



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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**UNESCO**



# LANGUAGES AND MULTILINGUALISM IN THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION

**An International Perspective**

## INTRODUCTION

This report, ‘Languages and Multilingualism in the Futures of Education’, was prepared by Bilingualism Matters in response to UNESCO’s Futures of Education consultation. Through this initiative, UNESCO proposes to consider the role of education as a common good in 2050 and beyond. It takes education as the key to building a more sustainable planet and more equal societies. Our focus in this report will be on the role of languages in education and the crucial role they can play in responding to the multiple challenges the world is currently facing.

We believe that this is a pivotal time to promote an understanding of the role of languages in education. The national academies the United States, Canada, UK and Australia have issued an unprecedented joint statement highlighting the key role of languages and calling on societies to take coordinated action to increase capacity for accessible language education and to “normalise” language learning. Fostering multilingualism and language learning is explicitly mentioned as a priority in the 2020 European Commission document on the European Education Area, and is the theme of the 2021 International Mother Language Day.

This report is based on a consultation with senior members of the Bilingualism Matters International Network involved in language education in their respective countries (China, England, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Norway, Poland, Scotland and the USA).

## GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGES

Language plays a central role in education across the world. It is the primary learning and teaching medium via which contents, cultural values and worldviews are transmitted. It is also a crucial part of the school curriculum. In both cases, preference is generally given to global languages at the expense of the minoritized, indigenous and heritage languages.

Over half of the world's population is multilingual. Yet, it is largely the monolingual norms, standards and attitudes that define education, research and how societies are organised.

Despite the existence of perhaps 7000 languages and language varieties across the world, a few global languages dominate formal education, relying on solid foundations of past colonisation and emergence of national states. While this increased potential for global communication is a positive trend, it is unfortunately coupled with explicit and intentional marginalization and denigration of minoritized languages and language varieties. The natural process of language change that affects all languages in mutual contact is often seen as undesirable and polluting native standards.

Across the world, languages face different challenges: some shared universally and others specific to particular countries and regions. Many societies, both in the Global North and the Global South, face internal as well as international migration, with challenges around how to embrace and address the increased linguistic diversity that comes with it. The role of English, as one of the main global languages and the language of choice in foreign language education across many countries, has been recognised as contributing to the dramatic reduction of linguistic diversity. A 2020 joint statement on these issues by the learned societies of Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA has called for international action and a renewed commitment to multilingualism and language education<sup>1</sup>. UNESCO acknowledged the value of minority and indigenous language as the main focus of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous languages<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/the-importance-of-languages-in-global-context-an-international-call-to-action/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.iyil2019.org>

### ◆ Languages and linguistic diversity at the heart of education

In the world we envisage, languages are at the core of education. The diverse linguistic backgrounds that students bring to the classroom are employed as a resource in achieving educational goals and as a medium to achieve inclusion and equity. In this ideal world, educational trajectories are motivated by the aim of having every child become fluent and fully literate in more than one language. Linguistic diversity across languages and modalities (spoken, signed and written) is understood and valued, and is regarded as an important resource for meeting learning objectives. All teachers understand that they are language teachers, who see linguistic diversity in their classrooms as an important resource for meeting learning objectives and feel equipped, motivated and skilled to harness this diversity towards cognitive, social and educational benefits for all pupils.

Global languages thrive alongside national, minoritized, heritage, and indigenous languages. Myths about multilingualism leading to language deterioration, which fuel unjustified worries, are dispelled and replaced by awareness of research-based generalisations pointing to the normality of language change in lively languages.

Linguistic diversity placed at the heart of education leads to better interaction, communication, and collaboration within and beyond the classroom, facilitated and enhanced - but not replaced - by digital learning.

### ◆ Languages link formal and informal education

In the world we envisage, formal language learning is complemented by informal language learning and teaching taking place at home and in the communities of migrants, minoritized and indigenous populations, as a valued and recognised part of a diverse educational system. Speaking a home language different from the languages of instruction is perceived as normal, encouraged and supported; it is also recognised as part of assessment standards and educational achievements. The status of minoritized, heritage and indigenous languages, and dialects is regarded as equal to that of global languages and standardized varieties, and this is reflected in education. Language learning spans formal and informal education at all ages across the lifespan.

### ◆ Languages are taught and assessed according to new standards

In the world we envisage, educational systems are prepared to embrace, value and develop students' heritage, indigenous and minority languages skills. Languages are taught using research- and experience-based methods and approaches, which are appropriate to skills, age, and cultural and educational context of learners. Assessment methods and standards take into account linguistic diversity, and are not exclusively based on monolingual norms.

### ◆ Researchers work together with societies

Research on multilingualism from all related fields informs teacher training, educational practice and language learning policies, and creates resources to support multilingualism in communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Support and improve educational approaches that draw on and encourage linguistic diversity, such as translanguaging, immersion programmes, dual learning programmes, and complementary schools.
- ◆ Strengthen links between community and formal education.
- ◆ Promote content-and-language-integrated learning and plurilingual approaches to learning, rather than single-language-medium instruction, whether it is in English or another language.
- ◆ Promote awareness of linguistic diversity in modality by focusing on both spoken and sign languages, and different writing systems.
- ◆ Promote research-based approaches to speech therapy offered to bilinguals and bilingual children with special needs.
- ◆ Create or co-create new resources for these approaches, and support the dissemination of existing resources for teacher training and innovation in digital learning.
- ◆ Make research on language learning and teaching available to educationalists in different forms tailored to specific contexts, and encourage consultation as a basis for further developments.
- ◆ Make research-based information accessible to all, contributing to changing attitudes towards other languages and linguistic diversity.
- ◆ Empower families and children to feel confident about home language use by providing them with tailored information about multilingualism and language learning.
- ◆ Use engaged research-based knowledge on multilingualism and language learning across the lifespan as a basis for training future generations of researchers in different fields to communicate with general audiences, teachers, educationalists, and policy makers.

## BILINGUALISM MATTERS (BM)

Bilingualism Matters ([www.bilingualism-matters.org](http://www.bilingualism-matters.org)) is a research and public engagement centre, founded by Professor Antonella Sorace in 2008 at the University of Edinburgh, that aims to bridge the gap between research and different sectors of society, enabling people to make informed professional or personal decisions on bilingualism and language learning across the lifespan.

BM heads a growing network of 27 active branches spread across 18 countries in 3 continents. All branches exist in order to provide the general public with information based on research about bilingualism, enabling informed decisions and responding to the specific needs of their local communities.

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