

# Multilingualism as the key to inclusive education for newly arrived migrant pupils

*Emmanuelle Le Pichon and Sergio Baauw*

## ■ Introduction

Imagine that you move to China with your 15 year old son and your 12 year old daughter. Let's assume that the school system over there is roughly the same as your own at the moment in the Netherlands. This new situation logically gives rise to several questions:

- How will your children be schooled?
- Are they going to enter the school system at the same grade level?
- Will the language of your children be supported at school? In the classroom?

A good way of understanding the challenge that newly arrived migrant children face every day is to try to look at the school system through the eyes of such a pupil. Just like putting a scarf over your eyes may be a powerful way to better understand what it is to be blind, we will try to get a better understanding of what it is to be confronted to a different language when going to school and what the consequences may be of such a situation for the child, trying to put ourselves in the position of a child with a migrant background.

In practice, when one moves from one country to the other, it is difficult to enter the same grade level. The barrier is of course, the school language. In this article, we will discuss several challenges that affect recent migrant children in their transition to the school system of their host countries. We argue that an approach is required in which the potential and skills, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that children bring along, are used in the integration process. We propose that the multilingual abilities of many of these children are likely to be assets that could be used more efficiently to their own benefit. We also argue that migrant children should be supported during their whole school career, if necessary, in order to develop their full cognitive potential.

## ■ Newly arrived migrant pupils: setting the scene

A very illustrative example is what happened at a conference in Germany some time ago. A local policy maker started her welcome word by saying that because she had to speak in English she felt like a stranger in her own city. What we learn from this experience is that speaking in another language than the one you grew up with, apparently implicates a change of position, an attack on one's overall identity. Vice versa, one can imagine something like the same effect may occur in the inverse situation: being suddenly surrounded by people speaking a different language. This is exactly the situation of a pupil with a migrant background who speaks other languages at home (see for instance, Le Pichon et al. 2010).

Currently, there is much debate about language as a key to inclusion in the host society. Nobody would deny that speaking the language of the country you live in is important for one's integration in society. But is it necessary to speak the language at native or near native level in order to consider oneself "integrated"? All of us know examples of successful foreigners who have a foreign accent and who occasionally make grammatical mistakes (native speakers make them too, by the way). So, being integrated does not mean that one needs a perfect native-like command of the surrounding language (Grosjean, 2010).

During their migration trajectory, newly arrived migrant pupils develop competencies in several languages, depending on many factors such as, for instance, duration of stay in one location and availability of schooling. Nevertheless, these competencies implicate that they should be considered as multilingual already. Being multilingual does not mean having an equal command of all our languages (Grosjean, 2010). In fact, perfectly "balanced" bilinguals are rare. According to some definitions someone is bilingual or multilingual if he or she is able to express him or herself in more than one language and for different purposes.

So, on the basis of the aforementioned considerations, there are two points that we would like to make:

- First, one doesn't need to speak the surrounding languages perfectly to be included in the new society.
- Second, being bilingual or multilingual doesn't mean that one has an equal proficiency in both languages.

These points are highly relevant for the education of newly arrived migrant children. They force us to think about our goals with respect to the teaching of the school language, and to ask ourselves: when is the level of a migrant pupil in the school language (Dutch, German, French, Swedish, the school language, the national language) good enough?

## ■ Transitions & diversity

The challenges that both newly arrived migrant children and their teachers face, inspired the Education of Newly Arrived Migrant Pupils project ("EDINA"). EDINA is a project in which researchers, policy makers, teachers and school leaders work on aspects that may be problematic when working in highly diverse classrooms. Diverse classrooms are characterized by pupils with different languages, different cultures and different experiences of schooling. Two important questions were addressed: first, how to smoothen the transition of the pupils into mainstream education and second, how to make sure that we do not judge based on stereotypes and our own judgements?

### *How to smoothen the transition of the pupils to mainstream education?*

Turning to our thought experiment: there are all types of things that you could think of, that would make the transition from your children to their age related classroom in China, go easier. However, in reality these conditions are often not there.

### **The incentives of a school teacher**

Let's start with the expectations that a teacher/ school principal may have from your child. As a teacher you can evaluate your own thoughts by performing the following thought experiment: *Close your eyes and choose a random pupil with a migrant background from your classroom, and ask yourself:*

1. *What do I expect from him/ her? What kind of job will he/ she get later on? What do I base my expectations on?*
2. *Did I ask this pupil what his/ her ambitions are? His/ her parents?*

*Then: try to improve your own expectations: How can you express your improved expectations to your pupil in your lesson?*

Expectations are highly relevant because of the so-called Pygmalion effect. Various studies have proven that higher expectations of pupils generate higher results in pupils (see for instance: Hajer, 2003). Pygmalion made a beautiful sculpture of a woman, and his sculpture was so beautiful that he fell in love with it and wished for

it to be a real woman. His wish was granted, the sculpture became a real woman and he married her. It is really a beautiful myth and also a real life phenomenon which shows that higher expectations lead to increased performance. It is a very important principle to keep in mind when teaching, because pupils are very sensitive to the feedback and attention of the teacher. If a pupil hears that he/she is not capable of working independently, he/she will probably stop trying. Not only will he or she stop trying; studies have shown that negative feedback is often linked to school dropout. Unfortunately, according to for instance, Ewijk, pupils with a migrant background are often underestimated (Ewijk, 2010). So these children need to benefit from the Pygmalion effect and the good news is that teachers and caregivers can give that to them.

### **Continuity in education across borders**

Going back to our original thought experiment about migration to China. So your children are schooled in a Chinese speaking school with teachers who do not speak a word of Dutch. Your children are improving but of course, progress is slow and they had to invest so much in learning the Chinese language that they now suffer from a delay in some general school subjects. However, you are optimistic because gradually you see that they have started the catch up trajectory and they have made some friends, and are starting to feel more comfortable in their new environment. Things are not so bad after all. But all of a sudden, the child hears that you and your family will be moving to Japan.

Is this a crazy thought experiment? In fact it isn't. This level of complexity is the reality of many migrant children in our classrooms today, who before arriving to the Netherlands, often have spent parts of their lives in various other countries, and some of them will continue moving to other countries. An example is a school that we followed for our research. When we called to inform about two children, the principal was enthusiastic about their progress but then she also told us that the family had left for the United Kingdom. These girls worked hard to learn Dutch after their arrival in the Netherlands. But of course, now they have to start all over again learning a new school language. Thus, transitions also include changes between environments or settings: this implies discontinuity for the development of the child.

This is a big challenge for children and teachers. How do we ensure continuity for children in situations that are highly unstable? How do we support children taking into account the complexities of their migration background? Moving the pupils

through Europe from country to country is detrimental and it seems like there is nothing teachers can do. However, with hindsight, those two girls would have highly benefited if from the very beginning in The Netherlands they had received a multilingual education including English and including their own languages. As shown by diverse studies, literacy in the mother tongue of the pupils may reinforce family links creating a stronger connection between parents and children or even ensure stability in the connections with the family left behind in the country of origin (Kenner & Ruby, 2012). In a study conducted by Sneddon (2008), teachers were asked to provide bilingual books to the pupils while the parents stimulated the reading skills of their children in the family language. The result of this study was that the pupils achieved a higher level of literacy than their peers in the school language while developing fluent reading in their home language. These multilingual strategies could have given the two girls more continuity during their transition from one country and school system to the other.

The second question that was raised within the EDINA project was:

### *How to make sure that we do not judge based on stereotypes and our own judgements?*

Most of us consider our school education as one of the most powerful tools to create equal chances for everyone. However, we do not realize that, in practice, the education system often becomes the place that emphasizes the inequalities between the children and their parents and the society they came to live in. This is of course not our intention, but it is the reality. Because of the language and cultural differences, it is the place where social inequalities are emphasized. Teachers thus face the challenge to try to reduce these inequalities and to contribute to more social justice in our schools.

School and language actually have an interdependent relation. Most of the migrant pupils speak other languages at home. Therefore school is almost the only place where they will be able to learn the school language. Just like your children in the China thought experiment, going to school puts them in a very uncomfortable situation because they do not speak the language of their new environment yet. On the other hand, school is also the only place where they will learn it. So they need school.

The language used at school, the curricula and the structure of the educational system are highly ideological and politicized issues. The way the schooling of the

pupils is organized is for a great part determined by, for instance, the financial support by the government, which often influences the priorities that schools are supposed to set (Åhlund, 2015: 14).

The problems related to the differences between school language and the language of pupils may lead teachers to judge pupils on the basis of incorrect beliefs about bilingual or multilingual language acquisition, or have unjustified expectations about their linguistic and academic development. We will therefore address some of these beliefs in the light of the research in the field of language acquisition and academic development.

### **Do young children learn a second language better or faster than older children?**

People often think that one can only learn a second language perfectly if the learning starts very young. But pupils learning a second language at school age implies several things.

- First, the learning of a second language usually happens somewhere between 4 and 15 years (the age that the child attends school).
- Second, at school the child is surrounded by the language he or she has to learn. For this we use the term “immersion”. Immersion implies a certain amount of input in the school language that pupils get on a daily basis.

The young age of learning and the immersion are positive factors, in principle, but does it mean that the younger a child is when she starts learning a second language, the faster she will learn it? The picture is not that clear cut. Research has shown that some aspects of the language may be acquired faster in older pupils. Often, these pupils are also already familiar with the writing system in their own language, which means that they will have an advantage regarding learning to read and write in the second language (Cummins, 1981). This is because they do not need to relearn “the trick” of reading and writing; they only need to transfer these skills that they already acquired in their own language. Another finding is from almost 30 years ago. Collier (see for instance Collier, 2004) did a study on age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. She did a study in the United States where she gathered the results of pupils from 100 different countries, who spoke more than 75 languages all together. She made three age groups based on age of arrival: 5-8 years old, 9-11 years old and 12- 15 years old. The results indicated that there were differences according to age. However, these did not indicate that younger children had an advantage over older children. She

found differences to the advantage of the 8-11 years old; not to the advantage of the youngest pupils. The 8-11 years old often reached a native like level within two years. The more disadvantaged group was the group of pupils who arrived when they were between 12 and 15 years old. For them, reaching the average level of peers would take much more time. After 4 years of schooling, the oldest pupils still presented a level below average, except in mathematics. This last aspect is interesting because mathematics may be the least language-related subject of all. This means that the language of schooling plays a greater role in the achievement of the pupils than cognitive capacities. Collier attributed these differences to the greater demands that secondary level put on the pupils.

Other research, on second language acquisition outside the classroom, indicates that younger children reach higher levels of proficiency than children that started to acquire a second language at an older age, normally after the beginning of puberty (Johnson & Newport 1989; DeKeyser 2000; Hyltenstam 1992; Weerman, Punt & Bisschop 2006). However, this normally applies after long periods of exposure to the second language. According to Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978), who tested English learners of Dutch, after a few months 12-15 year olds and adult learners obtained the best results, and after a year 8-10 and 12-15 year olds scored the best, leaving 3-5 year olds behind them. It turns out then that young learners may obtain the best results in the long run, but older learners learn faster (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979). More recently, Muñoz (2010) showed that apart from the age factor, the setting of the learning is relevant. The long term advantage that young learners have in learning a language both in a natural environment (i.e., outside the classroom) and at school does not show up in foreign language learning in classroom settings. One can conclude from this that young children may be good second language *acquirers*, but older children are better second language *learners*, as a result of the more matured cognitive abilities.

### **How many years does it take to learn the school language before the language level is comparable to that of monolingual peers?**

The study of Collier is very interesting because the situation in the United States was very similar to the situation that we have in Europe at present, or at least in The Netherlands. For instance, the pupils were not provided with any support in their own languages.

According to Cummins, it takes at least five years at school before a pupil can be compared to monolingual peers. Basic communication skills in the school language, generally acquired within two years, are not enough to support high-level thinking and learning skills, but they are a start (Cummins et al. 2016; Le Pichon, Baauw & Vorstman, in preparation). When the first author of this article came back to the Netherlands from the United States where her children mainly spoke French and English, they started school at a very low level. Only after five years in the Dutch school system, they were functioning in line with their own cognitive potential. This is especially true for her sons who were 4 and 5 when they arrived to the Netherlands. This actually implies that during these five years, they had to catch up from a level below their cognitive potential to their own level. And her youngest daughter who came to the Netherlands as a baby went through the same phases. This is important because it implies that academic evaluations in these children is only useful provided the results are evaluated in the context of the pupil's linguistic disadvantage as well as the "academic catch up trajectory" the child is likely to be in. In other words, academic results should be evaluated in the context of the pupil's development. Otherwise pupils run the risk of being underestimated, since their incomplete bilingual or multilingual acquisition may mask their cognitive abilities. However, individual circumstances should be taken into account: her daughter who was seven, could already read and write in English and French when the family came back to the Netherlands, and it took her only 2 years to function at her own cognitive level.

### **School language and school evaluation**

Does it mean that multilingualism is damaging performance in school? Nowadays, there is enough scientific evidence in support of the positive relationship between multiple languages and academic achievement (Cummins, 2009). Having different first languages than the school language is not a handicap but a chance. An essential condition is that we need to support a development of the pupils that includes their entire repertoire of languages. Think for instance of classes in which both the language of the country and the children's native language are used, in addition perhaps to an international language such as English (remember that as a result of many pupils' long migration history, some of them maybe familiar with English):: Is it detrimental to the pupils? No, results indicate they are not. We should actually reverse the notion: it may be detrimental if we fail to support the cognitive development of the pupils in their own languages in addition to the school language (August, Shanahan and Escamilla, 2009).



In the study that Le Pichon and Kambel carried out in Suriname, a multilingual country that has Dutch as the official language, they found that when tested on simple arithmetic skills such as additions and subtractions, the multilingual pupils performed better in the school language (Dutch) than in their home language (Saramaccan, or another creole language). But when compared to problem solving, tests which are of course much more verbal, results showed exactly the opposite: almost 40 % of the children scored better in their own language and only 6% scored better in Dutch (Le Pichon & Kambel, 2016). This indicates that if multilingual pupils are assessed in the school language, they may perform – at least for tests that heavily rely on language – lower than their real intellectual capacities. In a monolingual school system, the reasons why multilingual pupils may get lower results are thus the tests that are given in the language in which the pupil is less fluent; the norms that are oriented towards monolingual standards and of course, the cultural biases: the pupils may not be familiar with the way of testing, with local elements of the culture. Recall that being multilingual doesn't mean that one has an equal proficiency in all of his/ her languages. Research shows that for inclusion to be successful, the languages and culture of the pupils should be included and supported to optimally stimulate the learning. This also means that teachers have to differentiate between the pupils in the classroom, to develop for each of them an own learning path. A multilingual pupil who is further in the development of the school language, even if you do not notice in the everyday language that he/she does speak another language at home, will need to be supported at school: each lesson should be a grammar and vocabulary laboratory. And this at least for 5 years!

Finally, we should ask ourselves whether near native proficiency in the school language is really a prerequisite to the development of other skills. How good must a child's knowledge of the school language be to be considered 'good enough'? We believe that newly arrived pupils should not be treated differently than other populations with a "language disadvantage" such as dyslexia. Imagine that pupils with dyslexia would be treated as newly arrived children: focussing only on their language impairment, until the impairment is "under control" (if not to say "cured"), and then sent automatically to lower levels of secondary education. The parents would react heavily and angry! Luckily enough it is not the case in The Netherlands. Instead, pupils with dyslexia receive support, in the form of speech therapy, or more time to do their exams, during their whole academic career, up to the university, if necessary. Newly arrived children should not receive a different treatment.

## ■ Take home message: A change of focus

One could ask the question whether the school language is really the biggest challenge, or whether it is the school system. It is essential to realize that school education is not only about learning subjects but that it actually involves complex processes of negotiation of identities, cultures and power relations (Creese, & Blackledge, 2015; Kenner & Ruby, 2012; Cummins, 2000). The classroom is thus a very important place in relation to the overall development of pupils. Therefore, teachers and all people working in the schools have a key role in the development of intercultural communication within their school.

So how do we make sure that we do not judge based on stereotypes and own judgements? As we know that the quality of the relationship between teachers and pupils is the key, you may ask yourself the question: *How open am I to welcome pupils with diverse backgrounds in my classroom/school?* If, for example, a teacher would allow the pupils to serve as mediators for another pupil when his/her language skills are limited, then the anxiety related to speaking in another language will be reduced. This means that pupils will dare to engage in exchanges more easily. Comprehension will be facilitated. The child's self-confidence will be reinforced. This is a strategy that we call "translanguaging". Translanguaging is a powerful tool to mediate children's mental processes, to stimulate awareness of the languages, of the world. By recognizing that children have multiple resources, teachers help children to make sense of their identity. Teachers will rely on what the pupils know instead of relying on what the children do not know. The idea is that you emphasize the talents of the pupil instead of emphasizing the lacks (for instance, García & Wei, 2014; Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

The education should serve the pupil and not the other way around. In order to contribute to the successful inclusion of migrant pupils in our school system and in this condition it is essential that we educators, when looking at these pupils, consider their languages and cultures as an enrichment not only for the child himself but also as a profound enrichment of our schools and of our society.