sense of belonging within the school community and society at large. This is also true for adults, who, for instance, as migrants live in contexts where they encounter linguistic difficulties and so cannot make themselves understood as well as they can in their countries of origin. They, too, benefit from being able to use their language, which connects them to their heritage and provides a sense of belonging, stability, and familiarity in new and foreign settings.

Multilingualism on the rise

In recent years, increasing global conflicts, climate change, and health crises have forced or motivated many people to leave their home countries in search of safer environments where human rights are re-

spected and where better opportunities for education and employment are available. Europe, widely regarded as offering a politically and economically stable, democratic space, has been significantly impacted by various "refugee crises." These movements have challenged traditional social systems and political decision-making processes. Poland, in particular, has become a key destination, now for the first time in history issuing more permanent residency permits than many other EU countries. The influx of migrants has introduced new languages and cultures, diversifying the previously perceived monolingual and monocultural landscape – an image shaped by the eighteenth-century "one language, one nation" ideal of European nation-states.

However, this concept is increasingly outdated, as migration and globalization have transformed not only the lives of those who move but also those who remain in their countries of origin. Exposure to multilingualism is therefore very common in today's increasingly interconnected, twenty-first-century world – even for individuals who do not think of themselves as multilingual. Continuing to live by monolingual standards, that is, reinforcing a one-language-only policy in official, administrative, and educational contexts, can have negative consequences for many people who are learners of the local language and may need language assistance that is often still lacking.

New realities in Warsaw

My research project at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, co-funded by Poland's National Science Centre and the European Commission, examines local language laws, policies, and practices, with a focus on how migration reshapes the linguistic and political landscape at the University of Warsaw and beyond. The analysis reveals that multilingualism is now the norm rather than the exception across the city, with various languages visible in public spaces and heard in everyday interactions. While Polish remains the primary language of instruction, many classes are also taught in English, and university activities occur in multiple languages.

The "Polonicum" (Polish language and culture center) serves as a hub where international students at the university gather to learn about Polish life. Here, Polish and English are used as *lingua francas*, with students and teachers using all available linguistic resources to communicate. Teachers also draw on students' multilingual backgrounds to enrich the learning experience and allow others to learn about their peers' national, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, making the students feel valued and more engaged in the learning and integration process.

These new multilingual realities also bring challenges for students, instructors, administrative staff,

and policymakers. The University of Warsaw sees an unequal distribution of international students, with the most coming from Ukraine, while other nationalities (e.g., India, Pakistan, Brazil) are less represented. Recent data show declining visa approvals for foreign students, with the highest acceptance rates for Ukrainians and Belarusians and high rejection rates for others. Those who do receive visas often struggle to integrate initially, facing linguistic and cultural barriers. This can have a lasting impact on their well-being, overall health, and learning outcomes. As one participant from Algeria in our study explained, the arrival phase is very hard due to linguistic and cultural barriers, being singled out based on skin color, and trying to find friends among other migrants with similar experiences.

For Polish instructors, in turn, teaching in a foreign language (generally English) can be daunting, especially when both students and educators are unprepared. University programs often lack adequate support structures (e.g. preparatory language courses), teaching materials, or assessment methods tailored to the use of English as academic *lingua franca*, let alone multiple languages. Consequently, as my study has found, many students and instructors at Polish schools and universities still see learning Polish as essential and using English in the classroom as artificial. At the same time, however, institutions are increasingly aiming to further internationalize the programs they offer, without necessarily providing clear guidance. Simply offering English courses without adequate support limits meaningful intercultural collaboration. My project aims to identify what students and educators need to thrive in a multilingual setting and how to better provide inclusive education.

Multilingual schools in the Netherlands

During a recent research visit to the Mercator European Research Center on Multilingualism and Language Learning in Leeuwarden, The Netherlands, I had the opportunity to observe two multilingual schools: an elementary school for refugee and migrant children and a trilingual secondary school that teaches in Frisian (the local language), Dutch (the national language), and English (the school's international academic language of choice).

At the elementary school, dynamic language interactions occurred among children, parents, and teachers. In the mornings, parents contributed words from their home languages, which were introduced alongside Dutch, creating an inclusive environment that connected the school with family life. Conversations with staff highlighted that successful multilingual education relies on teachers' openness, their

dedication to understanding diverse linguistic needs, fostering a secure atmosphere, and encouraging students to value their cultural backgrounds. While policies and materials support multilingualism, it is the teachers' passion that makes the biggest difference.

Students at the second school were all voluntarily enrolled in a trilingual program, where all subjects were taught in one of the three languages. The program's popularity has grown, with more families enrolling each year. During my visits, I saw students and teachers switch seamlessly between the three languages, using mixed media to enhance learning, such as videos in one language with subtitles in another. There were no strict rules about language use, allowing for a flexible, natural approach to multilingual education. While linguistic resources are often restricted in formal settings, the teachers encouraged students to freely use all their language skills. This fluid, boundary-free approach maximized linguistic potential and should serve as a model for multilingual education, emphasizing flexibility over rigid language standards.

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Concluding thoughts

This and other research has shown that multilingualism is best viewed not just as an educational benefit but as essential for both individual and societal well-being. Embracing linguistic diversity fosters inclusion, enhances social cohesion, and promotes mental health by helping individuals feel valued and understood. For communities, multilingual education bridges cultural divides and encourages collaboration across boundaries, making societies more resilient in an increasingly complex and polarized world.

Poland's response to the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates a willingness to adapt, welcoming newcomers into schools and communities. The shared linguistic, cultural, and geographical ties have facilitated integration, though many newcomers do not plan to stay long-term. Future migration policies should build on this openness by addressing gaps in national regulations and ensuring fair representation of diverse migrant groups, regardless of background. Embracing the benefits of multilingualism will be crucial for shaping a more inclusive future. ■

Further reading:

Cummins J., *Rethinking the education of multilingual learners: A critical analysis of theoretical concepts*, Multilingual Matters, 2021.

Edwards J., *Multilingualism: Understanding linguistic diversity*, 2nd ed. Bloomsbury, 2023.