

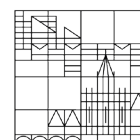


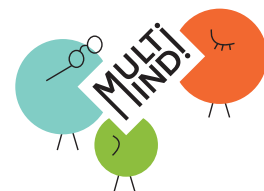
POLICY REPORT **4**

# HOW TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN HERITAGE, MAJORITY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS



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# HOW TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN HERITAGE, MAJORITY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS



**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 issues related to language and literacy development as well as their possible implications for the learning and teaching of heritage languages, majority languages (as second languages), and foreign languages. Given the increasing linguistic diversity in education, within but also outside of Europe, it is important for teachers to be acquainted with current research findings regarding the efficiency of teaching practices and techniques that can be implemented in heritage, majority, and foreign language classrooms. This report includes evidence from previous research as well as findings from a series of studies conducted within the framework of the project “The Multilingual Mind – MultiMind.”

## KEY FINDINGS

### Heritage Language (HL) Teaching

- Heritage Speakers often experience difficulties in reading and writing (literacy) in their heritage language
- Heritage Speakers may experience difficulties with less frequent and more difficult linguistic forms in their heritage language
- In the HL gender assignment of nouns may be more difficult than gender agreement between an adjective and a noun

### Majority Language (ML) Teaching

- Vocabulary techniques that incorporate pictures and movement are more efficient in the initial learning stages of the ML
- The use of running dictation can improve grammar awareness in the ML

### Literacy development in multilingual children

- Differences in reading between heritage and monolingual children in the ML disappear towards the end of primary school
- Bilingual education is beneficial for the development of literacy skills in both languages
- The use of a foreign language as the only medium of instruction may not be beneficial for children’s reading comprehension and mathematical skills



## 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).

## HERITAGE LANGUAGE TEACHING

### BACKGROUND & CHALLENGES

Heritage speakers (hereafter HSs) are a special type of early bilinguals. They are typically children of first-generation immigrants born in a bilingual environment. They usually grow up using a language at home, their heritage language (HL), which is different from the language spoken in the society in which they are raised, the majority language (ML) (see e.g., Montrul, 2008; Rothman, 2009). HSs are then native speakers of their HL. However, in middle-late childhood, there is typically a significant shift in exposure from the HL to the societal language, usually coinciding with the start of school. As a result, HSs often become more dominant in the ML and their adult competence in the HL can vary considerably from non-heritage native speakers. Moreover, HSs often do not attend school in their

HL, and thus, they typically do not have the chance to master literacy as well as complex grammatical structures in their HL, domains that are usually mastered at school and through exposure to written registers.

One project within MultiMind (Di Pisa & Marinis, accepted; Di Pisa, Kubota, Rothman & Marinis, under review) explored the comprehension and production of gender and number in HSs of Italian living in Germany and whether they experience more difficulties with specific or marked forms, i.e. feminine gender and plural number in Italian, compared to default or unmarked forms, i.e. masculine gender and singular number, as has been shown in previous studies with L2 learners (McCarthy, 2008).

### KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

#### **Heritage Speakers often experience difficulties in reading and writing (literacy) in their heritage language**

HSs of Italian who live in Germany were overall less accurate and showed longer reading times in Italian compared to native speakers of Italian living in Italy. This finding relates to their lower proficiency and limited reading in the HL (e.g., Bayram et al., 2019; Kupisch & Rothman, 2018).

#### **Heritage Speakers may experience difficulties with less frequent and more difficult linguistic forms in their heritage language**

HSs of Italian who live in Germany experience more difficulties with less frequent and more difficult (marked) forms, such as feminine and plural, compared to more frequent and less difficult (unmarked) forms, such as masculine and singular. HSs of Italian tend to use masculine instead of feminine gender and singular instead of plural number when they make errors.

#### **In the HL gender assignment of nouns may be more difficult than gender agreement between an adjective and a noun**

HSs acquire gender and number agreement, i.e., the grammatical rules of agreement between nouns, articles, and adjectives, relatively smoothly. In contrast, they struggle more with gender assignment, i.e., learning the gender of each noun, a phenomenon that is more related to vocabulary learning and lexical frequency.

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Reading and writing activities are essential in HL classrooms because they enhance language and literacy in the HL. There is a need to increase the offers of HL classrooms in schools in order to help children maintain and further develop their HLs.

Marked forms should be prioritized in HL teaching by providing students with extra exercises targeting, e.g., feminine and plural forms in languages, such as Italian.

There is a need to use teaching activities that target gender assignment in the HL, e.g., through the use of flashcards, to raise awareness about cues in gender assignment, like suffixes.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: HERITAGE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Teachers should be made aware of the specific characteristics of students with heritage language backgrounds as they do not fit in the categories of either first (L1) or second language (L2) learners. HL learners have different needs than L2 learners and should either attend classes specific for HL or teachers should provide them with different material than L2 learners.

HL teaching should give emphasis on activities and techniques that enhance vocabulary, literacy, academic language and more complex grammatical phenomena, like marked forms.

HL classes in school are necessary to enable students to maintain their HL alongside the ML.

## TEACHING THE MAJORITY (SECOND) LANGUAGE

### BACKGROUND & CHALLENGES

Research on second/foreign language teaching has put particular emphasis on which techniques are more efficient for vocabulary and grammar learning. For vocabulary teaching in a second language, several studies have explored the efficiency of techniques, such as flashcards (i.e., use of cards with mainly a written word and a picture illustrating the former), body movement (i.e., the transmission of information using our body with or without speaking), and contextual cues (i.e., information in a text that can facilitate the understanding of the meaning of unknown words). Flashcards and activities involving physical engagement are both entertaining and effective vocabulary teaching techniques (Alqahtani, 2015 for a review; Alipour Madarsara et al., 2015; Demircioglu, 2010). When it comes to grammar

teaching in a second language, Focus on Form (FoF, Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991) is considered a promising teaching approach which aims to draw learners' attention to grammatical structures using several activities that are based on meaning (see Ellis, 2016 for a review).

Olioumtsevit, Papadopoulou, and Marinis (2022) and Olioumtsevit, Papadopoulou, and Marinis (in prep) explored effective vocabulary and grammar teaching techniques in a particular setting of L2 teaching: primary school children who speak a HL, acquire the ML (L2) and have low literacy and low ML proficiency. These studies tested the efficiency of three vocabulary teaching activities (flashcards, pantomime and contextual cues) and one grammar teaching activity (running dictation).

### KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

#### **Vocabulary techniques that incorporate pictures and movement are more efficient in the initial learning stages of the ML**

Flashcards and physical movement, and in particular pantomime, are more beneficial than the use of contextual cues for young second language learners with low literacy and ML proficiency. Flashcards are a tool that can be used at any moment and place and can keep the learners motivated (Komachali & Khodareza, 2012; Sitompul, 2013). Movement is an effective way to include all students in a classroom (Skoning, 2010), also students with low literacy skills and low ML proficiency. Contextual cues are not that effective for young pupils with low literacy skills.

#### **The use of running dictation can improve grammar awareness in the ML**

Young learners of a ML may benefit from running dictation, a collaborative FoF activity. This activity enables learners to notice the target grammatical phenomenon, while at the same time it improves the dynamics of the classroom and enhances collaboration among students (see Willis & Willis, 2007 for more information on running dictation; see also Sousa, Tiraboschi, Lago, & Figueiredo, 2019 for benefits of collaborative activities).

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Teachers should use pictures and movement vocabulary teaching tools, particularly in the initial stages of ML acquisition, as they contribute to the students' participation in class activities. Contextual cues should be used in classrooms with learners with higher levels of ML proficiency.

Educators are encouraged to incorporate activities that allow students to work with their peers in a safe environment where they can learn and benefit from each other. It is, however, important to note that the students need to be familiarized with collaborative tasks so that the implementation of such activities is beneficial for them.



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TEACHING THE MAJORITY LANGUAGE

ML teaching in young students with low literacy and low proficiency in the ML needs to incorporate specific approaches and techniques that enhance and improve their linguistic knowledge and awareness.

Educational techniques that involve pictures and movement are beneficial for young learners who are at beginner levels of ML

acquisition and have not developed high literacy skills in either their first or second language.

Implicit grammar teaching and interactive games are effective teaching strategies and can increase the learners' grammatical awareness.

# LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN

## BACKGROUND & CHALLENGES

An increasing number of children learn to read in a non-native language. Therefore, it is crucial to gain more insight in the relation between reading development and (second) language development. Moreover, there is a worldwide trend to use more English at all levels of education, but it is still unclear how this affects learning outcomes (see Dearden, 2014).

One of the projects within MultiMind focused on L2 literacy development in primary school in three different contexts. A first study investigated how multilingual children with a migration background instructed in the ML of their country of residence compare to monolingual children in terms of their reading development,

and how this relates to oral language skills (including lexical and phonological skills) (Bosch, Guasti, Arosio, & Foppolo, 2021). A second study investigated reading and oral language skills in monolingual children enrolled in Italian-English and Italian-German bilingual education programs (Bosch & Foppolo, in prep). A third study investigated the effect of using a foreign language as the only medium of instruction on language, literacy, and non-linguistic learning outcomes. This third study was conducted in a very specific context in the Maldives, where all education is in English from the beginning of primary school, even though the Maldives is a monolingual non-Anglophone country (Bosch, Tsimpli, & Guasti, under review).

### KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

#### **Differences in reading between heritage and monolingual children in the ML disappear towards the end of primary school**

In Grade 3 (age 8-9), children who speak a HL at home and who learn the ML in school underperformed in ML reading accuracy and speed as compared to their monolingual peers. However, in Grade 5 (age 10-11), these differences were not present anymore, suggesting that multilingual children catch up during primary school, as their ML proficiency increases. For both multilingual and monolingual children, reading scores were related to children's vocabulary knowledge in the ML, and to their rapid naming skills (i.e., the ability to name a series of visually presented symbols as quickly as possible).

#### **Bilingual education is beneficial for the development of literacy skills in both languages**

In Grade 2 and 3 (age 7-9), monolingual children enrolled in different bilingual programs had age-appropriate reading accuracy and fluency in both languages, while reading comprehension was better in the L1. Firstly, they did not lag behind in their L1 reading acquisition, and secondly, their L2 decoding abilities were at a high level despite the fact that they were still learning the language. L2 reading abilities were positively correlated with L2 vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, very strong correlations were found between L1 and L2 decoding skills, suggesting that reading abilities develop together in the two languages when literacy instruction is provided simultaneously in both languages.

### TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The combination of oral, written, and vocabulary activities in the first years of primary school is beneficial for and can accelerate the development of literacy skills in the ML.

The simultaneous learning of literacy in the children's L1 and L2 is beneficial for the development of literacy skills in both languages, and thus, multilingual activities can be effective for the development of reading and writing.

## KEY FINDINGS (EXTENDED)

### The use of a foreign language as the only medium of instruction may not be beneficial for the children's reading comprehension and mathematical skills

In the Maldives, children in Grade 5 and 6 (age 10-12) performed relatively poorly in all tests, despite non-verbal intelligence within norms. While some children were able to quickly read texts in English and solve simple arithmetic problems, reading comprehension and mathematical problems presented in a story format were problematic in almost all cases. Reading accuracy was positively related to children's vocabulary knowledge in English, and the ability to solve mathematical story problems was positively correlated with both reading skills and English vocabulary knowledge, although this relationship was modulated by general intelligence.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The use of a foreign language as the only medium of instruction whilst neglecting the L1 may not enhance the development of reading comprehension and mathematical skills. Multilingual educational programs that employ the entire linguistic repertoire of the children are more effective for the children's educational outcomes.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN

- Multilingual education is a promising avenue for L1 maintenance and L2 learning. Schools should adopt multilingual approaches that value children's heritage languages and make use of all their linguistic resources.
- Multilingual education is beneficial for the development of language and literacy skills in children.
- Supporting oral language skills aids literacy development; this is especially important for children who learn to read in their L2.
- Children who speak a HL should receive high-quality exposure to the school language in order to overcome an initial 'disadvantage' in reading and writing in the ML.
- The use of a foreign language as the sole medium of education may not boost the development of language and literacy or the learning of a subject like mathematics; multilingual educational programs that exploit the children's entire linguistic repertoire are more beneficial for the development of language, literacy, and mathematics.

### Further reading

Bosch, J.E., & Foppolo, F. (in preparation). *Multilingualism, literacy development and school performance in different educational settings.*

Bosch, J.E., Tsimpli, M. T., & Guasti, M. T. (under review). *How English-medium instruction affects language and learning outcomes of children in the Maldives.*

Bosch, J.E., Guasti, M.T., Arosio, F., & Foppolo, F. (2021). *The Relation Between Reading and Language in Multilingual and Monolingual Italian Children.* Paper presented at the Conference on Multilingualism, University of Konstanz.

Di Pisa, G., & Marinis, T. (accepted). *Gender assignment and agreement in the oral production of heritage speakers of Italian living in Germany.* *Lingue e Linguaggio.* Bologna: Il Mulino.

Di Pisa, G., Kubota, M., Rothman, J., & Marinis, T. (under review). *Effects of markedness in gender processing in Italian as a Heritage Language: a speed-accuracy tradeoff.*

Olioumtsevs, K., Papadopoulou, D., & Marinis, T. (2022). *Second language grammar learning in refugee children: Is group dictation an effective teaching technique?* *Pedagogical Linguistics.* Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pl.21012.oli>

Olioumtsevs, K., Papadopoulou, D., & Marinis, T. (in preparation). *Vocabulary teaching in refugee children within the context of the Greek formal education.*

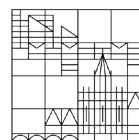


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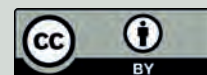
The complete reference list can be accessed here:

[www.multilingualmind.eu/policy-reports](http://www.multilingualmind.eu/policy-reports)



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