

Assessment of Plurilingual Competence and Plurilingual Learners in Educational Settings

Educative Issues and Empirical Approaches

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Chapter 3

Examining plurilingual repertoires: A focus on policy, practice, and assessment in the Australian context

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3 Examining plurilingual repertoires

A focus on policy, practice, and
assessment in the Australian
context

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Introduction

Changing patterns of forced and voluntary migration have significantly increased linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, and religious diversity around the world. Dynamic linguistic and cultural diversity characterises much of the educational landscape in the global north and south and is realised in many Australian schools and classrooms (D'warte & Slaughter, 2021). Australia's 120 surviving Indigenous languages (AIATSIS, 2018) have been joined by more than 200 languages, spoken by over 20 per cent of Australians as the primary home language (ABS, 2017). Although unevenly distributed, many Australian classrooms are increasingly super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007), comprising young people who are bidialectal/bilingual and plurilingual, and include speakers of languages other than English, monolingual speakers of English, and young people who are first language speakers of Aboriginal Englishes (AEs).

Over the last 10 years, for example, in New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state in Australia, the proportion of school-aged students who speak languages other than English has grown steadily from 29.4 per cent in 2010 to more than a third in 2020 (NSW DET, 2021). In 2020, 36.9 per cent of students came from homes where languages other than English were spoken by either the students themselves and/or at least one parent or carer, with the diversity of language backgrounds of students increasing by 12 per cent from 217 languages in 2010 to 243 languages in 2020 (NSW DET, 2021). In the second most populous state, Victoria, 32 per cent of school-aged students are identified as being from a language background other than English (Victoria DET, 2020), while in the Northern Territory, over 100 Indigenous languages and dialects are spoken, with around 50 per cent of the school-aged population coming from families that use languages other than English at home (NT DET, 2021a).

Across the diverse educational jurisdictions in Australia, the positioning of linguistic and cultural resources in relation to educational policies, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy is therefore of critical importance. Governmental responses to languages as a resource, however, have been highly politicised (Lo Bianco, 2010) and vacillated over many decades. Responses have also

been complicated by the federated nature of Australian politics whereby responsibility for education is predominantly devolved to each state and territory and each jurisdiction (Government, Catholic and Independent school sectors). At times, however, national directives have generated cohesion across jurisdictional contexts. In the 1980s, in predominantly English-speaking countries in the global north, Australia was considered a progressive innovator in language-in-education policy and Australia's 1987 *National Policy on Languages* (NPL) (Lo Bianco, 1987) was one of the first multilingual language policies in an English-speaking country (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2017). Nevertheless, since this time, collaborative language policy processes across sectors, states, and territories have diminished, and Australian educational policy has persistently shifted towards monocultural and monolingual conceptualisations of language and literacy in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Coleman, 2012; Eisenclas et al., 2015). These conceptualisations fail to recognise and value students' diverse linguistic resources, and limit opportunities for student resources to be leveraged for learning within educational settings, yet some small progressions in innovative policy and practices, as discussed in this chapter, are beginning to emerge.

In this chapter, we broadly discuss current policy and practice pertaining to language and literacy in the Australian context, with a particular focus on assessment. We consider the significant linguistic, cognitive, and social benefits that can be derived from recognising and harnessing students' plurilingual repertoire (Cummins, 2009; D'warte & Slaughter, 2021; French & Armitage, 2020; Oliver et al., 2021; Orellana & Garcia-Sanchez, 2019) alongside the competing tensions of predominantly monolingual, monoglossic educational policies and curricula, and the resulting implications for assessment practices in Australia. We present the current affordances and challenges offered for mainstream Australian classrooms and consider the role of policy and research in furthering plurilingual pedagogies and assessment in the Australian context.

Language and literacy policies and assessment in Australia

With a long Indigenous history, and a recent migration history, Australia has a complex story of multilingualism marked by the subjugation of Indigenous languages, and language and literacy policies that authorise monolingual, English-only practices (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2017; Schalley et al., 2015). Much has been written about the Australian language and literacy policy context over time. The scrutiny of policy has been substantial over recent decades, with dozens of reports into language policies being produced. These reports have illustrated the diverse linguistic needs of Australians, and the competing ideologies that can pull policies in different directions (e.g., Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2017; Schalley et al., 2015). Policy goals have focused on three main imperatives. First has been a focus on ensuring that all Australians have English language proficiency, including English monolingual students and

those who are learning English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D), with particular emphasis on English literacy. Second has been a focus on the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of community languages, supported by governmental policy and funding initiatives as well as through community-driven initiatives, while the third focus has been on the acquisition of second or additional languages, with a significant focus on the study of Asian languages. At various points, these differing goals have coalesced in policy initiatives, but more often than not, the divergent tendencies they represent have created inherent tensions and policy polarities (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2017) and have failed to acknowledge the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in Australia's pre-school and school-aged population.

While there have arguably been five key language and literacy policies in the last 35 years in Australia (see, e.g., Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2017, pp. 454–456; cf. Schalley et al., 2015, p. 164), the most celebrated policy has been Australia's 1987 *NPL* (Lo Bianco, 1987). The *NPL* was a bipartisan national policy on languages, which reflected the influence of both social and economic interests within Australia, and provided broad support, including funding, for the social and educational use and development of languages and language-related services. However, the universal rationale of the *NPL*, informed by an extensive, nationwide consultation process, was quickly overrun by the ascendancy of economic rationalism and a series of policies focused on English literacy (Scarino, 2014). The *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (*ALLP*) was introduced in 1991, with the then Education Minister, John Dawkins, proclaiming that 'literacy in English for all Australians must be a necessary, if not sufficient, overarching first goal' (Brock, 2001, p. 55). In a short period of time, policies and language plans (see Scarino, 2014) moved from being 'comfortably pluralistic and supportive of cultural and linguistic diversity' towards the positioning of linguistic diversity as problematic and a key contributor to lower English literacy levels (Schalley et al., 2015, p. 169). In their analysis of literacy-related policies over recent decades, Schalley et al. (2015) argue that the more linguistically and culturally diverse Australia has become, 'the more assimilationist the policies, and the more monolingual the orientation of the society that governments have sought to establish' (p. 162).

This turn towards English literacy (only) and economic rationalism in policy discourse and directions has had a significant impact on the nature of language assessment in Australia. Subsequent to the *ALLP*, an ongoing and relentless focus in public discourse on (English) literacy in schools and perceived underachievement among Australian students (see, e.g., Freebody, 2007), and divisive public discourse around Australia's performance in international testing schemes such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (*PISA*), among other factors (see, e.g., Scarino, 2014; Schalley et al., 2015), culminated in the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (*NAPLAN*) test in 2008. The *NAPLAN* test is undertaken by students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 each year, as a 'measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents, can determine

whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community' (ACARA, 2016, n.p.). The introduction of the test, however, remains contentious and as a test construct, the NAPLAN arguably presumes a singular definition of English language proficiency, lacking recognition of and differentiation for different cohorts of students (e.g., migrants, refugees, speakers of AEs) and the varying multilingual and dialectical competencies of students (Creagh, 2014; Macqueen et al., 2019). As a result, the test both underrepresents and overrepresents the language capacities of Indigenous, refugee, and immigrant children. The NAPLAN test, for example, benchmarks against Standard Australian English (SAE) and uses cultural and linguistic norms that are unfamiliar and unsuitable for many Indigenous children (Macqueen et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2009; Wigglesworth et al., 2011). The ramification of NAPLAN testing in Indigenous communities where English is not the first language of children, or where AE is the first language, has been profound. The mistaken attribution of bilingual teaching as a contributing force to below standard performances by Indigenous students, for example, as measured against SAE in NAPLAN testing, led to the dismantling of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, perpetuating the ongoing loss of intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages, culture, and knowledges (Devlin et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2009).

For students from refugee and immigrant, non-English-speaking backgrounds, the NAPLAN test also misrepresents or obscures the differing challenges of students from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). In an in-depth analysis of NAPLAN and school-based assessment data, Creagh (2014) found that on the surface, there appears to be no difference between the score of LBOTE and non-LBOTE students, although test results for Indigenous students (who may or may not come from a SAE background) are significantly below the average across the measures of readings, spelling, English, and mathematics. Using a multiple regression analysis, Creagh (2014) found that visa category was the most influential variable, with students arriving in Australia on refugee visas scoring significantly lower than those arriving on skill migration visas, a variation that is obscured by the broad LBOTE categorisation within the testing data.

Despite repeated calls for the testing mechanism to be adapted not only to better reflect the varying proficiency levels and entry points of students, but also to incorporate measures which could recognise and understand the rich and diverse language practices that students do possess (e.g., Macqueen et al., 2019), no changes have been made in this regard. As a result, with no current national language policy in Australia, there is the chance that test mechanisms can take on the de facto role of top-down language policy. Despite a plethora of research which argues for the benefits of recognising and valuing students' complex linguistic resources, as will be explored next, broad assessment mechanisms such as NAPLAN continue to perpetuate monoglossic

approaches to language and education that 'privilege majority languages and legitimise monolingual, monocultural, and monomodal language practices' (Kirsch, 2020, p. 15).

Plurilingual repertoires and multiple meaning making opportunities

We argue that the enduring monolingual lens for languages policy and associated mechanisms such as the NAPLAN test in Australia has failed to recognise the role of language and culture, including languages other than English or indeed diverse English language resources, in the cognitive and socio-emotional development of students in Australia (Cross et al., 2022). This stance has stood in opposition, for many decades, to research into language, education, and cognition (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), including more recent work on heteroglossic conceptualisations of language development and use, which has moved us away from viewing languages use as being in a discrete first language and additional language relationship. Instead, research has conceptualised meaning-making as involving a single integrated system of complex linguistic and semiotic resources that work together to promote thinking and cognition, and direct our social emotional life (García, 2009; Lau & Van Viegen, 2020). We refer to this construct as a plurilingual repertoire, a dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user or learner, a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources used to communicate and interact with others. Underpinning this research is an acknowledgement of and respect for linguistic and cultural pluralism, a positioning that has increasing resonance across diverse, multilingual educational contexts globally. In English-speaking countries, including Australia, as will be explored in this section, growing consideration is given to the benefits of engaging holistically with the diverse communicative repertoires of young people.

Foundational to this active engagement with students' full linguistic repertoire in mainstream contexts is moving away from exclusively identifying what young people 'lack', to instead identifying and productively mobilising the full range of linguistic resources – the plurilingual repertoires young people bring to their learning (García, 2014). This positioning has led to significant conceptual work turning a heteroglossic lens onto curriculum, pedagogy and assessment policy and practice. This has included research into strategies that support teachers in developing heteroglossic practices within their diverse classrooms (e.g., Kirsch, 2020; Leung & Valdes, 2019; Slaughter & Cross, 2021), as well as engaging young people in reflective plurilingual, inquiry centred on themselves (e.g., Chik & Melo-Pfeifer, 2020; Little & Kirwan, 2019). Reinterpretation of curricula that embraces and encourages the use of multilingual and intercultural knowledge and the experiences and biographies of students and communities, and new and revised pedagogies such as, for example, linguistically responsive pedagogies (Morrison et al., 2019); culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017); translanguaging pedagogy

(García et al., 2017) and functional multilingual learning (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014), among others, are now well recognised in educational contexts. These developing curricula and pedagogies aim to not only recognise and challenge the biases of practitioners, but to recognise the linguistic competencies of students and to seek practices which can acknowledge, provide space for, and extend the knowledge of bilingual, dialectical, and plurilingual young people (e.g., Barac et al., 2014; Busch, 2012; Duarte, 2019; D'warte, 2021; García, 2014; Heugh et al., 2019; Orellana & Garcia-Sanchez, 2019; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014).

Plurilingual approaches in the Australian context

The research identified above is among a growing body of research crucial to the development of policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment related to working in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, yet much of the research is generated in contexts very different from those experienced in many Australian classrooms. Context-specific research is critical. While a national curriculum – the Australian curriculum (ACARA, n.d. b) – was introduced in 2014, it is mandated curriculum for Catholic and independent education systems, whereas State governments are able to interpret the Australian curriculum. Some States draw directly on the national curriculum (e.g., South Australia) while other States incorporate the Australian curriculum with their established curriculum (e.g., the Victorian curriculum). As a result, highly varied policy and educational responses exist across Australian educational landscape.

Contextualised research from Australia is continuing to emerge, offering new knowledge and understandings of how groups of teachers and students are negotiating and acquiring knowledge in multilingual classrooms (e.g., Choi & Ollerhead, 2018; Dutton & Rushton, 2021; D'warte, 2021; French, 2019; Slaughter & Cross, 2021). For example, in a study of bilingual primary schools in NSW, Fielding (2015) found that plurilingual children drew on their home language(s) as a resource in school contexts where other languages were used. This process increased students' enjoyment of learning and assisted students in developing learning strategies, which built on their plurilingual experiences. In a review of research in two secondary schools in NSW and South Australia, French and Armitage (2020) also found that when students were given an opportunity to bring their own languages and knowledges to classrooms, they were active and engaged in classroom learning. Students also developed a deeper understanding of concepts, offered additional linguistic and cultural knowledge to the classroom, and involved their family and community members in the process and products of learning.

Dutton and Rushton (2021, p. 108) argue that Australian students are 'required to engage with and draw upon their own lived experiences – culturally and linguistically' as per the national and state-based curricula (ACARA, n.d. a; NESAs, 2019). In a research undertaken in secondary school English

Language Arts classes, with highly multilingual and multicultural student cohorts, Dutton and Rushton (2021) employed what they call translanguaging poetry pedagogy to 'explore new possibilities that challenge the routinized everyday monolingual practices' (p. 108). Their research found that within the translanguaging poetry space, students were able to engage in complex, multilingual expressions of language and 'develop powerful personal representations' (p. 108) through their work.

In focusing on Australian Aboriginal children in mainstream classrooms in the state of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Oliver et al. (2021) employed translanguaging pedagogies to draw on children's complex linguistic practices. These researchers found that such practices could enhance home language knowledge and the development of Standard English, as well as providing greater agency for children to express their multifaceted linguistic and cultural identities. Given the critical role of teachers and pedagogy in enacting plurilingual pedagogies in their classrooms, research in this area is also key. Recent research in a variety of Australian contexts demonstrates that with effective tools, teachers can acquire new knowledge about their students and their cultural and linguistic lives, leading to teachers increasing the complexity of assigned tasks, and enriching learning activities for students (Choi & Slaughter, 2021; D'warte, 2018; French, 2019; Turner, 2019).

Work is also underway into the positioning of language in teacher education. While scholars argue that it is important for teachers to position their students' full plurilingual repertoires as a resource (Busch, 2012; Cummins, 2014; García, 2009), understanding what this looks like continues to be a challenge. Among pre-service and practicing teachers, even among those who are themselves multilingual, research highlights a lack of confidence about how to acknowledge and build on their own linguistic strengths in their teaching (Coleman, 2012; D'warte et al., 2021; Slaughter & Cross, 2021). A key contradiction lies in mainstream teacher education, where pre-service teachers are often being introduced to heteroglossic views of language learning and encouraged to recognise and build on their students' plurilingual repertoires. Yet in their university teacher education contexts, they are overwhelmingly exposed to monolingual instructional practices, including during their professional practice experiences, and few opportunities are provided for them to use their full linguistic repertoires (D'warte et al., 2021) or to understand plurilingual pedagogies in practice.

Mitigation of the monolingual mindset in assessment

While the broad body of work focusing on the reframing of language, culture, and identity within education seeks to disrupt the entrenched mismatch between schools as institutions with a monolingual habitus serving linguistically diverse societies, it is important to continually reflect on the implications of this work given that education is highly contextualised and political in nature. We must be mindful that multilingualism and associated notions of hybridity

can perpetuate a privileged experience of multilingualism. Kubota (2016), for example, argues that '[w]ithout addressing power and ideology, advocacy of multi/plural approaches and hybridity in language use can become complicit with domination and will fail to solve real problems' (p. 9), particularly for those who need to conform to standard school-based, university-based, or work-based conventions and standard use of language (Kubota, 2016). This is where careful work in advocacy, as well as research, is necessary when seeking to shift the relationship between the positioning of linguistic resources and assessment, to ensure that changes are made in concert with each other, particularly in mainstream contexts.

With teachers as the final point of departure for education policy and practice, the pedagogical choices they make in the classroom 'ultimately constitute an enacted language and literacy policy' (Lo Bianco, 2010, p. 165). Teachers can therefore work in small and powerful ways for their students as demonstrated in the research we have discussed (e.g., Dutton & Rushton, 2021; D'warte, 2021; Slaughter & Cross, 2021). However, assessment mechanisms are most often rigid and top-down, either as explicit assessment policies such as the NAPLAN test or in the shifting of funding and priorities that act as *de facto* policies. This later point is realised for example, in the reduction of support for Indigenous Languages as a First Language programme, and the increased funding for EAL/D programmes in the Northern Territory in Australia (Disbray, 2019). These challenges are also reflected in Disbray's (2016) study in a remote urban township in Central Australia with Indigenous children who were speakers of Wumpurrarni English. While the children in the study demonstrated their narrative skills in sophisticated ways in their home language variety, these skills and understandings were not visible in a culture of high-stakes literacy testing. Her research demonstrates the critical point that unless changes are made in assessment mechanisms, the washback effect of the monolingual mindset in testing will continue to enforce a hegemonic view of (English) language in the education system.

Small gains are being made in the State of Victoria, for example, the newly developed English as an Additional Language curriculum has explicitly integrated cultural and plurilingual awareness as an assessed element. The curriculum has three assessed language modes, aligned with the English curriculum – speaking and listening, reading and viewing, and writing. Each mode contains three strands: communication, linguistic structures and features, and cultural and plurilingual awareness. This last strand takes a more holistic view of students' linguistic resources, defining this element as:

understanding and using the cultural conventions of spoken and written communication in Standard Australian English – including the relationships between text and context, and audience and purpose – and drawing on the knowledge and resources of students' other languages and cultures to negotiate communication and enhance learning.

(VCAA, 2019)

In the Northern Territory, the recently released Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages (ACARA, 2019) builds on the 1993, Australian Indigenous Languages Framework for traditional Australian languages. This framework promotes language teaching, learning, and maintenance of Indigenous Language as a Second language (ILSL) programme. Support for teachers working with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) includes the direction that learning environments should position home languages and dialects, and students' knowledge of the world, as valued resources, as well as encouraging teachers to use other home language speakers to translate and make understandings clear (NT DET, 2021b). In the State of NSW, the Department of Education offers a suite of Professional Learning materials for schools and teachers, which incorporate the use of multilingual resources and the use of home language to support differentiation for EAL/D students in teaching and assessment (e.g., NSW DET, 2020).

The inclusion of such policy discourse and associated resources, increasingly visible across different educational jurisdictions in Australia, is arguably creating what Flores and Schissel (2014, p. 454) term ideological and 'implementational spaces' which provide an opportunity for teachers to explore what plurilingual approaches may look like in practice. We must acknowledge that while positive discourse and policies have existed in the past, as noted above in the policy section, they have diminished over time, yet there is some hope for further momentum moving forward.

Concluding comments

In discussing language and literacy education in Australia, it is important to acknowledge that the education landscape is diverse, complex, and variable, and we have only touched briefly on some of the many issues at play. We have not, for example, considered the study of languages other than English (Languages curriculum) in the Australian education system. However, we have tried to illustrate that, from the early years and onto primary and secondary schooling, a growing body of conceptual work illuminates the possibilities in harnessing and adapting plurilingual approaches and strategies in a range of Australian classrooms. We accept that plurilingualism and the use of plurilingual pedagogies in one setting are unlikely to be the same as in another and that strategies and practices applied in one context may need continual review and adjustment in another context. However, it is clear that enabling equitable access to educational development for all children requires challenging the positioning of literacy as inextricably linked to the English language (only). Research and public discourse need to impact not only on political and social landscapes, but also on educational policy and the mechanisms used to demonstrate student achievement. Despite complex theorisations and ongoing empirical studies, and some small, visible changes in educational policies across Australia, curriculum, assessment, and more often than not, most teacher pedagogy, continue to predominantly perpetuate a monolingual bias, with the assumption

that students draw on only one language system (i.e., SAE) to access, create, and recreate knowledge.

More empirical work that engages Australian young peoples' plurilingualism as a tool for learning across contexts is needed. A return to the progressive language policies that centred language as an intellectual, cultural, economic, social, citizenship and rights resource is also critical (Lo Bianco, 2010). These pressing and crucial calls, for renewed policy and applied knowledge, are motivated by the need to not only disrupt the monolingual, monocultural orientation of mainstream classrooms, but to also recognise the experiences and understandings of Australia's increasingly diverse population. While policy change and change to educational structures are slow, they have the capacity to move us towards a more equitable education system that recognises both the strengths and needs of its students and Australia's wider community.

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