

o. Knowing and using the languages present in the classroom



To identify the home languages spoken by children as well as their language skills and language practices at home is a valuable resource that can enhance communication, support learning, and foster a more inclusive school environment.

Understanding which languages children speak at home is crucial for several reasons:

- **Cultural Sensitivity**

Acknowledging and respecting a child's home language fosters a culturally inclusive classroom environment. This recognition validates the child's cultural identity and can enhance their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

- **Identifying Learning Needs**

Sometimes, difficulties in learning may be wrongly attributed to cognitive or behavioural issues when they are actually related to language proficiency in the school language. Awareness of the home language can help in distinguishing between language acquisition issues and other learning challenges.

- **Social and Emotional Support**

Children navigating multiple languages and cultures might face unique social and emotional challenges. Teachers informed about their linguistic backgrounds can better support these students, fostering an environment where they feel understood and accepted.

- **Resource Allocation**

Schools and districts can use data about home languages to allocate resources more effectively, such as hiring bilingual teachers, creating dual-language programs, and providing appropriate learning materials.

- **Equal Chances for plurilingual students and their families**

By providing content in multiple languages, referred to the home languages of their students, schools can better support the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their communities, ensuring that all students and their families have equal access to information and educational opportunities. This approach not only helps students feel more connected and engaged but also empowers parents to participate more fully in their children's education, thus creating a more cohesive and supportive learning environment.

However!

Students and their families sometimes feel ashamed of their heritage, home languages, and cultures, which can lead to discomfort when schools inquire about these aspects. This reluctance can stem from a fear of judgement or discrimination, making it challenging for educators to gather accurate information. Additionally, students and parents often feel ashamed if they do not speak the school language well or because of their accents, which can further hinder an open communication about plurilingual practices at home.

Therefore, teachers require a high degree of sensitivity when collecting information about it. They also need to explain **why** they are interested in knowing more about the home languages of their students, for example:

- in order to refer to home languages and family traditions at classes and school projects
- to better understand students and support them emotionally
- to use the plurilingual competence of children within the school community (but not as interpreter between school and parents)

How to identify the languages spoken by children at home?

School staff can employ several strategies to collect information on the languages children speak at home:

1. **Language Survey Forms:** Distributing language survey forms to parents at the beginning of the school year is a common practice. These forms typically include questions about the languages spoken at home, sometimes also about the proficiency level in each language, and any additional information that might be relevant.
2. **Parent-Teacher Conferences:** During parent-teacher conferences, teachers can directly ask parents about the languages spoken at home. This can provide an opportunity for more detailed discussions and clarification if needed. However, it is crucial to explain to parents why you are interested to know more about the home languages spoken in the family and provide a positive signal that the plurilingual competences of the students are valued.
3. **Informal Conversations and Multilingual spaces at school to explore and talk about home languages and plurilingual practices:** Teachers and school staff can engage in informal conversations with students and their families to learn more about the languages spoken at home.

Creating informal multilingual spaces at school involves organising activities and events that celebrate and incorporate the diverse languages spoken by families. Schools can host multicultural fairs, language exchange cafes, and storytelling sessions where parents and students share tales in their native languages. Teachers and staff can learn basic greetings and phrases in various languages to use during daily interactions, fostering a welcoming environment. Additionally,

providing multilingual signage and resources, and encouraging parents to participate in school activities using their preferred languages, helps build rapport and acknowledges the value of their plurilingual practices. This approach not only supports language diversity but also strengthens the connection between families and the school community.

a. Language portrait

To get interested in the children's languages and understand what those languages mean for them, there are several activities which can be done in the class.

The most known is the language portrait.

The language portrait helps to raise awareness of the languages used. It allows one to visualise the languages of one individual. It all started at the beginning of 1990's with Birgitta Busch² who was interested in mapping the languages on the body.

The idea is to use the silhouette of a human body and to colour in the various languages that you speak linked to the feelings and ideas you have about each of your languages.

The language portrait is another manner to represent the language repertoire of the children. It will help you as a teacher to understand the linguistic practice of the children as well as the emotional language experience (Busch, 2018). It is not a tool box of the languages of the children, but rather the presentation of what the languages they children know mean for them and the relationship they have with them. When asking children to portrait their languages, it is interesting to talk with them about those portraits, why they put such languages at such places in their body silhouette and why they used such or such a colour. It is a way for you as a teacher to start a conversation about the languages of the children and understand them better. Those languages are part of their identity. You can ask them why they put such a language in such a part of their body, why they choose such a colour, etc.... all those questions will help you understand what those languages mean for the children and how they use them.

According to the age of the pupils, those language portraits can help explore language ideologies, language attitudes.

When doing this activity of language portrait, it is important to give as little instruction as possible. It is important to let the children choose one colour or several colours. To let them add stripes, circles, dots... if they feel like it. The only thing to say would be: I would be interested in knowing where you put all your languages on this silhouette. It is important to let them know there is no right way, or no wrong way to do it.

² https://heteroglossia.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publication/busch18_The_language_portrait_copy.pdf

When discussing about those portraits, you could, for example, ask:
 whether there are languages they did not add and why;
 where do they use the languages, they put and why those colours;
 can they speak, understand, read and write in all the languages represented.

Here are some silhouette which are commonly used others can be found on our website



And this is what they can look like when the children have coloured their languages. A language portrait means to put into a drawing the importance of all these languages for you. It's showing what the languages mean to you in one single drawing. Indeed, we all have a language of heart, it is often our mother tongue, the one we learned with our parents. There is the language we use in society. There is the language we use in school. To these, we can add the language of the person we love, the one of our in-laws, the one of the country where we live, the languages we have learned at school, the languages we have encountered in our travels, in our expatriations... those that have remained within us, those that we think we have forgotten. We are all dipped into these languages. In the language portrait, languages are not represented according to our skills in the latter, but rather according to our attachment and the meaning they have for us.

Developed by Brigitta Busch, these language portraits enabled teachers and educators to understand the linguistic identity of their learners. They are also used in certain therapies related to migration, inclusion, education... because they allow us to understand part of the history of people and children who are in consultation. They are also very useful to develop language awareness in schools and to enable children to discover that their classmates sometimes speak unfamiliar languages and give them the opportunity to discover them. They are used in many different ways.

You can simply choose to do it for yourself and your family. Because it can help you to better develop the plurilingualism that you want to pass on to your children. How?

You can either draw a character, a figure, that would represent your languages. You can also choose to represent your languages with a flower, a village... You must list all the languages you know and ask yourself questions about them. It is important to take everything into account. This allows you to understand how important these languages are for you. Why are they in my life? Why do I need them? Why do I like them or not? Visualising your languages allows you to take a step back on the bilingualism and/or plurilingualism that you live. These portraits allow us to create the linguistic reality that we had never expressed or that we were not aware of. They are a representation of our language journey at a given time, since our experiences with languages change over time. They give us a picture of our languages, of how we perceive them, of our attitudes towards them.

b. Language flowers

The Language flowers is another way to learn to know which languages are spoken in the class. The idea is to give each pupil a paper petal on which he/she can write or draw about the languages they speak and which are important to them. All the petals will create a big language flower which can be put on the wall of the class or in a vase when adding sticks to each petal

c. DLC - Dominant Language Constellation

Children like to do things with their hands.

They can create their own language constellation with modelling clay. The DLC is a way to visualise your languages in a 3D manner. It is a way of showing the languages you master and how they rotate together.

<https://www.dominant-language-constellations.com/>

d. Translanguaging

Translanguaging is a teaching method that uses the languages of the students to teach in the class. It started in Wales in the 1980's and was re-developed by Ofélia Garcia. The idea of translanguaging is to let the students use all their languages in the learning process in the class. It is a dynamic pedagogical process which helps the students get confidence in their academic learning.

We are providing more information about translanguaging [on our website](#) and modules.