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# BILINGUALISM AND PLURILINGUALISM IN PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

## Summary of research and recommendations

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## Abstract

The vast majority of children around the world grow up in a multilingual environment. In France, the proportion of the population that uses a language other than French at home is estimated to be between 20% and 40% (depending on the region), and some preschool and elementary school classes are composed entirely of children whose home language is not French. Hundreds of languages from all continents are spoken in France, in addition to the country's 70 regional languages, which are spoken to varying degrees.

Multilingual classes therefore exist throughout the country, and many children—although they may not yet have mastered French upon entering preschool—already possess linguistic skills in one or more of the languages spoken at home.

How can the linguistic and cultural skills and knowledge associated with children's mother tongues (or family languages) in bilingual environments be integrated into pedagogical approaches to learning French? This document presents scientific data, educational practices, and avenues for reflection to support teachers in maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms, the educational benefits of which are considerable both for bilingual children and for their classmates. Such an approach should be a priority of any educational and cultural policy in a democratic society, in which schools play a fundamental role in fostering successful integration.

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*Édouard Glissant: "When I speak of my multilingualism, someone says to me: Ah yes, how many languages do you speak? One may speak no language other than one's own. What matters instead is the very way one speaks one's own language: whether it is spoken in a closed or an open manner; whether it is spoken in ignorance of the presence of other languages, or in the awareness that other languages exist and influence us even without our knowing it." Gauvin, L. (1992).*

## Introduction

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Language acquisition is both one of the most natural and fundamental processes for human beings. Children acquire language in less than three years, without any specific instruction and generally without difficulty (Bijeljac-Babic & Breton, 1997; Jusczyk, 1997; de Boysson-Bardiès, 1996; Kail, 2020).

The vast majority of children worldwide grow up in a multilingual environment. In our society, many people (20–40% of the population) use a language other than French within the family sphere. In some preschool and elementary school classrooms, this is the case for 100% of the children. This also includes Creole languages spoken in overseas territories, family languages, or the form of French used in Mayotte, which differs from the French used in formal education. In addition to the more than 70 languages of France, practiced to varying degrees, hundreds of the approximately 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, across all continents, are used in France. Two thirds of the world's languages (66.5%) originate from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia—continents from which the majority of migrants come. As a result, multilingual classrooms are found throughout the territory, and many children entering preschool already have more advanced proficiency in one (or more) language(s) other than French.

Numerous studies support what most parents observe: the simultaneous acquisition of two languages from birth occurs just as spontaneously as the acquisition of a single language, provided that the quality of exposure is varied, and that the quantity of exposure to each language is sufficiently high. Support from both the family and educational environments is therefore essential to ensure that, on average by around age three, bilingual or multilingual children are able to communicate—often fluently—in their family language(s) as well as in the majority language of schooling (Werker et al., 2009; Sebastián-Gallés, 2010; Bijeljac-Babic & Dodane, 2017; Bijeljac-Babic, 2017; Persici et al., 2019; Hole et al., 2020; Bialystok, 2021; Bialystok et al., 2022). In general, for most children for whom French is not the first language, progress in French occurs rapidly. However, the failure to recognize their multilingualism, their dual cultural background, and the academic difficulties experienced by some of these children can make language development and academic progress challenging and, at times, painful.

## 1. Being born into a bilingual environment

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A child born into a bilingual environment enters a sound universe that is more complex and variable than that of a monolingual child. In their surroundings, people speak with different accents, switch from one language to another—sometimes within the same sentence—and parents may speak to each other in a language different from the one addressed to the child. In addition, the time of exposure to each language is, at best, divided in half compared with a child who hears only one language. Bilingual children also have fewer opportunities to speak each language. Finally, institutional and societal pressure, as well as parents' hesitation to pass on their own language, can make language development and language acquisition more complex.

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As with monolingual children, the perceptual and learning processes that characterize the early stages of language acquisition are present in children from bilingual environments. From birth, newborns show a preference for their mother's language over a foreign language, whereas newborns of bilingual mothers are able to differentiate between the languages spoken by their mothers and enjoy listening to both equally (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2010).

Languages spoken around the world differ from one another in many respects: phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and gestural. Bilingual children construct sound categories for each language before the end of their first year of life (Sebastián-Gallés & Bosch, 2002). They learn that the same object can be named differently depending on the language (Vihman et al., 2007), and thus gradually build two vocabularies. Very early on, they understand that word order can vary from one language to another (subject–verb–object order, as in French, or subject–object–verb order, as in Japanese) (Gervain & Werker, 2013). They are also able to transfer (Cummins, 1979) skills from one language to another (sounds, syntax, etc.) within their linguistic repertoire (Gumperz, 1964), which allows them to operate through trial, error, and success and to develop metalinguistic skills<sup>1</sup> related to how language—and languages in particular—function. Ultimately, young children learn to inhibit one language when listening or speaking in the other in order to avoid interference, despite their use of code switching<sup>2</sup> (Yow, Tan & Flynn, 2018). Clearly, early language acquisition in a bilingual environment follows the same developmental trajectory as the acquisition of a single language. However, prejudices against early bilingualism persist, both in academic settings and among the general public.

In the editorial of the special issue of *Frontiers in Psychology*, **Perspectives on the “Bilingual Advantage”: Challenges and Opportunities**, Bright and Filippi (2019) highlight contradictions in opinions—among both researchers and the general public—regarding the benefits of bilingualism. When these researchers ask their students and colleagues the question, “Is being bilingual/plurilingual an advantage?”, everyone answers yes without hesitation. There is general agreement that plurilingual speakers<sup>3</sup> can communicate with people from different backgrounds, are more sensitive to different cultures, have greater employment opportunities, and can travel the world with greater confidence, among other benefits. However, when the question is framed differently—“Is being bilingual/plurilingual an advantage for cognitive development?”—the answers are far less clear-cut. Some fear that learning a second language may delay language acquisition in the early stages of life; others believe that children should focus more on a single language, especially the language of schooling in the country of residence, to avoid mental confusion. Often—and this is probably the most troubling situation—education professionals advise parents from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to speak French to their children, arguing that this is the only way for them to succeed at school (Festman et al., 2017).

<sup>1</sup> Metalinguistic skills refer to the ability to understand and analyse language structures, such as word order (syntax), vocabulary, gestures, etc., within one or more languages. According to Bialystok (1988), types of metalinguistic awareness include phonological awareness, word awareness, syntactic awareness, and pragmatic awareness.

<sup>2</sup> Code switching refers to switching from one language to another from one sentence to the next (e.g., “Tu viens? I am waiting for you”) or within a single sentence (e.g., “Das ist ein cheval”).

<sup>3</sup> Following the work of Coste, Moore, and Zarate (2009) for the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, any **individual** who has developed the ability to communicate in two or more languages can be described as **plurilingual**, regardless of their level of proficiency or the linguistic contexts involved. A society—that is, a group of plurilingual speakers—is described as **multilingual**.

## 2. Bilingualism in children: a disadvantage or an advantage?

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All scientific studies on bilingual language development, without exception and **regardless of the language pair involved**, have shown that bilingualism does not cause language delay. Bilingual children generally go through the same stages of language acquisition and follow a developmental timeline similar to that of monolingual children (Höhle et al., 2020). However, once children enter formal education, monolingual children tend to outperform bilingual children on tasks in which linguistic abilities are assessed in only one of the bilingual child's languages—namely, the language of schooling, the L2 (Hammer et al., 2014). This is hardly surprising, as bilingual children's linguistic experiences are distributed across two languages, meaning that they have less experience in any single language and, consequently, perform less well on tasks that require knowledge of that specific language (Hoff et al., 2012). When bilingual children do not show the same linguistic outcomes as monolingual children, parental and school responses can diverge sharply. Specialists in bilingualism argue that children should continue to use their family language(s), even if their performance in the language of schooling is temporarily weaker. They also emphasize that, over time and with appropriate support, plurilingual children develop the same competencies as monolingual children.

This is why teacher training is essential to support plurilingual children in classrooms—by valuing students' languages and offering activities that create connections between the languages they know and French. Some parents and educators, however, discourage the maintenance of family language(s), fearing that mastery of the school language and academic success will suffer. The arguments put forward by these two positions will be discussed later.

## 3. Assessing the language skills of children from bilingual background

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### 3.1 Phonological aspects

The degree of similarity between the languages to be acquired influences the course of language development. Recently, the expressive vocabulary of two-year-old bilingual children from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds was assessed in Italian in terms of vocabulary size, composition, and the presence of translation equivalents (TEs). These children came from families who spoke either Romanian or Nigerian English at home and Italian in the broader social environment. In both groups, a larger vocabulary was observed in Italian than in the home language. In addition, Romanian–Italian bilingual children produced higher proportions of translation equivalents than Nigerian English–Italian bilingual children.

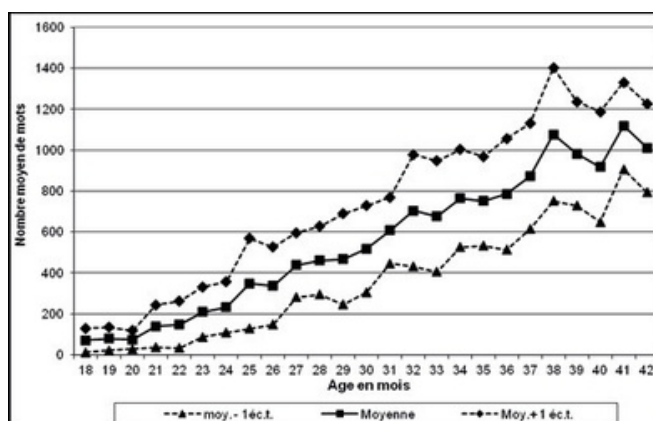
These findings suggest that phonological similarity between L1 and L2 facilitates the acquisition of cross-linguistic synonyms (Barachetti et al., 2022). Floccia and colleagues (2018) similarly found that phonological similarity between L1 and L2 (as in English–Dutch or English–German language pairings) led to higher levels of productive vocabulary among two-year-old bilingual children learning British English as an L2 than among children whose family language is phonologically distant from English, such as Hindi or Portuguese. These differences have been interpreted as evidence of transfer between phonological systems: early acquisition of sounds shared by both languages and later acquisition of other sounds. It is now widely accepted that bilinguals do not possess two entirely separate phonological systems, but rather two interacting systems in which transfer from one language to the

other evolves over time. When L1 is dominant relative to L2, transfer tends to occur from L1 to L2. Similar results have been obtained through analyses of prosodic features—specifically lexical stress placement—in the speech production of English–French (and French–English) bilingual children aged between 3;6 and 6;0 years (Bijeljac-Babic & Dodane, 2017). Over time, and with schooling in L2, the influence of L1 decreases (Anderson, 2004), and the full range of languages in students’ linguistic repertoires can be mobilized to support the acquisition of the language of schooling.

## 3.2 Vocabulary acquisition

Language skills in children are commonly assessed on the basis of vocabulary size: the larger the number of words a child understands or produces, the better their comprehension and their ability to combine words and form complex utterances.

There are considerable differences among children in the age at which first productions emerge. Some children begin to speak before their first birthday, while others do not produce words until the end of their second year (Marchman & Fernald, 2008). Thus, at 18 months, the 10% least talkative children use an average of 25 words, whereas the most talkative use 167; at 36 months, the figures are 454 versus 1,036; and at 42 months, 714 versus 1,230 (Bassano, 2008). The magnitude of these differences highlights the importance of interindividual variability in expressive vocabulary size at the onset of language production. Less talkative children tend to catch up in vocabulary within a few months, while others continue to show slower developmental trajectories and achieve below-average outcomes (Bates et al., 1994; Fernald & Marchman, 2012).



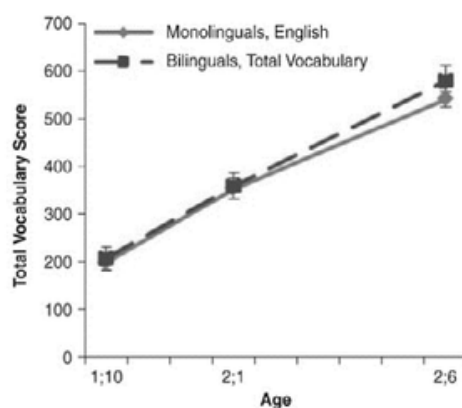
**Figure 1.** Development of the total number of words produced by French monolingual children (Bassano et al., 2020).

### Children from Bilingual Backgrounds

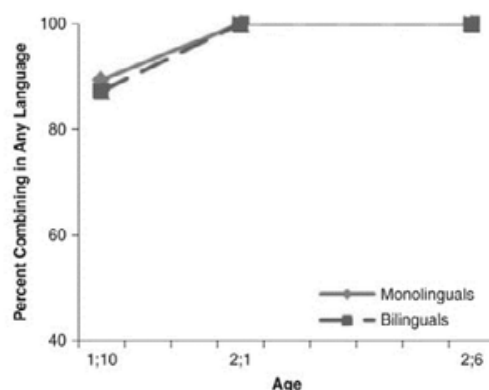
Results from studies examining early vocabulary size in L1 and L2 distinguish between comprehension and production and take into account children’s age, the quality and quantity of exposure to each language, the similarity between the languages involved, and families’ socioeconomic conditions. For example, **comprehension** scores in French and English among French–English bilingual children aged 1;4 to 1;6 are remarkably similar across both languages (Legacy, Zesiger, Friend, & Poulin-Dubois, 2016). In contrast, the number of words **produced** in Spanish by Spanish–English bilingual children at 2;6 years of age is higher than that **produced** in English (Core et al., 2013). Differences between comprehension and production scores are frequently observed, with comprehension **consistently preceding production** (Hoff & Parra, 2011; Hoff & Ribot, 2017; Bialystok et al., 2010), including in monolingual children.

In nearly all scientific studies, the vocabulary size of bilingual children, when assessed in their L2, is smaller than that of monolingual children. Hoff and Ribot (2017) assessed expressive English vocabulary in monolingual children and Spanish–English bilingual children every six months between 30 and 60 months of age. On average, bilingual children showed a delay of six months to one year in English relative to monolingual children over this period. However, the authors emphasize that such delays do not predict language development disorders when bilingual children’s parents report that their children use their home language at home.

Hoff et al. (2012) examined language development in greater detail at ages 1;10, 2;1, and 2;6 in English monolingual children and in Spanish–English bilingual children from families with high and equivalent socioeconomic status across both groups. While progress in English was faster among monolingual children and the gap between the two groups increased with age, the authors also noted that differences between groups **disappeared when words from both languages were taken into account**. In fact, bilingual children’s total vocabulary size was strictly identical to that of monolingual children in English (Figure 2). Moreover, there were equal proportions of monolingual and bilingual children combining words into phrases (Figure 3).



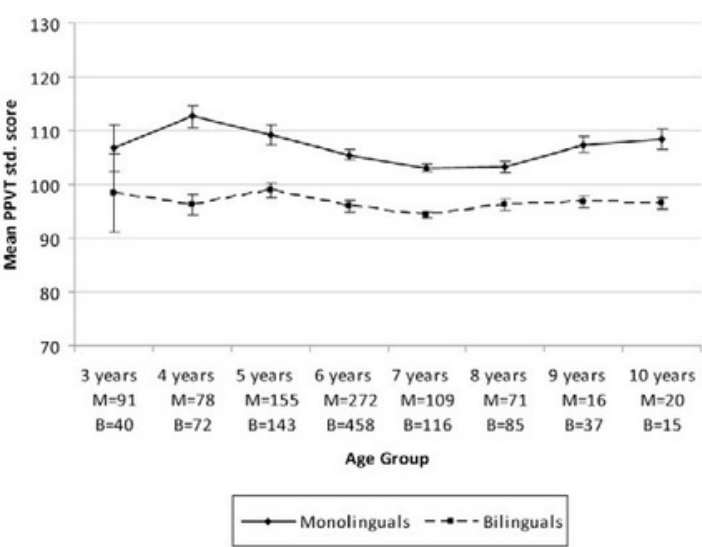
**Figure 2.** English vocabulary scores of monolingual children and total vocabulary scores (English + Spanish) of bilingual children at ages 1;10, 2;1, and 2;6 (Hoff et al., 2012).



**Figure 3.** Percentage of monolingual and bilingual children combining words into phrases, regardless of language (English for monolinguals; English, Spanish, or both for bilinguals), at ages 1;10, 2;1, and 2;6 (Hoff et al., 2012).

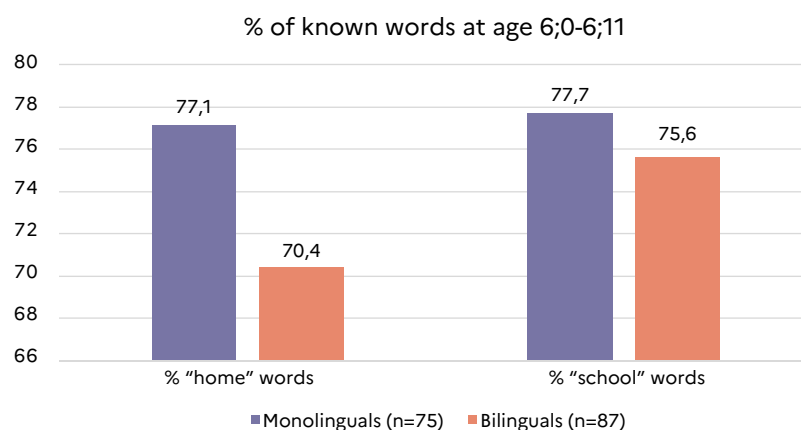
These results show that, on average, children acquiring two languages exhibit a slight delay compared to monolingual children when bilingual children’s skills are assessed in the language in which they are less proficient. However, **the majority are just as competent as monolingual children when their dominant language is considered—and even more so when their entire linguistic repertoire is taken into account**.

In order to determine whether vocabulary differences in the language of schooling (i.e., English) observed between monolingual and bilingual children in individual studies reflect a general pattern applicable to large numbers of children across a wide age range, Bialystok et al. (2010) examined data from multiple studies on word **comprehension** in children aged 3 to 10 years. Among the 1,738 children tested, 772 were English monolinguals and 966 were bilinguals. The PPVT-III (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test; Dunn & Dunn, 1997) was administered. In this test, participants must point to or name the image corresponding to the word spoken by the experimenter. At all ages, monolingual children obtained higher scores than bilingual children (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Mean scores and standard errors by age and linguistic group on a receptive vocabulary task (Bialystok et al., 2010).

However, the researchers conducted a more fine-grained analysis of children’s responses. Given that bilingual children primarily used English at school and their family language at home, these contexts may selectively shape certain areas of English vocabulary. Bilingual children tend to learn “home” words in their family language and may therefore not know them in English, the school language. By separating responses for “home” words and “school” words, this analysis of children aged 6 to 7 years showed that monolingual children knew more English words used at home, whereas the performance of both groups was comparable for words used at school (Figure 5). Furthermore, bilingual children do not show greater difficulty in the academic use of spoken language, although they may display lexical or grammatical expressions indicating the influence of another language. As Grosjean (2010) reminds us, “a bilingual is not the sum of two monolinguals, but a specific speaker who does not behave exactly like a monolingual in each of their languages.”



**Figure 5.** Mean scores by linguistic group as a function of word type ("home" vs. "school"), adapted from Bialystok et al. (2010).

Based on findings from psycholinguistic research and clinical psychology studies by Wallon et al. (2008), the assessment of bilingual children’s competencies must take into account **their language skills in both languages**.

### 3.3 From one bilingual child to another

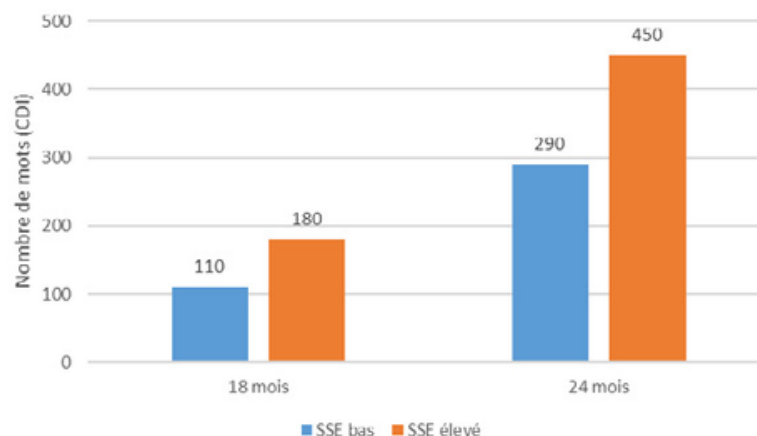
Variability is important at the early stages of language acquisition among bilingual children, as the conditions, quantity, and quality of exposure to languages differ from one child to another, as does the age at which L2 is acquired (Marchman et al., 2017). In addition, some children are more motivated, receive greater support from their families and schools, or are simply more linguistically skilled. Nevertheless, all children—regardless of the language pair involved—are capable of acquiring more than one language at any age.

**Supporting and encouraging parents to use their family language(s) is a key factor in successful language development. It should not be forgotten that this process is sometimes lengthy and rarely follows a linear progression; however, under all conditions, bilingualism is possible and represents a valuable asset for the future, particularly when teachers are also trained to work with plurilingual students.**

#### Family Socioeconomic Status and Language Acquisition

The socioeconomic and cultural status (SES) of the family plays a decisive role in early language acquisition, particularly in vocabulary development. Differences in SES are a major source of variability in verbal abilities prior to school entry and have a strong impact on later academic achievement. Hart et al. (1997) observed that at 36 months of age, children from higher-SES families produced twice as many words as children from lower-SES families. Moreover, substantial disparities between families of different SES levels have been observed in the amount of speech addressed to children. At 18 months of age, children from lower-SES families had lower expressive vocabulary scores and were also slower in real-time word recognition than children from higher-SES families. By 24 months of age, the gap between the two groups had reached six months (Fernald et al., 2013).

Studies such as those by Lahire (2019) show that advanced language skills developed within the family and the use of specific discourse genres including humour, irony, or argumentation—have a positive impact on students’ academic success. Indeed, these discourse genres are embedded in academic norms at school, allowing children to transfer them from the family environment to the school context without disadvantage.



**Figure 6.** Mean number of words reported on the MacArthur-Bates CDI by age and SES (Fernald, 2012).

Children from immigrant families—often from lower-SES backgrounds and exposed to two languages—are particularly affected by the quality, duration, and frequency of language interactions within the family. Marchman et al. (2017) studied Spanish-speaking families living in the United States. In some families, a three-year-old child hears approximately 200 words per hour in Spanish, whereas in other families of the same SES and with children of the same age, the child heard seven times as many words. These differences are correlated with early vocabulary size (Figure 6). A similar pattern has been observed in adult-child interactions in monolingual families with low SES (Florit et al., 2021).

To fully understand the development of language and cognitive abilities in bilingual children, it is essential to consider parents’ educational level—particularly that of the mother (Hoff, 2003)—family SES, family and migration history, and other factors that may be confounded with bilingualism (Bialystok & Werker, 2017). Using standardized tests of nonverbal and verbal abilities (receptive vocabulary), attention, and executive functioning, Calvo and Bialystok (2014) examined the impact of SES (working-class vs. middle-class) and linguistic background (monolingual vs. bilingual) in six-year-old children. All children obtained comparable results on intelligence tests, but performance on language and executive-function tasks was influenced by both SES and bilingualism. Notably, it’s interesting to observe that intelligence was not correlated with language skills. Children from middle-class backgrounds performed better than those from working-class backgrounds on all measures, and bilingual children scored lower than monolingual children on language tests regardless of SES. In contrast, bilingual children achieved higher scores than monolingual children on executive-function tasks<sup>4</sup>. While language skills are negatively affected by disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, **the acquisition of multiple languages may help offset the negative effects of those conditions and promote the development of non-linguistic cognitive mechanisms.**

Creating conditions that foster direct, frequent, and high-quality interactions with children—regardless of the languages (including spoken languages)—from birth onward is currently recommended for all parents, particularly as daily time spent with children has decreased and is often replaced by the use of electronic devices. Reading books to children, telling them stories, singing songs—in all possible languages—promotes the learning of new words and concepts, develops phonological awareness, and encourages openness to knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> Executive functions refer to the set of cognitive skills involved in action planning, attention control, and the inhibition of inappropriate responses (for example, inhibiting a language that is not being used in conversation).

Indisputably, such practices provide richer and more diverse linguistic input than more passive forms of language exposure, such as watching television or playing on smartphones or tablets (Rowe et al., 2021). This is because it is in their mother tongue that parents convey the full linguistic and emotional richness of their culture and language. To create high-quality interactions, it is therefore important to **encourage parents to speak the language(s) in which they feel most comfortable.**

## 4. Advantages of bilingualism

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Despite the complexity of the linguistic environment in which bilingual children develop, bilinguals show advantages in non-linguistic tasks involving cognitive processes related to memory (Brito et al., 2015), attention, and inhibition. Among the studies investigating the cognitive advantages observed in bilingual children, one can cite one of the many studies conducted by Ellen Bialystok's research group (Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008). Between the ages of 4 and 5, bilingual children perform better on conflict tasks that require the inhibition of irrelevant responses. For example, in the Simon task, two types of stimuli are presented on a screen: a red circle on the left and a green circle on the right. Participants are instructed to press the left button as quickly as possible when a red circle appears on the screen and the right button when a green circle appears (congruent condition). When the red circle is presented on the right and the green circle on the left, the participant is in the incongruent condition. In this latter condition, response times are generally slower in monolingual children. In contrast, bilingual children respond just as quickly in the incongruent condition as in the congruent one. Researchers suggest that in order to respond as quickly in the incongruent condition, bilinguals develop executive functions earlier—those involved in attention, selection, and inhibition of multiple sources of information from the environment.

Another aspect, such as metalinguistic ability, also develops earlier in bilinguals. Metalinguistic development refers to the ability to reflect on the nature and functions of language (Gombert, 1990). Rich and diverse daily language use sharpens children to reflect on language itself. In tasks requiring metalinguistic skills (metaphonemic, metamorphological, metasyntactic, etc.), young bilinguals (aged 4–5) from linguistically rich environments achieve significantly higher results than monolinguals from similar environments, regardless of the language in which they were tested—Italian–English or Italian–French (Pinto & El Euch, 2017).

Switching between languages may also contribute to the combination of different ideas and have a positive effect on creativity. According to Karmiloff-Smith (1990), drawing a nonexistent object is considered a measure of cognitive flexibility: children aged 4–5 modify the size or shape of existing objects, whereas children aged 8–10 draw objects by adding additional elements, such as a man with two heads, or by incorporating elements from another category, such as a house with wings. Adi-Japha and colleagues (2010), by studying drawings of such objects produced by bilingual and monolingual children aged 4–5, showed that bilingual children produced a significantly higher proportion of drawings combining elements from different categories than monolingual children of the same age. Linguistic flexibility and experiences with multiple cultures (Leung & Chiu, 2010) may also have a positive effect on creativity.

In everyday life, from a very young age, bilingual children understand that the social context determines the choice of language(s) used by speakers. For example, while monolingual infants as young as 14 months expect monolingual adults to communicate with each other in the

same language, bilingual infants of the same age accept that a speaker from their linguistic communities may communicate in several languages—something monolingual children do not accept. Moreover, the more infants are exposed to multiple languages, the more they expect speakers of different languages to communicate easily with one another (Colomer & Sebastián-Gallés, 2020).

At an even more fine-grained level, Siegal et al. (2010) tested monolingual (German, English, Japanese) and bilingual (Italian–German, English–Japanese) children aged 3–6 using the Conversational Violations Test (CVT) in order to examine their ability to identify utterances that violate principles of quality, quantity, relevance, and politeness. In this task, children watched a video in which short conversational exchanges in Italian were acted out by three talking puppets. In each episode, one of the two female speakers asked a question, and the two other speakers gave brief answers. One answer violated a conversational principle, while the other did not. Participants were asked to point to the puppet that said something foolish or rude.



**Adapted from Siegal and al. (2010). Condition: politeness**

Bilingual children, whether younger or older, generally outperformed monolingual children in response accuracy. Exposure to more than one language provides an advantage in understanding social conventions by enhancing children's ability to evaluate effective communicative responses, regardless of whether bilingualism involves German, Italian, English, or Japanese, and for children with similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

The presence of two languages in a child's environment from birth, and the potential acquisition of these languages, therefore does not hinder linguistic or cognitive development. On the contrary, it provides children with certain cognitive, linguistic, conversational, and cultural advantages. **Bilingualism is in no way a handicap.**

## 5. Language difficulties and disorders in bilingual children

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As mentioned previously, bilingual children constitute a highly heterogeneous group, with diverse family backgrounds and varying social and linguistic contexts. All of these factors exert a significant influence on language development and on the severity of developmental language disorder (DLD). It is therefore reasonable to accept greater variability among bilingual children and to allow them more time to reach speech milestones. However, it should not be overlooked that some of these children may present with language disorders, like all children (whether bilingual or not), and that it is essential to identify them **as early as possible** in order to enable timely intervention. Within this population, a detailed linguistic anamnesis covering all languages spoken must be conducted in order to maximize the identification of children with genuine language disorders. The clinical context at Avicenne Hospital (Bobigny) led Marie-Rose Moro<sup>5</sup> and her team to develop tools to assess the abilities of children who speak at least two languages and are exposed to as many cultural worlds (ELAL – Évaluation langagière des allophones et primo-arrivants; Wallon et al., 2018). The authors describe several types of difficulties in the context of exposure to more than one language: loss (attrition) of the first language, language difficulties in both languages, or extra-familial mutism affecting the language of the host country (see also Auger & Sauvage, 2009).

The ELAL test battery makes it possible to analyse children's competencies in relation to the family's linguistic and migratory trajectory, the transmission of the home language(s), and the quality of bilingualism. From a theoretical perspective, ELAL helps to understand the psychological and cultural factors that "facilitate second language learning and the construction of harmonious bilingualism." From a clinical perspective, the aim is to assess language disorders while taking the child's first language into account.

In Sweden, Nayeib et al. (2020) tested more than 100 children in the middle of their third year by assessing their language skills in both languages. In this country, one third of children attending preschool grow up in bilingual families. The results point in the same direction as those reported by the authors of ELAL, namely that bilingual children must be assessed in both of their languages in order to obtain an accurate evaluation. This screening procedure is particularly important for children from families with low socio-economic status living in complex linguistic environments.

## 6. Bilinguals at school

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In early childhood settings—day-care centres, nursery schools, primary schools, lower secondary schools, and beyond—as previously noted, children from families in which a language other than French is spoken represent an increasingly large population. While for parents and some educators children's bilingualism is considered a normal phenomenon, bilingualism involving so-called "minority" languages is often poorly accepted and devalued. Europe recognises children's right to maintain the language and culture of their country of origin. Likewise, the Council of Europe states that the language, ethnic background and culture that children and adolescents from immigrant families carry with them into schools are assets that should be valued and built upon. More recently, in the Bulletin officiel of the French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (École maternelle, June 2021), it is stated:

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Rose Moro is a French child and adolescent psychiatrist, university professor–hospital practitioner in child and adolescent psychiatry at Université Paris Cité, and a psychoanalyst.

“In nursery school, students will discover the existence of languages, sometimes very different from those they already know... It is important to value the home language of multilingual or non-French-speaking children. Their presence in the classroom enables teachers to raise all pupils’ awareness of linguistic diversity and to help them discover at an early age that multilingualism is a source of enrichment. Classroom activities open schools to the linguistic and cultural diversity of France.”

Although such policy texts exist and progress is being made (see, for example, the European texts in the appendices), and although research findings from recent decades are increasingly disseminated and institutionally endorsed, some teachers—due to a lack of training and to deeply rooted representations inherited from a historical tradition in which schools were expected to eradicate regional languages—still often consider the regular use of migrant or regional languages at home to be problematic and view this form of bilingualism as anything but an asset. While teachers are attentive to students’ language development, they often doubt bilingual children’s capacity to develop two languages in parallel and fear that the presence of a home language may hinder the acquisition of French. Teachers may also feel uncomfortable when pupils possess linguistic knowledge that they themselves do not master, which challenges the traditional status of the teacher as the one who knows.

The rather negative attitude of institutions towards certain forms of bilingualism involving migrant family languages—such as Arabic, Kabyle, Bambara, Soninke, Turkish, Wolof, Lingala, among others, some of which may be primarily oral—can discourage some parents from their desire to transmitting their language. Families may experience feelings of exclusion, frustration or fear of becoming involved in their children’s schooling, due to cultural differences, limited proficiency in French, and the lack of valorisation—or even acceptance and recognition—by schools of the fact that languages other than French are spoken at home. In contrast, other forms of bilingualism involving languages such as English, Italian, Spanish or Japanese are often much more highly valued and actively encouraged.

Drawing on her long experience as a speech and language therapist and ethnoclinician, Francine Rosenbaum (2019) writes: “I try to sift through my memories of children from migrant backgrounds whom doctors or schools referred to me because of symptoms affecting speech, writing or behaviour. Except for a very small proportion who suffered from hearing impairment or another organic condition, I would say that these children’s symptoms were more like SOS signals, indicating that they were hostages and victims of our society’s contempt for their parents, who are not considered ‘citizens like us’.” (La Blanc, 2010, p. 82)

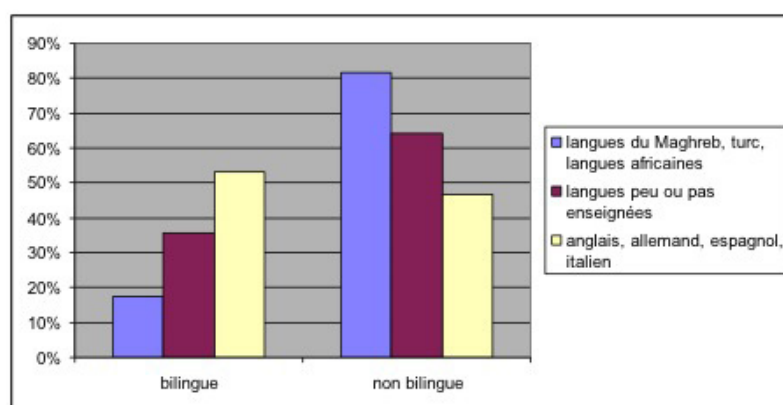
## 6.1. Teachers and plurilingualism

Despite scientific research and pedagogical recommendations developed over the past century, teachers in France are still not systematically trained to address these theoretical and practical issues (Auger & Cadet, 2016) within the Écoles académiques de la formation continue. This is the case even though, in certain neighbourhoods, some classrooms are at times entirely multilingual—both in UPE2A classes (Unité pédagogique pour élèves allophones arrivants, pedagogical units for newly arrived allophone pupils) and in mainstream classrooms in some urban areas. Moreover, linguistic ideologies shared in France remain deeply marked by glottophobia (Blanchet, 2016). France continues to be conceived as a monolingual nation (Cerquiglini, 2003), despite the many languages that have always been present on its territory. The representation of French as the only language of legitimate quality remains particularly strong (Chiss, 2018), especially among teachers, who rightly see themselves as guardians of the linguistic norm to be taught.

Indeed, the historically unifying role of the school system—which repressed other languages spoken in France, including regional languages as well as migrant languages throughout the history of education—has inevitably had a lasting impact on perceptions of family languages. A series of surveys conducted by Nantes and Trimailles (2013) in the Grenoble area examined primary school teachers’ (preschool and elementary) representations of their students’ home languages. The findings confirm the existence of a dual discourse on bilingualism, depending on the social status of the family language. According to surveys conducted by teachers themselves among their students, 139 children were in contact with languages other than French. However, 98 out of these 139 pupils (i.e. 71%) were not considered bilingual.

The researchers then classified languages according to their status into three groups:

- Group 1: low-status migrant languages, mainly languages from the Maghreb, Turkish, and languages of sub-Saharan Africa;
- Group 2: languages that are little or not taught at school but are not subject to devaluing representations (Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, etc.);
- Group 3: “prestigious” languages taught within the school system, namely English, German, Spanish and, in the Grenoble context, Italian.



**Figure 7.** Students considered bilingual or not depending on their home language (Nantes & Trimailles, 2013).

What is striking is that the majority of students whom teachers identify as bilingual are those who speak Group 3 languages—that is, languages that are socially valued and present within the school system (Figure 7). By contrast, among the 81 pupils who speak Group 1 languages, 66 of them (i.e. 81%) are not regarded as bilingual by their teachers. Such representations still reflect contemporary attitudes towards the languages of formerly colonised populations, whether in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa or Asia. Beyond official calls to respect languages and cultures of origin, it remains deeply rooted in the collective consciousness that social integration requires the prior acquisition of French (Zirotti, 2006). As a consequence, many immigrants in France, particularly those originating from Africa or Asia, do not consider it important—or do not dare—to transmit their languages, which they often refer to as “dialects,” thereby engaging in self-stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963, 1975). Yet, the transmission of languages and cultures within the family context plays a crucial role in the construction of language and linguistic competence.

## 6.2. Mobilising home languages in teaching

Since the 1970s, research on multilingual educational practices in classrooms where some students speak languages at home other than the language of schooling has expanded considerably. Engel et al. (in press) examined the impact of oral intervention in Portuguese in classrooms in Luxembourg. In this country, Luxembourgish, German and French are official languages, while approximately 27% of pupils come from Portuguese-speaking households. In earlier work, these authors showed (Engel de Abreu et al., 2012; 2013) that young Portuguese-speaking pupils perform below their monolingual peers both in the language of schooling and in their home language. This phenomenon is not uncommon and is referred to as first-language attrition or incomplete first-language acquisition. While there is broad consensus that acquiring the second language—the language of the wider society—is crucial for integration and academic success, the authors argue that it is equally important to promote the maintenance and enrichment of home language(s). Doing so enables positive cross-linguistic transfer from one language to another, including to the language of schooling. They therefore assessed whether an intervention programme in Portuguese in preschool could serve as a springboard for learning the school language(s). The study was conducted in 16 preschools, across 81 classes, involving 168 pupils—almost all native Portuguese speakers born in Luxembourg from low socio-economic backgrounds. The intervention lasted 30 weeks, with assessments conducted immediately afterwards and again nine months later.

The results showed significant improvements in vocabulary and phonological awareness in both Portuguese and Luxembourgish in the short and long term. Overall, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of systematic support for home languages in the development of both languages, to the clear benefit of the language of schooling—an outcome expected and sought by teachers.

Home language(s) thus play an essential role in the social, emotional and cognitive development of bilingual learners. Rosenbaum (2019) therefore advises practitioners “to bear in mind that a harmoniously integrated mother tongue constitutes the potential linguistic foundation for all languages. Access to speech, symbolisation and narrativity is mediated through the mother tongue and through the competencies associated with parenting.” She further adds that “ignorance or denial of the importance of the mother tongue inhibits and blocks access to cultural heritage, and constitutes a serious risk of impoverished and pathological communication between the family environment and the child and/or of communication disorders in the second language” (p. 43).

Among the many contexts in which mother tongues (home languages) are marginalised or risk disappearing in favour of former colonial languages, African contexts are particularly revealing. In Nigeria, for example, where between 500 and 600 languages are spoken across the country, three national languages—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—are spoken by more than half of the population. However, English, the language of colonisation, remains one of the official languages. The use of English in schooling is a deeply rooted and widespread aspiration among parents, as English is associated with economic success and social prestige. As a result, Nigerian languages have progressively lost ground in formal education in favour of English.

Most pupils in Nigerian primary schools receive instruction in their mother tongue during the first three years of schooling, before transitioning to English in the fourth year. When instruction was provided in Yoruba for the **first six years** of primary school and English was subsequently taught by a well-trained specialist teacher, pupils achieved better outcomes than those who had received three years of mother-tongue

instruction followed by a transition to English from the fourth year onwards (Ayodele & Oyinloye, 2019). Observations and recent studies converge in showing that when local languages are appropriately used as languages of instruction and English is introduced as a subject, there is no obstacle to successful adoption of English at a later stage of schooling.

In France, particularly in metropolitan France, it is clearly not feasible to offer instruction in pupils' home languages, given their sheer number. However, these languages cannot be ignored, devalued or excluded from pupils' identities and potential. Educational discourse should instead support parents in transmitting their home language(s), and schools should value and mobilise these languages within the educational context.

To conclude, let us echo the wish expressed by a secondary school French teacher involved in the project *Languages as Migratory Objects* (*Les langues comme objets migrants*, La Vieille Charité, Marseille, 2022): "Let us not leave home languages at the school gate."

## 7. Practical implementation in school settings: opportunities

### 7.1. In official documents

Curricula make room for spaces of reflection and practice, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the Official Bulletin for Preschool Education (June 2021):

#### Awakening children to Linguistic Diversity

In preschool, pupils discover the existence of languages, sometimes very different from those they already know. Through playful situations (games, nursery rhymes, etc.) or activities that they can make sense of (such as DVDs of familiar stories), they become aware that communication can take place through languages other than French: for example, regional languages, foreign languages (including those spoken within families or by classmates), and French Sign Language (LSF). Expectations are modest, but the attempts pupils are encouraged to make—particularly when repeating certain elements—must nevertheless be carried out with a degree of rigour.

Raising awareness of linguistic diversity lays the foundation for students' learning pathways in this domain. It constitutes the initial stage of a learning continuum that will continue throughout schooling and represents pupils' very first contact with linguistic plurality in the school context. It is important to value the home language of multilingual or non-French-speaking children. Their presence in a classroom enables teachers to raise all pupils' awareness of linguistic diversity and to help them discover, at an early age, that multilingualism is a source of enrichment. The activities carried out thus open the school to the linguistic and cultural diversity of France.

Through the playful and reflective activities it mobilises, awareness of linguistic diversity contributes to the development of phonological awareness and oral language, to the consolidation of mastery of French, and to all the objectives of preschool education, by engaging pupils' sensitivity, their motor skills, and relational and cognitive abilities.

The Guide for Raising Awareness of Linguistic Diversity, published by the Ministry of National Education in 2023 and implemented by Laurent Gajo, confirms this perspective <https://eduscol.education.fr/document/50921/download> (in French).

Although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and, more recently, its Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) describe competence in relation to an unspecified individual language, they assume that language users and learners develop integrated plurilingual repertoires. One of the preparatory studies for the CEFR, conducted by Coste et al. (1999), explains that learners' plurilingual and pluricultural competence should not be viewed as "the superposition or juxtaposition of separate competences, but rather as the existence of a complex—indeed composite—competence upon which social actors may draw" (p. 11). In 2001, the CEFR further emphasised that plurilingual and pluricultural competence "promotes the development of linguistic and communicative awareness, and even metacognitive strategies, enabling social actors to become aware of and to regulate their own 'spontaneous' ways of managing tasks, particularly their linguistic dimension" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 134). The learning experience of a new language therefore cannot be conceptualised without taking into account the languages already present in the learner's repertoire—what is referred to as their plurilingual competence. The Council of Europe's Platform for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education (2016) provides practical and concrete guidance on creating synergies among the languages present in schools in order to improve acquisition of the language of schooling and curriculum content. Thus, the language of schooling (here, French) can be related to regional languages, home languages, migrant languages, modern foreign languages and classical languages, in all classrooms and across all subjects. Managing this repertoire implies that its component varieties should not remain isolated from one another but instead form an integrated communicative competence (Beacco & Byram, 2007, p. 71).



In practice, however, a clear separation still exists between classes welcoming newly arrived pupils and mainstream classes, as well as between different school subjects. Home languages and classical, regional or modern languages are still rarely used as resources to develop competences both in the language of schooling and in the disciplines taught. In order to create links between classes, disciplines and languages—in the sense of reliance proposed by Edgar Morin (1990)—it is necessary to start from students themselves: from their linguistic and cultural experiences, which can serve both as a motivational springboard and as learning resources for acquiring the language of schooling, French, and for engaging with the linguistic dimension of different curricular subjects. Emphasis is placed on ways of helping learners, particularly bi- and plurilingual students, to use their language(s) to support and strengthen their engagement in formal learning at all levels of schooling, from preschool to upper secondary education. This perspective also benefits monolingual French-speaking pupils, who must learn other languages and also deepen their mastery of French as the language of schooling.

The objective is therefore not to intensify learning of the language of schooling by necessarily increasing exposure to French in order to bring all pupils to the same level. Rather, from a pedagogical standpoint, the aim is to activate cross-linguistic transfer from students' linguistic repertoires into French. Studies (Auger, 2005; Nocus, 2022, 2024; Guédat, 2024) show that such classroom activities foster both motivation—through recognition of pupils' often marginalised languages—and enhanced cognitive development of linguistic competences through metalinguistic activities, which help learners better understand and memorise the structures and uses of French.

After nearly 25 years of research on this topic, Auger (2022) proposes the model of the Language Diamond, developed to promote an inclusive approach to plurilingual repertoires and cultural diversity in classrooms, in the service of students' academic success in French and across disciplines. The diamond shape was chosen to represent the seven facets that must be addressed to achieve this objective of inclusion (ENSEMBLE) and success. Each facet of the diamond provides concrete support for teachers, teacher trainers, school leaders, inspectors and policymakers. These facets form an ENSEMBLE to be considered as a whole and are not intended to be approached linearly.

Each facet corresponds to a letter forming the acronym ENSEMBLE. Facet E invites us to Explore the languages and cultures present in the classroom, facet N to Link (Nouer) languages through classroom activities, facet S to Stimulate the creation or purchase of multilingual materials, the E facet to Train (Entraîner) students to become peer tutors, the M facet to Mobilise environments beyond the classroom, the B facet to Build teaching-learning practices with parents. Finally, the L.E facet aims to Link Teachers (regardless of subject) within a community of practice.

In popular imagination, owning a diamond symbolises wealth! This metaphor is intended to convey that this linguistic model “strengthens social cohesion in its social, educational and cultural dimensions.” The Language Diamond can be implemented at any educational level, from preschool to university. The film The Language Diamond provides examples for each facet, illustrating how curricular objectives can be achieved across different educational cycles.

## 7.2. The language diamond: promoting academic success for all



<sup>6</sup> See their testimony in the movie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=artl-xcTDJc&t=3603s>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=artl-xcTDJc&t=3603s>

## Facet 1 : Exploring the Languages and Cultures Present in the Classroom

Identifying the languages present in the classroom and in the school is a way of making visible repertoires that are often overlooked by teachers who believe that, in order to ensure their students' academic success in French, all other languages and prior cultural experiences must be set aside.

To identify the languages present in the classroom, there are very simple activities that can be carried out, such as language biographies – see the resource “[Maledive - Majority Language and Diversity](https://maledive.ecml.at/Home/tabid/3598/language/fr-FR/Default.aspx)”<sup>8</sup> developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). According to Busch’s framework (2016), these biographies are intended for all ages and all levels of language proficiency. Their aim is to empower students by helping them identify their linguistic repertoire, reflect on their language experiences, and develop a stronger sense of security and self-confidence by becoming aware of their own linguistic identity and their multiple linguistic resources when learning a new language and using it to learn other subjects.

The objective is by no means to learn about students’ languages in order to “correct” them. On the contrary, the important point is to recognize these languages in order to promote linguistic benevolence (Beacco & Byram, 2007, p. 75). This also strengthens the recognition of each student as an individual within the classroom, which may lead to greater engagement, as noted by Cummins (2001; 2021).



Example of a language biography in a primary school (languages, mobility, cultural experiences).

## Facet 2: Connecting Languages Through Classroom Activities

Carrying out learning tasks in the language of schooling, in other foreign languages taught at school, and across different subjects is crucial for students. It is easy to translate school content (class instructions, textual activities, etc.) into languages with which students feel more comfortable, enabling them to better understand instructions or texts to be studied, for example. Several options exist: dictionaries, digital translators on phones, tablets, or computers. Receiving help from speakers of the same languages, whether adults or children, is also valuable.

“[Let's Compare Our Languages](https://maledive.ecml.at/Home/tabid/3598/language/fr-FR/Default.aspx)”<sup>9</sup>, available on the Canopé website (Auger, 2005), is another activity that allows students to compare their home languages (or other languages of their choice – students should of course not be assigned to a particular language) with the language of schooling (French). This helps activate transfer processes, but also encourages reflection on language(s), and supports the development of abilities in French.

<sup>8</sup> <https://maledive.ecml.at/Home/tabid/3598/language/fr-FR/Default.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/bsd/sequence.aspx?bloc=481293>

| Les jours de la semaine |         |          |           | Les jours de la semaine |           |          |          |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| français                | lundi   | mardi    | mercredi  | jeudi                   | vendredi  | samedi   | dimanche |
|                         | lundi   | mardi    | mercredi  | jeudi                   | vendredi  | samedi   | dimanche |
| italien                 | lunedì  | martedì  | mercoledì | giovedì                 | venerdì   | sabato   | domenica |
| espagnol                | Lunes   | Martes   | Miércoles | Jueves                  | Viernes   | Sábado   | Domingo  |
| catalan                 | dilluns | dimarts  | dimecres  | dijous                  | divendres | dissabte | diumenge |
| anglais                 | Monday  | Tuesday  | Wednesday | Thursday                | Friday    | Saturday | Sunday   |
| allemand                | Montag  | Dienstag | Mittwoch  | Donnerstag              | Freitag   | Samstag  | Sonntag  |
| arabe                   | الاثنين | الثلاثاء | الأربعاء  | الخميس                  | الجمعة    | السبت    | الأحد    |
| chinois                 | 星期一     | 星期二      | 星期三       | 星期四                     | 星期五       | 星期六      | 星期日      |

**Days of the week in a primary school in Montpellier (Prasad & Auger, 2015): French as the language of schooling, foreign languages taught, regional language, and students' home languages.**

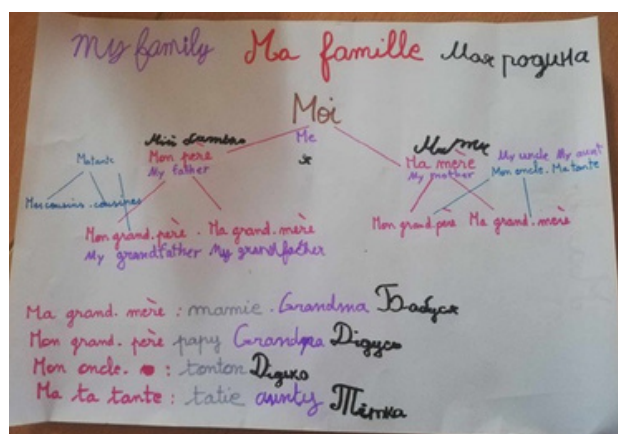
These activities, which involve observing similarities and specific features of each language, can be carried out in all subjects. In geography, for example, students can draw on their plurilingual repertoires to discuss borrowing and exchanges between languages when studying oceans; in life and earth sciences, similar work can be done around food ([Conbat+ project](#))<sup>10</sup>

### Facet 3: Encouraging the Creation or Purchase of Multilingual Materials

The introduction of linguistically and culturally diverse materials into the classroom is important for our multilingual and multicultural 21st-century classrooms (UNESCO, 2018). It also fosters the intercultural approach promoted by the Council of Europe and strengthens the relationship between students and the teacher.

Providing multilingual and multicultural materials such as books, textbooks, children's literature videos, audio documents, and materials translated into languages known by the students also supports better understanding of subject content. Students should not have to wait until they are fully proficient in the language of schooling before engaging with different school subjects. Teachers should not hesitate to use online documents in students' home languages, textbooks in other languages, or materials translated by the students themselves as classroom resources. The aim is to encourage students to bring in materials they already have in order to share them with others, as illustrated in Anne-Laure Biales' dissertation (2020), which implemented literary debates in lower secondary school, incorporating different languages known by the students through the novels they shared in class. Multilingual materials can also be created in line with curriculum objectives for display in the classroom or inclusion in students' notebooks (for example, in primary history lessons on the concept of filiation, through a plurilingual family tree).

<sup>10</sup> <https://conbat.ecml.at/DidacticUnits/Notreterrenousnourrit/tabid/2696/language/fr-FR/Default.aspx>



#### Facet 4: Training Students to Act as Peer Tutors

Tandem language learning is a form of reciprocal peer tutoring. For example, a child who has recently arrived in France may offer French lessons in exchange for lessons in their own language. However, French-speaking students do not always wish to learn the languages of other children. It is therefore important that students always have experiences to share, even beyond languages. A student may exchange help in French for help in music, art, sports, or other foreign languages taught at school, and so on.

It is important to ensure that the relationship remains symmetrical. If a student is always in the role of mentor, they may develop an attitude of condescension toward other children with relatively lower levels of competence. Conversely, a student who is regularly mentored may come to see themselves as incompetent and may no longer dare to take initiative. It is therefore essential for the teacher to design activities, aligned with curriculum objectives, that mitigate this negative dynamic by ensuring opportunities for reciprocity and sustainable mutual mentoring.

#### Facet 5: Engaging environments Beyond the Classroom

We live in multilingual environments that are not always explored at school. This can be as simple as street names, shop signs, multilingual shopkeepers, or public signage.



Sign near Montpellier (Occitanie)

Educational projects that take linguistic and cultural diversity into account can therefore take place in public spaces, as well as in museums or libraries where different languages and cultures are represented. For example, students have proposed multilingual guided tours. Numerous projects and videos documenting these experiences are available on the [LISTIAC website](https://listiac.univ-montp3.fr/videotheque).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://listiac.univ-montp3.fr/videotheque>

## Facet 6: Building Teaching-Learning Practices with Parents

Comparative studies (UNESCO, 2018) show that parents are not always included in the life of schools. In this respect, awareness-raising information promoting bi-/plurilingualism as an opportunity rather than a “risk” for children’s development is essential. Parents can also be concretely involved in classroom projects. Pioneering projects in this area were launched in Switzerland with the concept of “story bags”<sup>12</sup>. In this project, books are provided in the language of schooling (French) as well as in other home languages (in written and audio versions). Children read them in class and at home with their parents (those who cannot read listen to them). Subsequently, parents are invited to help translate additional books.

As part of the European Romtels project in France, parents and students wrote artwork labels for a fine arts museum in Romani, Romanian, and French, even though the parents had limited proficiency in French and were unable to read or write in any language (see the [film](#) available on the project’s ERASMUS+<sup>13</sup> website). These projects illustrate the wide range of possibilities that can be adapted to teachers’ objectives and school curricula.

## Facet 7: Link Teachers (Across Subjects) Within a Community of Practice

Teachers, school leaders, and other staff members in contact with students are encouraged to work together. The aim is to ensure that everyone feels included in the process and that connections are built among teachers, classes, students, subjects, parents, and both the school and out-of-school environments.

Training for teachers, educational staff, and parents is key to the successful schooling of migrant children—and more broadly, of all students who benefit from inclusive approaches that promote living together in our multilingual and multicultural contexts. However, any training must anticipate a number of challenges (Auger & Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2021). Teachers’ beliefs about languages may constitute an obstacle. Moreover, teaching French is not solely the responsibility of the French teacher; it concerns all teachers who use language both as an object of instruction and as a medium of learning. Teachers must also be trained to feel confident sharing their expertise with students, to understand what resources students possess in terms of knowledge, lived experiences, and languages, and to use these resources effectively to support learning and implement their teaching.

Following Lavoisier’s principle, “Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed” (1789), and drawing on the state of research regarding linguistic repertoires and transfers from one language/standard to others, we propose rethinking teaching and learning (through) languages by also referring to the Möbius strip. The Möbius strip, described by mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing in 1858, quickly attracted the interest of the social sciences and humanities. It was later adopted, in the 1970s, as a symbol of recycling. In fact, it is a strip with three half-twists.



<sup>12</sup> <https://edu.ge.ch/site/sacdhistoires/about/> ; <https://pedagogie.ac-toulouse.fr/casnav/les-sacs-histoires-plurilingues-kits-telecharger> ; <https://jokoafalac.com/sacs-a-histoires/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://nuvision.ncl.ac.uk/Play/17830>

This idea of an endless cycle has inspired many fields in the social sciences and humanities, such as psychology and anthropology. This interrelationship has also nourished numerous theories of language development linking social contexts, language, and identities (see Bronckart, 2019, for a synthesis).

For all these reasons, it seems useful to draw on the metaphor of the Möbius strip in order to move from the sequence:

collision of languages/norms → misunderstanding → negative emotion → stigmatization

to :



Thus, when interference occurs, both students and teachers become aware of the collision of languages or norms at work in a border crossing. This awareness of such processes can then be generalized within the classroom (Auger, 2022). Students, like teachers, can infer the reasons for this collision (for example, a different phonological system, lexical relatedness but divergent semantic evolution, etc.).

While the recycling of languages and norms may occur automatically for linguistic units that function in similar ways, it is valuable to dwell on these processes in order to build confidence that many units can be transferred and that students arrive with prior knowledge that can support their own learning. Viewing a learning/teaching situation through this model makes it possible to move beyond denial and even beyond the stigmatization linked to collisions between languages, or standards of linguistic practices, and diverse cultures.

The importance of joint explanation in the classroom—among students, supported by the teacher—together with dedicated time to reflect for oneself (to understand) and for others (to understand one another), constitutes a fundamental bidirectional movement.

Another point, that also puts the relationship at stakes, concerns the rejection of others—their languages, norms, linguistic and cultural practices. Working with the metaphor of recycling makes it possible to welcome transfers, including those that lead to errors, then to reflect on them and “recycle” them. There is also the idea that this “already-there” knowledge is worth problematizing in order to enter into the learning loop. This notion of welcoming is also present in the expression “gentle and sustainable recycling.”

The recycling of languages and norms is a meaningful metaphor for understanding the processing that occurs when learning a new language or norm. Like conventional recycling, it allows certain materials—here, linguistic ones (transfers)—to be reintroduced into the production of new forms of expression. These units (recyclable materials) include sounds, vocabulary, syntax, discourse genres (narrating, explaining, describing, arguing), gestures and body language, and so on.

Recycling has two major “environmental” consequences for students, teachers, and parents:

- the reduction of the volume of “waste,” which for us corresponds to a reduction in errors and in the “pollution” they cause by stigmatizing students and generating misunderstanding among teachers;
- the preservation of natural resources, since recycled material (linguistic units already present) is used, thereby preserving a certain form of learning ecology (the safeguarding of and confidence in one’s own resources).

Recycling refers to all the operations involved in collecting and processing linguistic units so that they can be reintroduced into a cycle of developing new languages and norms. Even though these activities require a certain amount of time, they are economically beneficial from both a linguistic and an emotional perspective.

Recycling has been used since the Bronze Age for metals in order to manufacture new objects. This practice exists in all civilizations. It represents an effort to preserve both what is “already there” and the environment (and we can observe the positive impact of such reflective practices on classroom climate and learning). Recycling aims to overcome scarcity. When we consider students’ repertoires, we realize that apparent scarcity actually conceals numerous possible transfers and recycling processes that reassure students and help them progress more confidently in their learning.

### 7.3. 1.1. Language week: promoting family languages

In response to the very significant academic difficulties encountered in Priority Education Network areas (REP/REP+) in the Val-d’Oise department, a reflection process was initiated as early as 2007 to address these challenges. The vulnerability of some students led educational teams to develop a project aimed at creating a bridge between the home environment and the school environment, drawing on families’ languages. This is how La Semaine des Langues (Language Week, SDL) was created more than 15 years ago. The concept has been adopted by the French Ministry of Education<sup>14</sup> for the past eight years. Beyond the Ministry’s intention to promote foreign languages taught at school, the aim of this initiative was to value multilingualism, regardless of which languages were involved. As mentioned several times in this article, proficiency in the language of schooling can be developed effectively when it is built on solid foundations in the mother tongue. The objective was therefore to reduce the divide between families and schools and to encourage parents who are not very comfortable in French to take part in school events by contributing their own languages and cultures.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.education.gouv.fr/semaine-des-langues-vivantes-11996>

The association *Bilingues et plus*<sup>15</sup> has published the *Guide de la Semaine des Langues* (Bijeljac-Babic, Pialhox, & Zerrougui, 2023, 68 pages), which offers teachers and educators—from early childhood settings to lower secondary school—ideas for organizing a Language Week in their institutions. This brochure provides practical guidance on how to take into account, and even make use of, students' home languages in pedagogical practices, by engaging in a process of valuing and respecting multilingualism and cultural diversity.

The guide is structured around three objectives: (1) Present research-based arguments on bilingual competencies and the benefits of acquiring and/or mastering several languages; (2) Suggest numerous pedagogical and playful activities for organizing a Language Week; (3) Situate Language Week pedagogical practices within the regulatory and institutional framework of the French Ministry of Education. User-friendly and attractively illustrated, the guide includes several dozen bibliographic references as well as websites accessible via QR codes.



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<sup>15</sup> <https://bilinguesetplus.org/>

PS

MS

GS

CP

CE1

CE2

CM1

CM2

## LE MUR D'EXPRESSION

Lors de la SDL, les parents sont invités lorsqu'ils déposent leur(s) enfant(s) à écrire un mot choisi par les enfants. Ainsi, en fin de semaine, des « murs d'expression » sont disponibles. Ces mots peuvent être repris en classe.



**Effectif**  
classe entière

**Durée**: le temps  
de l'accueil

Avec parents

**Objet final**: les mots  
écrits dans différentes  
langues

**Matériel**: papiers

**Compétences**  
valorisation  
des langues,  
coopération

### 7.4. Recommendations from European institutions

The European Social Charter (1961, revised in 1996) recognizes the role played by language in social inclusion. The Parties to the Charter undertake to “promote and facilitate the teaching of the national language of the host State or, if there are several, one of these languages, to migrant workers and members of their families” (Article 19.11). However, this addresses only one aspect of the linguistic challenge posed by large-scale migration. The European Social Charter also recognizes the importance of the mother tongue for the academic success of every migrant. It further commits to “promote and facilitate, as far as practicable, the teaching of the migrant worker’s mother tongue to his children” (Article 19.12).

Moreover, the Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation (CM/Rec (2012)13) on ensuring quality education “provides access to learning for all pupils and students, in particular those from vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, by adapting it to their needs, where appropriate” (Appendix, 6.a). Recommendation CM/Rec (2014)5, on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for academic success, states:

“Where pupils’ and students’ inability to follow regular educational programmes is due to temporary factors such as insufficient proficiency in the language(s) of instruction [...], public authorities should ensure that those concerned are given the opportunity to remedy the causes of their difficulties as quickly as possible” (Appendix, 29). Alongside these recommendations, the project Languages in Education, Languages for Education produced a reflection document on the linguistic and educational inclusion of migrant pupils and students (Little, 2010; Auger & Little, 2023), containing a wide range of practical proposals.

If (as proposed by the project Languages in Education, Languages for Education) plurilingual and intercultural education encompasses all languages present in a given educational context, and if (as argued by the CEFR) plurilingual repertoires are rooted in the languages individuals acquire in early childhood, it follows that home languages—at least those known by the learner (since some languages may also have been transmitted through other school systems)—should play a central role in the educational process. Over the past two decades, work conducted in Ireland at primary level and in France at all levels of schooling, from preschool to upper secondary, has explored ways of helping learners from families who speak languages other than the language of schooling to use their mother tongue to support and strengthen their engagement in formal learning. In light of this, on February the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2022, “the Ministers’ Deputies adopted a new recommendation to Member States on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture. This recommendation addresses two developments of concern to the Council of Europe: a tendency on the part of public authorities and civil society to think that proficiency in one additional language is enough; and the notion that proficiency in minority or migrant languages, widespread in today’s increasingly diverse societies, is harmful to societal cohesion. To counter such developments, the Recommendation emphasises the cognitive, linguistic and social benefits of learning several languages, demonstrating the ways in which plurilingual and intercultural competences contribute to educational success, to societal integration and to understanding, assessing and formulating the arguments and opinions that are essential to democracy.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/education/-/new-council-of-europe-recommendation-on-the-importance-of-plurilingual-and-intercultural-education-for-democratic-culture>

## Key takeaways

- **Bilingualism is not a handicap.** Studies simply show that, on average, children who acquire two languages may experience a slight delay in language development compared to monolingual children when their skills are assessed in their weaker language. Conversely, when assessed in their dominant language, the majority are just as competent as monolinguals—and even more so if their entire bi-/plurilingual repertoire is taken into account.
- If language skills are negatively affected by disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, **acquiring multiple languages can help compensate for the negative impact of these conditions** and foster the development of non-linguistic cognitive mechanisms.
- To promote high-quality interactions, it is important to **encourage parents to speak the language(s) in which they feel most comfortable.**
- **Recommendations from European bodies** emphasize findings from international research showing **the value of plurilingual and intercultural education** for the success of all students.
- Similarly, **official French policy documents** support raising awareness of linguistic diversity (nursery rhymes, stories in different languages, etc.) in order to develop the phonological filter and help students **transfer skills from one language to another**, particularly toward French.
- **Numerous pedagogical practices** validated by scientific research make it possible to activate such transfers for the benefit of French and for the understanding of different subject areas.
- **The “language diamond” model**, which represents students’ plurilingual repertoires in the classroom, makes it possible to develop a wide range of activities depending on the facets addressed: exploring the languages and cultures present in the classroom; comparing them; using multilingual materials; training students to become peer tutors; mobilizing environments beyond the classroom; proposing co-educational activities with parents; and fostering collaborative work among all educational staff. The film “The Language Diamond” provides examples for each facet of the diamond and shows how to align them with curriculum objectives across grade levels.
- **Multilingual classrooms are a lever not only for learning but also for living together.** They foster inclusion when the “already-there” of languages and cultures serves as a springboard for new learning in the classroom.
- The **recycling of languages** and norms is an interesting metaphor for understanding the processing that occurs when **learning a new language or norm**. Like conventional recycling, it allows certain materials—here linguistic ones (transfers)—to be reintroduced into the production of new forms of expression. These units (recyclable materials) include sounds, vocabulary, syntax, discourse genres (narrating, explaining, describing, arguing), gestures and body language, and so on.
- Events such as **Language Week** make it possible to develop a concrete project that creates a bridge between the home environment and the school environment, drawing on families’ languages.

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=artl-xcTDJc&t=3603s>

18 <https://bilinguasetplus.org/>

## Recommendations

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In summary, it is essential to acknowledge students' language development and to follow these recommendations:

- 1. Support the development of bilingual competences by avoiding comparisons with those of monolinguals, since reaching monolingual levels in both languages is virtually impossible.
- 2. Accept that bilinguals may sometimes use translation or code-switching/mixing (alternating or blending words or syntax from two languages), as these practices provide reassurance and support at any age.
- 3. Value the mother tongue and home languages, which are key resources for learning.
- 4. Respect learners' right to be themselves—to use language differently from monolingual native speakers and to possess knowledge that differs from that of monolinguals. This will help them more effectively reach the language norms expected in the school context.
- 5. Do not abandon the native speaker model, but do not consider it the only model. Each individual follows their own developmental path.
- 6. Ensure that the mother tongue/home languages and diverse cultural experiences are welcomed by the education system and by society, as they constitute a powerful lever for academic learning.

## To go further

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**Find all the CSEN publications on :**

[reseau - canope.fr/conseil-scientifique-de-leducationnationale](https://reseau-canope.fr/conseil-scientifique-de-leducationnationale)

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