

# Linguistic diversity in the classroom: Embracing multilingual perspectives and pedagogies

Despite the cultural and linguistic diversity present in classrooms across various parts of the world, many education systems still follow monolingual ideologies. **Dr Sandra Zappa-Hollman**, an applied linguist at the **University of British Columbia** in Canada, is investigating how teachers view multilingual students in their classrooms and how prepared these teachers feel to implement pedagogical practices to create more inclusive spaces for all learners.



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## Fields of research

Applied linguistics, second language education, academic discourse development

## Research project

Encouraging teachers to embrace multilingual pedagogies and investigating how they engage with multilingual students

## Funders

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**S**chools are places of diversity, with students bringing a rich variety of languages and cultures to the classroom. Despite this, many education systems remain rooted in monolingual ideologies, which prioritise a single dominant language (often English) for instruction and communication. Dr Sandra Zappa-Hollman, an applied linguist at the University of British Columbia, is challenging

this approach by investigating how embracing multilingualism can enhance learning, promote equity and combat the biases that multilingual students often face.

## Language ideologies at play in education

Language ideologies are the beliefs and assumptions people hold about the roles, significance and perceived value of languages. “A monolingual language ideology is associated with the belief that there is one language (or one variety of a language) that is superior to others and should therefore be prioritised,” explains Sandra. “In contrast, a multilingual ideology is associated with the belief that the coexistence of multiple languages in society is desirable because linguistic diversity contributes to creativity and mutual understanding of different perspectives.”

These ideologies influence how languages are treated in educational settings. A monolingual ideology results in teachers enforcing the exclusive use of a single language. Until relatively recently, this was seen as the ‘normal’ and desired way to teach, while the linguistic diversity in the classroom was ignored and considered irrelevant or even problematic. However, a significant body of research demonstrates the negative impact of ‘silencing’ the linguistic diversity of students. To begin with, this monolingual approach marginalises students who speak

other languages, limiting their ability to engage fully and build on their linguistic knowledge. It’s not just learning that is impacted; research has shown that students who speak English as an additional language often face significant challenges in English-only learning environments. Their linguistic identities may be overlooked, leading to feelings of exclusion or undervaluation. In an attempt to ‘fit in’, multilingual students might abandon their native languages, which could lead to language attrition, undermined self-esteem and the loss of important cultural connections.

In contrast, a multilingual ideology considers linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier. As such, when educators make space to intentionally incorporate students’ languages into teaching, this helps create inclusive learning environments that enhance communication, promote deeper understanding and provide more equitable pathways for student engagement and participation, alongside validation of students’ identities.

## Entrenched monolingual practices in education

The prevalence of monolingual ideologies in education primarily stems from historical efforts to establish a ‘standard’ language to promote national unity. For many teachers, their own experiences often emphasise monolingual



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instruction. Furthermore, teacher education programmes rarely prioritise multilingual pedagogies, leaving teachers ill-equipped to support linguistically diverse students effectively.

Some teachers may see monolingual practices as an equaliser, believing a shared language ensures all students are on the same footing. “However, the idea of being ‘on equal footing’ by using only English as the language of instruction and assessment assumes that all students have the same linguistic resources to navigate their education in English,” says Sandra. “As has been argued, this concept of equality, while well-intentioned, can actually reinforce inequality by privileging one linguistic group (in this scenario, proficient English speakers) over others.”

### Deficit perspectives

A ‘deficit perspective’ refers to the tendency to view multilingual students as lacking in some way, often seeing their language skills or cultural background as a barrier to their success. “Teachers may adopt a deficit perspective of multilingual students out of frustration if they feel students are unable to follow along in their classes, or when students’ spoken or written contributions suggest they are still developing the language proficiency to communicate effectively,” says Sandra. “This is somewhat understandable, as without a clear understanding of how language development works, how to scaffold language and content learning at the same time, and appreciating the value of multilingualism, teachers might feel underprepared to adjust their pedagogy to effectively support all students in their class.”

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### Barriers to implementing multilingual approaches

Embracing a multilingual perspective is seen as key to creating inclusive school spaces. Yet, even if teachers are keen to embrace multilingual approaches, they may find themselves at a loss. “As teachers already have a packed curriculum to cover, they may feel that the presence of multilingual students only adds to their workload and, as a result, they may resent having multilingual students in their class,” explains Sandra. Without adequate professional development in inclusive pedagogies or integrated language and content instruction, teachers may struggle to effectively teach students who are developing language skills as well as learning academic content.

### The benefits of multilingualism

Multilingual students bring a wealth of cognitive, cultural and linguistic benefits to the classroom. Research shows that multilingualism enhances cognitive



Sandra at the 2024 American Association for Applied Linguistics conference

flexibility, memory and attention control – skills that can enrich student learning as well as the learning environment.

“Multilingual students’ knowledge of languages can enhance the linguistic awareness of other students in the classroom, as they often possess the ability to analyse and compare different linguistic aspects across languages,” says Sandra. Furthermore, the presence of multilingual students can encourage teachers to reflect on their pedagogical approaches and adapt materials to make them more relatable for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This not only validates students’ identities but also cultivates a learning environment that values diversity as a strength, enriching the educational experience for everyone.

# Instructors' perceptions of multilingual students

**S**andra was curious about how university instructors perceive their multilingual students, so she investigated whether and how they adapt their teaching practices to accommodate linguistic diversity. To do so, she surveyed and interviewed over seventy university instructors across a range of disciplinary fields.

## Understanding instructors' perceptions

"I explored instructors' pedagogical practices, specifically asking whether they felt it was important to create space for multiple languages in their classrooms, and whether they actively promoted such practices," Sandra explains.

The majority of study participants shared positive perspectives about the presence of multilingual students. Many highlighted important benefits that linguistically diverse students contribute to their classrooms, such as a wider range of perspectives brought to discussions. At the same time, many instructors distinguished between highly functional multilingual students who were able to navigate learning across languages, versus multilingual students with lower English language proficiency who were seen as struggling to succeed. In addition to concerns for these students' learning, several instructors also shared their frustration at not knowing how to best help these students. This dual perspective reflects a tension between the appreciation of linguistic diversity and the practical challenges of embracing multilingual pedagogy.

## The value of collaborations between 'language' and 'content' teachers

Some participants indicated that professional development opportunities, such as workshops, were too generic and often irrelevant to their teaching contexts. Such training failed to address their specific pedagogical needs. Instructors requested more context-sensitive, collaborative support tailored to their unique teaching situations. These collaborations can include consultations



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with colleagues who have expertise in language and literacy.

In such consultations, the first aim is to discover what may present a barrier to learning. Teachers can ask themselves: Are task instructions making it unnecessarily difficult for multilingual students to understand what is being asked of them? Are students getting confused because too much information is included, not all of it necessary for solving the task? Have examples been provided so that students get a good sense of what an appropriate solution looks like?

Gaining awareness of the barriers is a first step towards addressing the problem. This information is necessary to implement changes in the task instructions. It is then important to test the revised version of the instructions and analyse students' performance to see if there is an improvement. The instructions can then be further adjusted as necessary.

## Adapting teaching practices

"One concern often raised is that adapting course materials or teaching methods to be more accessible for multilingual students might lead to 'dumbing down' content," says Sandra. "However, this perception is misguided; making materials

more inclusive doesn't mean reducing their intellectual rigour." Instead, it involves designing instructions in ways that are accessible to diverse learners. It is also important to scaffold comprehension, for example, by using clear and precise language, visual aids, and opportunities for active participation and critical thinking. These inclusive teaching practices benefit all students in the classroom.

## The impact

"My research has identified specific gaps in support that instructors face, particularly around multilingual pedagogy in disciplinary contexts," explains Sandra. "Many instructors reported feeling inadequately prepared to teach multilingual students." This signals the need to focus on linguistically responsive instruction as part of the professional development offered to educators. Sandra is helping to update professional development resources to support instructors of multilingual students, and she collaborates with instructors to design classroom-based inquiry projects to identify language-related aspects in their pedagogy that prevent multilingual students from reaching their full potential.

# Advice for teachers

## Value your students' linguistic diversity

“The first step in supporting multilingual learners is to acknowledge the rich linguistic diversity present in the classroom,” says Sandra. “Demonstrating genuine interest in and appreciation for students’ language abilities sends a powerful message that their identities as multilingual individuals are respected and valued.” Gain awareness of what languages your students speak, and how they may rely on these for comprehension and deeper learning.

## Incorporate multicultural content

Integrate diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives into your lessons to enhance student engagement and enrich learning for all. Use examples, readings and case studies that represent the different cultural contexts of your students, and encourage them to share cultural insights relevant to the topic. This approach validates students’ backgrounds while broadening everyone’s understanding of diverse perspectives.

## Embrace multilingual pedagogies

Learn about multilingual pedagogies, such as translanguaging, which involves creating space for students to use their full linguistic repertoire to support their own learning. This means allowing (and encouraging) students to switch between languages during group conversations or individual learning. Research has shown

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that such practices improve students’ understanding of key concepts, spark curiosity, deepen engagement and boost confidence.

## Adapt your assessment practices

To ensure fair evaluation, use diverse assessment formats that allow all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in multiple ways. “Create assessments that do not assume knowledge of cultural norms that may be unfamiliar to multilingual students. If cultural norms need to be included, add an explanatory note to aid understanding,” advises Sandra.

## Embrace your role as a language facilitator

Some educators hold the belief that supporting their students’ language development is beyond their professional responsibility as a disciplinary subject

teacher. However, such a perspective overlooks the intrinsic connection between content mastery and language proficiency. “When you embrace your role as a facilitator of both content and language, you empower your students to become not only experts in the subject matter but also more competent communicators,” explains Sandra. “As a specialist in your subject, you are uniquely positioned to support your students’ language development because you have expertise in the language of your discipline.”

## Provide effective feedback

“Precise, targeted feedback can include helping students refine their use of technical vocabulary, guiding them to use language that accurately reflects disciplinary concepts, or showing them how to structure an argument or explanation in ways that align with disciplinary ways of meaning-making,” explains Sandra. “When you provide this kind of focused feedback, you are doing much more than evaluating the content of students’ work – you are helping them build the language and literacy knowledge to express themselves effectively.”

## View multilingualism as a resource

Multilingual students often possess cognitive flexibility, advanced problem-solving abilities and unique cultural insights. You can leverage these strengths by encouraging students to draw on their linguistic knowledge to analyse complex topics and explore multiple perspectives. Highlight and celebrate these skills to boost students’ confidence and show all learners the value of linguistic diversity.

## See the bigger picture

“Creating a linguistically-responsive classroom goes well beyond recognising the multilingual make up of a class,” says Sandra. “Rather, it is concerned with fostering equity and inclusion; it is a matter of social justice.” By embracing linguistic diversity, you can create a classroom culture that values empathy, mutual respect and intercultural understanding. These practices will enhance the academic success of all your students and prepare them to navigate a multicultural world.

