TOWARD A PLURILINGUAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT Drawing on current theoretical perspectives on language and bilingualism, this paper explores implications for language teaching and learning in the educational context. Traditionally, understandings of language and bilingualism have been rooted in cognitive perspectives on second language acquisition that emphasize language systems rather than language users. This emphasis has contributed to prioritizing acquisition of native-like proficiency in the target language (such as English) rather than the functional integration and dynamic use of languages by bilingual speakers. Recently, sociolinguistic perspectives have highlighted the variability among bilingual speakers and patterns of bilingual language use, foregrounding the fluid, dynamic use of one or more languages as bilingual speakers communicate across different social domains and contexts. Engaging with the differences between these understandings of language, several scholars in bilingual education and applied linguistics have pointed out the monolingual bias in education, which tends to exclude not only bilingual language practices but also minority or non-dominant languages from the classroom and from curriculum learning. Bridging the frequent separation of home and school language practices, this paper articulates key processes in a plurilingual approach to pedagogy that explicitly draws upon students' home languages as resources for teaching and learning in English-medium classrooms. In particular, the paper highlights several examples drawn from a school-university research partnership that supported English as a Second Language (ESL) and classroom teachers at the elementary level to integrate students' home languages into teaching and learning activities. The school involved in the research partnership was multilingual and multicultural, with 97% of the students speaking a language other than English at home, and 30% of the students having been born outside of Canada. Within this context, teachers drew on students' home languages to: *1)* scaffold English vocabulary and literacy development; *2)* support students' bilingual language and literacy; and *3)* assist students to develop their plurilingual identities. Taken together, these findings illustrate the kinds of plurilingual language practices that are possible in multilingual classrooms. Moreover, a plurilingual approach to pedagogy reflects contemporary understandings of bilingualism in society, and offers a means to engage with the rich linguistic resources present in Ontario classrooms and communities. Further, this approach aligns with a culturally responsive and inclusive approach to education that recognizes the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in Canadian society.

RÉSUMÉ S'appuyant sur les perspectives théoriques actuelles sur la langue et le bilinguisme, cet article examine leurs implications sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues en contexte scolaire. Traditionnellement, notre façon de concevoir le langage et le bilinguisme était enracinée dans des approches cognitives de l'acquisition d'une langue seconde axées davantage sur les systèmes linguistiques plutôt que sur les utilisateurs de la langue.

Cet accent contribuait à prioriser l'acquisition de compétences linguistiques équivalentes à un locuteur natif de la langue cible (par ex l'anglais) plutôt qu'une intégration fonctionnelle et une utilisation dynamique de différentes langues par des locuteurs bilingues. Récemment, des perspectives sociolinguistiques ont souligné qu'il existe une grande variabilité dans la maîtrise linguistique de différents locuteurs bilingues et dans les modes d'utilisation du bilinguisme, insistant sur le fait que les individus bilingues utilisent une ou plusieurs langues de façon fluide et dynamique selon différents contextes et domaines sociaux. En tentant de comprendre ces différentes conceptions du langage, plusieurs chercheurs en éducation bilingue et en linguistique appliquée ont souligné l'existence d'un biais monolingue en enseignement, qui tend à exclure non seulement les pratiques linguistiques bilingues, mais aussi les langues minoritaires ou non dominantes de la salle de cours et du curriculum. Afin d'essayer de combler l'écart qui sépare fréquemment les langues utilisées à la maison et à l'école, cet article décrit les principaux processus de l'approche plurilingue en enseignement, qui utilisent explicitement les langues d'origine des élèves comme ressources pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans les cours de langue anglaise. Plus spécifiquement, cet article fait état de plusieurs exemples issus d'une recherche partenariale école/université qui encourageait les enseignants d'anglais langue seconde (ALS) et les enseignants du primaire à intégrer les langues maternelles de leurs élèves dans leurs activités d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. L'école qui a participé à ce partenariat est multilingue et multiculturelle; 97 % des élèves parlent une langue autre que l'anglais à la maison et 30 % sont nés à l'extérieur du Canada. Dans ce contexte, les enseignants ont puisé dans les langues utilisées à la maison par les élèves pour : *1)* renforcer le vocabulaire et la maîtrise de l'anglais ; *2)* soutenir le développement du bilinguisme des élèves ; et *3)* aider les élèves à former leurs identités plurilingues. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats nous indiquent que plusieurs pratiques linguistiques plurilingues sont possibles dans les classes multilingues. De plus, une approche plurilingue en enseignement concorde avec notre conception contemporaine de la place du bilinguisme dans la société d'aujourd'hui et constitue une façon de prendre en compte les riches ressources linguistiques présentes dans les salles de classe et les communautés en Ontario. Et finalement, cette approche correspond à l'éducation inclusive et culturellement adaptée qui reconnaît la valeur de la diversité culturelle et linguistique de la société canadienne.

INTRODUCTION

In the province of Ontario, educators are developing greater knowledge and expertise for teaching in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. This capacity is being built as educators respond to the growing number of students who are newcomers to Canada and/or Canadian-born children from newcomer families. For example, among the 2.1 million students in the province of Ontario, 27% were born outside of Canada, and a great proportion of these students speak a language other than English or French at home (Gallagher, 2014). Some schools, particularly in urban areas, have a majority of students who speak other languages at home. These circumstances point to the linguistic diversity present in Ontario classrooms and communities, suggesting a need for clear, evidence-based policies on the role of home languages in education. Current theoretical and empirical studies on language in education provide a rationale for exploring whether and how home languages might be drawn upon as a resource for language, literacy and curriculum learning. Moreover, many educators, in their classrooms, are already experimenting with strategies for incorporating students' home languages into teaching and learning activities as a means to support student learning and engagement. Addressing these issues, the purpose of this article is to articulate key processes in a plurilingual approach to pedagogy that recognizes and builds upon linguistic diversity in the elementary classroom.

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Evaluating approaches to language in education requires understanding conceptualizations of language and bilingualism. The way that language and language use is understood has implications for not only how educators teach language, but also for how educators teach about language and/or include minority or non-dominant languages in the classroom. Traditionally, understandings of language and bilingualism have been rooted in cognitive perspectives on second language acquisition that emphasize language *systems* rather than language *users*. This emphasis has contributed to prioritizing acquisition of native-like proficiency in the target language (such as English) rather than the functional integration and dynamic use of languages by bilingual speakers. Recently, sociolinguistic perspectives have highlighted the variability among bilingual speakers and patterns of bilingual language use, foregrounding the fluid, dynamic use of one or more languages as bilingual speakers communicate across different social domains and contexts. Engaging with the differences between these understandings of language, several scholars in bilingual education and applied linguistics have pointed out the monolingual bias in education, which tends to exclude not only bilingual language practices but also minority or non-dominant languages from the classroom and from curriculum learning.

The exclusion of students' home languages from the edu-

cational context can be limiting, and does not reflect how bilingual individuals and communities use language in everyday life. For example, the contemporary globalized context can be characterized by a *"multiplicity of multilingual discourses"* (Garcia, 2009, p. 53) as people with diverse linguistic repertoires mix and shift between languages in unique and complex ways to interact and communicate with others. The concept of *translanguaging* has been used to describe the language practices of bilingual speakers (Baker, 2011; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; García, 2009; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012). Translanguaging refers to speakers' shifts between two or more languages within communication or activities, highlighting the functional integration of linguistic repertoires among bilingual individuals and communities. Li Wei & Wu (2009) describe the importance of recognizing translanguaging practice, calling it:

> *"the most distinctive behavior of the bilingual speaker; there is no better behavioural indicator to show that a speaker is bilingual than when he or she is using two languages simultaneously in social interaction"* (p. 193).

In multilingual classrooms where students are proficient in more than one shared language, educators can often see students shifting seamlessly between languages both in and out of class. This evidence from practice illustrates how bilingual students can use their second or additional language(s) along with, not in place of their first language (L1). Describing a model of bilingualism that accounts for these circumstances, Garcia (2009) offers the idea of "dynamic bilingualism" to highlight the differentiated, multiple, and flexible language proficiency of bilinguals rather than a model of bilingual proficiency that maintains first and second (L2) or additional languages as discrete. Similarly, the term "plurilingual" has emerged out of the European context, promoted by the Council of Europe and the use of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. Plurilingualism and plurilingual competence refer to:

> *... the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social actor has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the social actor may draw* (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 2009, p. 11).

The theories of dynamic bilingualism and plurilingualism move beyond the separation of languages toward an understanding of bilingual proficiency that recognizes the hybrid language practices of bilingual speakers. Importantly, these theories can inform an "additive" approach to language teaching and learning that aims to add a new language to students' existing linguistic repertoires and maintain their home language proficiency, rather than a "subtractive" approach that tends to marginalize home language practices (Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2009).

Understanding language and bilingualism from these perspectives can assist educators to see linguistic diversity not as a problem, but a resource in the classroom. In particular, these models of bilingualism can give educators a reason to draw upon other languages in the classroom as a means to accomplish four goals:

- support the bilingual development of students who are in the process of learning English;
- scaffold academic English vocabulary and literacy development;
- promote language awareness; and
- assist students to develop their identities as bilingual speakers.

Similarly, allowing and indeed fostering translanguaging in the classroom can be a way for educators to demonstrate the value linguistic diversity, not only in education but also in society. These strategies can promote a broad vision for education that is both culturally responsive, and inclusive of the rich linguistic knowledge present in Ontario classrooms and communities. Further, these strategies help to create a counter-discourse to the dominant perspective that languages other than English or French have no place in Ontario schools.

PLURILINGUAL PEDAGOGY

Bridging the frequent separation of home and school language practices (Cummins, 2000), in what follows I articulate key processes in a plurilingual approach to pedagogy that explicitly draws upon students' home languages as resources for learning in English-medium classrooms. In particular, I share several examples drawn from a school-university research partnership in which I, as part of a team of university-based researchers, assisted English as a Second Language (ESL) and classroom teachers at the elementary level to integrate students' home languages into teaching and learning activities. The school involved in the research partnership was multilingual and multicultural, with 97% of the students speaking a language other than English at home, and 30% of the students having been born outside of Canada.

Working together, we co-constructed pedagogic practices for incorporating students' home languages into the classroom. Below, I offer a brief explanation and example of these practices to illustrate several aims of a plurilingual approach to pedagogy.

SCAFFOLD ACADEMIC ENGLISH VOCABULARY AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Students' linguistic resources can be drawn upon to scaffold vocabulary learning and academic concept development, writing processes, and curriculum learning (Gibbons, 2002). For example, pre-teaching vocabulary for a lesson on families, the teachers actively encouraged students to use both English and their home languages to learn new words. This strategy is illustrated by the image of student work in figure 1

Similarly, teachers encouraged students to use their home languages for pre-writing activities, assisting students to generate ideas for writing in their L1. Students were able to generate more ideas in their home languages than they were capable of writing in English at this stage of their English language proficiency development, and teachers encouraged students to use these ideas as content for their English writing. Figure 2 illustrates a graphic organizer that students used to organize ideas for writing, using both English and their home language.

SUPPORT THE BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS WHO ARE IN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING ENGLISH

Using students' home languages in the classroom assisted students to develop new vocabulary and write in their home languages. Teachers encouraged students to complete culminating curricular tasks using both English and home languages. For instance, students created dual-language storybooks and dual-language presentations. Though all the students had oral language proficiency in their home languages, not all students were able to write in their home languages. Parents and same-language peers assisted students to translate and write words, and one student noted:

> *"It was interesting, to learn new words in our languages. First we learned the words, and then put it into sentences."*

Similarly, another student observed:

> *"It's really neat to speak it [my home language] at school, because other kids at school can learn it too."*

For a social studies activity on communities, Rifat, a boy in third grade, worked with a classmate, Hassam, to research and write a PowerPoint presentation called *Traditional Foods in India and Turkey*. Hassam 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. Rifat was unable to get help from other students or family members to write his presentation in Turkish, so he worked by himself to sound out the Turkish words that he wanted to say, spelling them phonetically. The figure below shows a sample slide from Rifat's presentation in Turkish.

This example illustrates how teachers might connect students' home languages with curriculum learning, promoting the development of conceptual and subject-area vocabulary knowledge in students' home language(s) in the context of cognitively challenging academic material (Lightbrown, 2014).

ASSIST STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THEIR PLURILINGUAL IDENTITIES

The explicit acknowledgement and incorporation of students' home language practices in English-medium classrooms can send a message to students that they have an advantage by being bilingual, and that their linguistic knowledge and flexibility is an asset to learning. For example, Asad, a boy in fourth grade wrote a story called *My Journey to Canada* in English and Urdu. When it came time to present his story to parents and classmates at the end of the term, Asad 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. This example illustrates how students' home language practices can influence and shape flexible language practices in the classroom. As Wei (2011) writes:

> *"The act of translanguaging then is transformative in nature; it creates a social space for the multilingual language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, beliefs and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance, and makes it into a lived experience"* (p. 1223).

Allowing and supporting students to think and communicate using the full range of their language resources creates a teaching and learning context that validates students' linguistic repertoires, and affirms their home language practices as legitimate and appropriate in the educational context.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the kinds of plurilingual language practices that are possible in multilingual classrooms. Further, these examples point to opportunities available to draw upon students' home languages to scaffold academic English vocabulary and literacy development, support the bilingual development of students who are in the process of learning English, and assist students to develop

FIGURE 1. SAMPLE PAGE FROM VOCABULARY ACTIVITY USING STUDENT'S HOME LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH

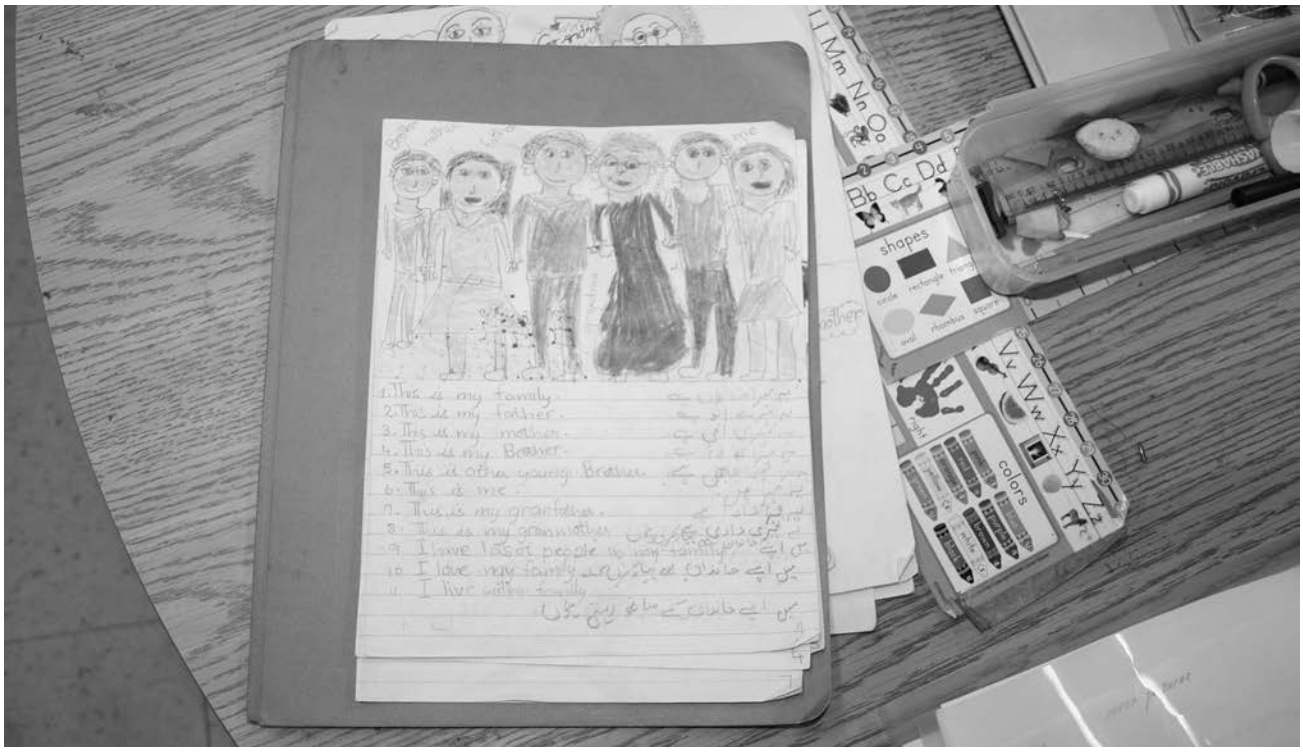
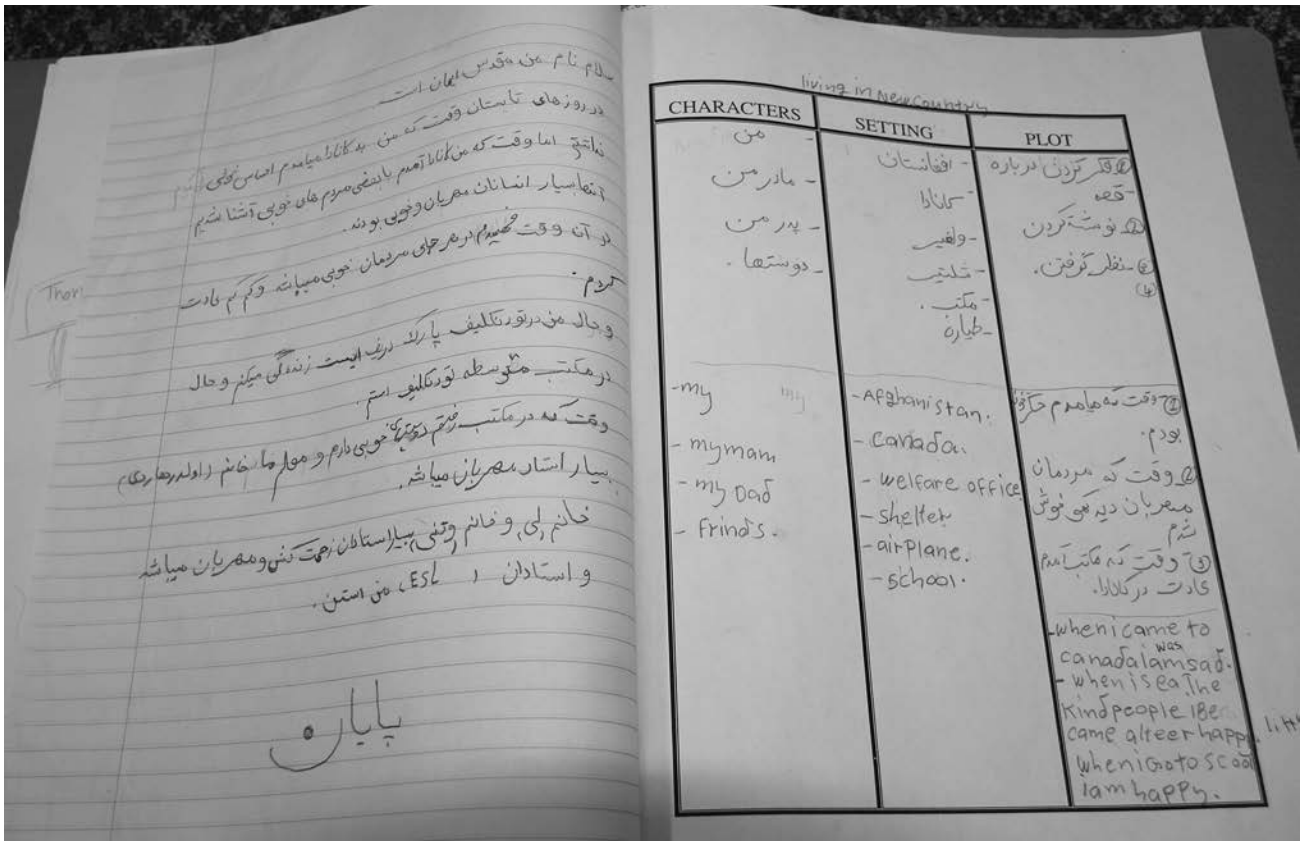


FIGURE 2. SAMPLE PAGE FROM PRE-WRITING ACTIVITY USING STUDENT'S HOME LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH.



their plurilingual identities. Educators can experiment with a plurilingual approach to pedagogy at the elementary level through the use of strategies that include:

- Using textual resources that were written from different perspectives, including indigenous stories and songs, multicultural children's literature and poetry, dual-language books, and bilingual dictionaries;

- Inviting parents and special guests into the classroom to volunteer and to share information from different cultural perspectives;

- Creating visual displays that highlighted students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds;

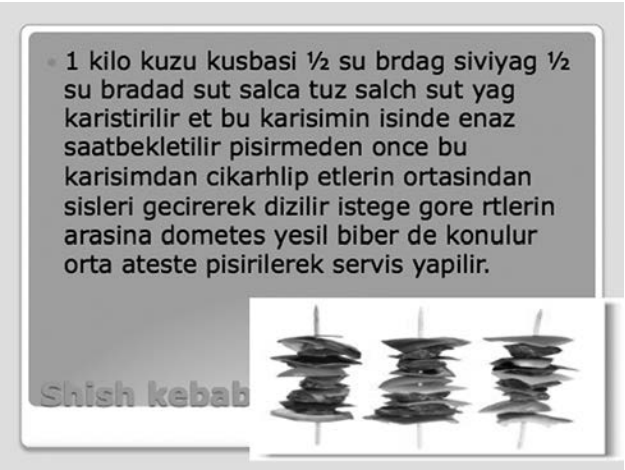
- Using Internet resources to explore curricular concepts from different global perspectives, such as digital images and videos created in other global locations;

- Encouraging students to name curricular concepts in other languages and compare understandings from different cultural perspectives and global locations;

- Encouraging students to use home languages as well as English to make meaning in writing and in collaborative work.

A plurilingual approach to pedagogy reflects contemporary understandings of bilingualism in society, and offers a means to engage with the rich linguistic resources present in Ontario classrooms and communities. Moreover, this approach aligns with a culturally responsive and inclusive approach to education that recognizes the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in Canadian society.

FIGURE 3. SAMPLE SLIDE FROM RIFAT'S PRESENTATION ABOUT *TRADITIONAL FOODS IN INDIA AND TURKEY* IN ENGLISH AND TURKISH.



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