
Foundation for Learning: Engaging Plurilingual Students’ Linguistic Repertoires in the Elementary Classroom

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Social, cultural, and technological change has created new contexts, mobilities, and networks for communication. The language practices of individuals and communities within and across these contexts open a broadened perspective on the purposes of and approaches to language teaching and learning. The notion of plurilingualism shifts both theoretical and practical orientations to language education. Responding to this perspective, the purpose of this article is to elaborate key processes in a plurilingual approach to pedagogy that can be useful to support learners who are in the process of learning English at the...
same time as they are learning content curriculum in school. Drawing upon data gathered during a school–university research collaboration in a large Canadian city, this paper describes the role that students’ home languages can play in scaffolding language and literacy learning, affirming students’ plurilingual identities, and promoting new forms of participation in the contemporary linguistic landscape.

Plurilingualism highlights the dynamic integration of languages within an individual’s linguistic repertoire (Beacco & Byram, 2007; Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009). Developed according to individuals’ biographies, temporal encounters, and relationships with language, linguistic repertoires are not fixed or static, but dynamic and evolving along with the broadening of social experience (Blommaert & Backus, 2012; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Underlying this perspective is an emphasis on language use, and the idea that individuals draw upon the diversity of their linguistic resources according to changing social contexts and circumstances.

The significance of this notion of plurilingualism for language education is that it focuses attention on subjectivity, agency, and social context. Students’ plurilingual identities are always under construction: open, shifting, and emergent in everyday activities, and shaped by and within the practices and pedagogies of the classroom. Under-scoring language development as mediated by social context and interaction, a sociocultural perspective offers a lens through which plurilingualism can be explored as a valuable approach to language education. In particular, students’ linguistic resources can be drawn upon to scaffold language learning (Gibbons, 2002). Adding a critical dimension to this perspective, not only does plurilingualism fuel a paradigm shift in applied linguistics (May, 2011), it reveals the monolingual, monocultural assumptions that frequently underlie approaches to English language teaching. English language and literacy practices are privileged, and students who are in the process of learning English are often constructed as Other, as different, as deficient and struggling to catch up to an idealized English-speaking norm (García, 2009).

Key principles of a plurilingualism-inspired pedagogy include the recognition of students’ unique linguistic repertoires, the promotion of plurilingual language practices, and the transfer of skills between languages (see, e.g., García & Sylvan, 2011; Piccardo, 2013, this issue). Most importantly, effective classroom instruction will draw upon the full range of students’ linguistic repertoires and diverse histories as a foundation for learning (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cummins & Early, 2011; Dagenais, Walsh, Armand, & Maraillet, 2008; Marshall & Toohey, 2010). To these principles, we would add the idea that instruction that affirms students’ identities exerts a significant impact both on their self-image and the quality of their language learning.
Furthermore, the emergence of widespread access to digital media enables teachers and students to foster plurilingualism through multiple modes of representation that extend beyond the boundaries of linear one-dimensional print.

To illustrate how language teaching can connect with these potentials, we describe several examples gathered during a project involving newcomer and Canadian-born students, ages 8 to 11 years. The project took place at an elementary school in a large Canadian city. The school community is one of the top receiver communities for immigrants to Canada, and the school reports that 95% of its student population speaks a language other than English at home. Students involved in the project spoke a wide range of languages, the majority including Urdu, Pashto, Dari, Arabic, Gujarati, and Tamil. Working collaboratively with English as a second language (ESL), English for literacy development (ELD), and classroom teachers, members of the research team assisted teachers to integrate students’ home languages into literacy activities and to use digital media to publish students’ work and share it with a wider audience. Students created a variety of digital texts, including digital dual language storybooks, dual language PowerPoint presentations, and a digital documentary film. Sources of data for the research included digital audio and video recordings of classroom observations, field notes, transcripts of student and teacher interviews, and artifacts of students’ work.

Understanding linguistic repertoires as developed through a variety of trajectories and involving diverse linguistic abilities that can change over time and based on social circumstances (Blommaert & Backus, 2012; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), we considered language as developed with and in students’ dynamic, negotiated subjectivities. Students’ diverse experiences and backgrounds meant that associating language with particular speech communities was insufficient to reflect the diversity of their language knowledge and capabilities. Most of the students spoke fluently in one or two languages, and had partial oral fluency in one or two other languages in addition to English. This was particularly true for students from rural areas where the local language was different from the language in education or official national or provincial languages in their home country. For instance, Rasa,

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1 This case study took place in the context of a broader project entitled Engaging Literacies, which was financially supported by a Canada Research Chair awarded to Dr. Jim Cummins of OISE, University of Toronto.

2 In this school district, English for literacy development (ELD) classes are designed for students who have experienced gaps in their formal schooling or limited prior schooling.

3 All names are pseudonyms.
fourth-grade student from Afghanistan, shared about her language knowledge: “I know lots of languages. Dari, Pashto, Urdu, English, Hungarian, French, Spanish. I know lots of languages!” Rasa’s response was typical of many students. The students’ lists were part biographical, part indexical—both real and imagined at once. Responding perhaps to the recent expansion of experience in their lives, their developing English language abilities, their encounters with children from other countries, the French classes that they had just begun, the students were discovering what linguistic diversity meant in their school and community context. Students’ lists of languages were both personal and social, reflecting their experience of the contemporary linguistic landscape, their curiosity and interest in the languages that they were encountering, and the words they were learning from their teachers and their friends. Students’ home languages provided a scaffold for vocabulary learning and literacy activities. For instance, the teachers taught new English words thematically and in lexical chunks, and embedded vocabulary learning in the context of students’ creation of digital texts. The teachers explicitly encouraged students to use both English and their home language to support vocabulary learning and to complete pre-writing activities. Figure 1 shows a sample vocabulary activity, and Figure 2 shows a sample of students’ pre-writing work. Using students’ home languages assisted their writing process. Many students wrote stories that were quantitatively longer than they would have been in English and their stories were qualitatively much richer and more representative of their ideas than text that they could have

FIGURE 1. Sample page from student’s vocabulary work relating to words about family.
written in English at this stage in their learning. For instance, Khadija, a fourth-grade student, joined the class halfway through the first term of school. Khadija was from Afghanistan, and spoke Dari and Afghani Pashto languages. We encouraged Khadija to create a digital storybook by writing entirely in her home language. In just two days, Khadija wrote a ten-page story. Throughout this activity, Khadija’s teachers provided encouragement for her progress, showing their expectation that she could do the work, and supporting her same-language peers in helping her. The teachers used Khadija’s story to scaffold her English language acquisition, assisting her to integrate phrases that she was in the process of learning, and to add labels to her illustrations in English, which can be seen in Figure 3.

Supporting students to express themselves using the full range of their language resources created a teaching and learning context that validated students’ linguistic repertoires and plurilingual identities. Students began to experiment with ways to draw upon the multiple languages that they knew during literacy and curriculum learning activities, which is illustrated in the following two examples. Asad, a nine year old boy in fourth grade, wrote a story called My Journey to Canada. Asad wrote his story in English and in Urdu, and when it came time to present his story, he asked if he could present the story in English and in Pashto. Asad wanted to feature all the languages that he felt confident using, and though he could not write in Pashto, he wanted to incorporate his Pashto oral language abilities into his presentation. Another student, Rifat, a nine-year-old boy in third grade, worked with a classmate, Ahmed, to research

FIGURE 2. Sample page from student’s pre-writing work for a story called My Journey to Canada.
and write a PowerPoint presentation called *Traditional Foods in India and Turkey*. Ahmed prepared his part of the presentation only in English, and Rifat chose to prepare his part of the presentation in Turkish and English. Rifat reported that he could speak English, Kurdish, and Turkish, but he had only learned to write in English because he had come to Canada before first grade. Describing his presentation, Rifat said, “I am going to read it in English, but I will write in Turkish. I will look at the word in English, and then if I know it I will say it.” Rifat worked by himself to sound out Turkish words and spell them phonetically. Figure 4 shows a sample slide from Rifat’s presentation.

In this way Rifat wrote a transcription of his Turkish oral language. He delivered his presentation orally in both languages when we practiced the presentation and did the presentation for another third grade class. However, when the students did their presentations in the school library for parents and school administrators, Rifat delivered his presentation only in English. When asked about this choice, he said, “When we did the presentation in Turkish in the library, I
couldn’t do it, I couldn’t read the Turkish. I felt shy and there were butterflies in my stomach.”

The data highlighted here point to the flexibility of learners’ language practices, and the role that these practices can play in the development of plurilingual competence and English language proficiency at school. Furthermore, these data suggest that language teaching can draw on the full range of students’ cultural, linguistic, and representational skills and abilities as a foundation for learning, and as a means to promote new forms of participation in the contemporary linguistic landscape. These instructional strategies affirm students’ evolving identities as plurilingual social actors. They counteract the typical erosion of students’ linguistic repertoires under pressure from the dominant English language and enrich their personal, academic, and language learning experiences.

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Towards the Development of a Plurilingual Pedagogy: Making Use of Children’s Informal Learning Practices

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Piccardo (2013, this issue) argues that English language teachers who make use of their learners’ plurilingual and pluricultural competencies in the language classroom are effecting a paradigm shift in pedagogy: a shift in what is being taught, how progress is viewed, and the roles of learners. She describes how, in order to develop a truly plurilingual instructional philosophy, teachers will need to “help learners to become autonomous, to integrate formal and informal learning” and to “delegate some of the learning power to the students” (p. 609). This article takes the view that it is inevitable and unavoidable that teachers will face challenges in mainstream schools when they modify their monolingual disposition (Gogolin, 1994); recognise and utilize the rich linguistic learning and life experiences which their students bring to the classroom; and, in particular, value their students’ unconventional expertise in learning practices associated with plurilingual language use that they develop outside the classroom. We argue that practitioners in mainstream schools have much to learn from the informal learning practices of plurilingual students, and that practitioners may be unaware of many students’ learning activities in their out-of-school time. These activities