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# 17 Language and literacy across and beyond the curriculum

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the role of language and literacy in crosscurricular teaching. The complex role of language in school contexts is initially scrutinized by means of two complementary functions of language in school, that is, language as a goal and as a means of learning. As a goal of learning, focus is on language as a school subject mainly as it relates to foreign language teaching (e.g., English or German in Finland) and second language teaching (e.g., English for multilingual students in the United States or United Kingdom). Language as a means of learning not only concerns the language classroom, but notably all subject classrooms. Thus, language as a means of learning takes us into the field of literacy, which in this context mainly entails students' ability to effectively use reading and writing for learning purposes in all subjects (see, e.g., Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Notably, the millennium shift brought two different research-based turns to the fore that have had a prominent impact on how languages and language learning in school are perceived today. The first turn, the social turn, changed teaching perspectives from individual-centered cognitive learning processes toward language learning as a social phenomenon and practice (see, e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007). The second turn, the multilingual turn, builds on multi-competence (Cook, 2016) and a multilingual mind as a starting point and normalcy where a monolingual norm has long been dominating (May, 2014, 2019). Whereas the social turn underlines the importance of participant-based, jointly constructed communication for language learning, the multilingual turn views the languages of bilingual and multilingual students as an entity that should be evaluated in its own right. This, again, brings about opportunities for using language as a resource by drawing on the multilingual learners' full language repertoire when using and learning languages. Thus, within both turns, it is stressed that the language competence of individual students is dependent on how they linguistically engage with others in different contexts. Consequently, language skills do not develop in a vacuum, nor are they based only upon students' inner capacities. As languages are usually our main way of communicating, the popular and predominant

role of the communicative functions of languages, prompted by the two turns, has softened the previous rather strict opinion that languages are taught only during explicit language lessons. This also creates opportunities for language learning in crosscurricular endeavors.

Whereas language as such is essential for all human communication, one important tenet for the inclusion of language in crosscurricular teaching lies in the inherent possibilities of working toward a wide variety of intercultural aims. After all, one of the main reasons we learn languages is to be able to engage with people from backgrounds other than our own. To this end, a central value-related intercultural aim is the development of an ability to relate to difference and diversity, which in globalized, postmodern societies signified by individual variation in worldviews increasingly turn intercultural encounters into complex processes of meaning-making (Kramsch, 2014). Such encounters also provide insights and help develop self-awareness that can be crucial for students' own identity formation, for example, to develop as multilingual and multicultural individuals. Fleming and Byram (2019) reflect on an integrated perspective of *Bildung* and language education, suggesting that confrontation with alternative worldviews can be an opportunity not only to understand the other, but also to become aware of one's own perspective, to critically assess it, and to transform it into new ways of thinking. They bring forth the German academic context, where the intercultural approach to *Bildung* is an important approach regarding both theory and praxis of education including ethics in encounters with difference and diversity (see also Chapter 3). Thus, these aspects of *Bildung* not only pertain to the context of language education, but also contribute to the curriculum as a whole.

In a discussion of *Bildung* in relation to language education, Hu (2015) notes that Humboldt, who was not only a philosopher but also a linguist, emphasized possibilities for holistic growth and the fostering of social responsibility. Hu suggests intercultural, aesthetic, critical, and creative aspects of language education to constitute aspects of *Bildung*, as a contrast to more reductionist, one-sided instrumental-functional views of language learning. The aspects related to *Bildung* stand in contrast to today's neoliberal principles and the instrumental view of knowledge that oftentimes appears to be entrenched into the reality of schooling (see Chapter 3; see also Byram, 2010, on the purpose of the cultural dimension in language teaching related to *Bildung* and how language education could include more content connected to citizenship education).

In order to present a more holistic and contextual framework for the role of language in crosscurricular teaching, we first open up the two perspectives: language as a goal and as a means of learning in all subjects. We then use well-established bilingual and multilingual education programs such as language immersion and CLIL as an example to illustrate how both perspectives have relevance for emergent bilingual students' academic achievement and language development. In light of the two perspectives presented and insights gained from bilingual and multilingual education, we then turn our

focus to crosscurricular teaching involving language. We discuss both opportunities and challenges, ending with reflections on how a language perspective can contribute to crosscurricular teaching and *Bildung* through a dialogic approach in the classroom.

### **Language as a goal of learning**

The view of language teaching adopted here and espoused by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) builds on a communicative and action-oriented approach, where active, diverse language use and meaningful interaction form important prerequisites for language learning (compare Bardel, 2022). As opposed to traditional, formalistic approaches that focus on grammatical accuracy and proficiency, communicative approaches focus on communicative competence, that is, the ability to use language effectively for different purposes and in different situations. The communicative approach builds on the assumption that languages are best learnt as they are being used. Through engagement in authentic interaction with others, the learners naturally employ strategies of production, comprehension, interaction, and mediation, which, in turn, support learning (Bardel, 2022). Thus, the active role of the learner is emphasized, and other aspects of student-centeredness are also promoted as language learning is effective when communication is meaningful (there is an authentic purpose for and need to communicate) and relevant to the needs of the learner.

In addition, within language education at large, a gradual expansion of curricular aims and core content has taken place in several steps, particularly during the last 30 years. As recognized in the CEFR, successful communication and participation in communicative events both require and develop a number of general competences, such as knowledge of the world, social skills, attitudes, and the ability to learn (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 101–108). This development has seen not only the inclusion of an increased variety of cultural aspects into previously mainly linguistic dimensions of language learning, but also an extension of cultural aspects from largely culture-specific content knowledge toward a broader notion of intercultural competence. This overall development of learning goals is in line with the perspectives of *Bildung* put forward in this handbook (compare Chapter 3).

### **Language as a means of learning**

As language is used in all school subjects to convey meaning, access to language becomes a prerequisite for equal access to education. It is therefore increasingly emphasized that all teachers teach in a way that supports the development of language and literacy alongside content knowledge and subject-specific skills, that is, recognizing language as a means of learning (see, e.g., Cummins & Early, 2015). This heightened emphasis is reflected in recent projects focusing linguistically sensitive and language-aware teaching in all subjects (see, e.g., Bergroth

et al., 2022). Such language-sensitive teaching supports the development of literacy strategies and creates bridges between students' everyday language and the academic language of different school subjects. To this end, research proposes the teaching of both generic and subject-specific literacy strategies (see Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). This includes active and regular work with a wide range of learning strategies, most notably those connected to reading and writing. For example, by applying reading strategies to texts studied with the students in the classroom, teachers support students' understanding of content in real time. At the same time, the students are supported to develop these reading strategies also for independent use. To develop writing strategies, students are guided to be aware of the purpose of different texts and, accordingly, of their different structures: for example, how descriptions of historical events differ from those of natural phenomena. Through these active work processes, students are provided with opportunities to process information through spoken and written interaction, which allows them to more efficiently learn new subject-specific concepts and general academic language.

With growing linguistic and cultural diversity reflected in mainstream education, language-sensitive teaching pertains to multilingual students in particular. However, it also benefits students whose first language is the school-language, as the expansion of basic everyday language into subject-specific or more academic language happens gradually for everyone with increased literacy engagement. This means that language-sensitive teaching scaffolds and strengthens the content learning of all students, while also contributing to the development of such transversal skills as (multi)literacy strategies and language awareness. Multiliteracy refers to the fact that literacy strategies are employed not only for verbal texts, but also for visual and audio materials as well as, for example, numeric and kinesthetic symbol systems. Language awareness connects strategies of language learning and language use, for example, the ability to draw on one's full language repertoire to infer meaning when encountering words one does not understand. Strengthening students' language awareness also serves as a means of learning more broadly: in addition to benefiting students' language learning, it also serves to facilitate students' understanding of content and content-specific language in other school subjects and future studies (see also Section "Crosscurricular teaching: language as a goal meets language as a means of learning" on collaborations between language-subjects on a common language pedagogy). Thus, multiliteracy and language awareness are transversal skills that carry not only across but also beyond the curriculum by answering to demands of lifelong learning.

### **Integrating language as a goal of learning and language as means of learning: lessons from bilingual and multilingual education programs**

Alongside mainstream schools with mainly one language of schooling and designated language lessons, a multifold of bilingual and multilingual education

programs have been developed to meet a globalizing world and the needs of a growing student population whose first language is another than the medium of instruction (see, e.g., Baker & Wright, 2017). These programs serve different purposes such as the revitalization or maintenance of minority languages or transition from education in one language to another. Thus, they vary greatly in terms of length and intensity. However, what they do have in common is the use of two or more languages as languages of instruction during subject lessons, where students' comprehension of the content learnt is vital for their academic achievements. Although two or more languages as a means to teach content primarily aims to facilitate students' access to knowledge, a second aim is to develop or maintain students' bilingualism and multilingualism.

This dual focus on both content and language is reflected in universally established programs labeled as CLIL (content and language integrated learning), CBL (content-based learning), and language immersion. Early development of these programs envisioned that simply using the language-to-be-learnt in non-language subjects would be sufficient for students to learn a new language (see, e.g., Krashen, 1987). Indeed, results from empirical studies have shown that using this teaching style combined with teachers' implicit error correction generates high comprehension skills as well as fluent and confident second language speakers. However, students' grammatical accuracy and sociolinguistic sensitivity in their second language reach a developmental plateau that do not equal that of native-level speakers. To address these shortcomings, for example, Swain (1995) suggests that students need to use their second language to notice if there is a gap between what they are able to express and what they want to express, to test if they are using correct language based on feedback from others, and to reflect upon the language forms they use and the feedback they get. Swain (1988) further notes that since subject content teaching usually focuses on meaning and language teaching on producing, "typical content teaching is not necessarily good second language teaching" (p. 81). She suggests that content teachers in multilingual programs continue to use authentic and functional subject-specific language, all the while being aware of offering the students possibilities of using their second language accurately, coherently, and appropriately in an integrated content or subject-focused approach.

The lessons learnt from bilingual and multilingual programs thus show that it is possible, or in some cases even necessary, to attend to both content and language objectives, and to simultaneously use language as a goal and as a means in teaching. Though possible, the dual focus has proven to be a challenge for teachers in these programs, as they find it difficult to maintain a balanced approach and plan for both content and language objectives during lessons (see, e.g., Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). To support and assist teachers, research has addressed co-teaching and collaboration between language teachers and non-language subject teachers to maintain an equal balance of language and content objectives. There is also a growing interest in constructions of models to showcase what content knowledge teachers need to successfully

integrate content and language (see, e.g., Cammarata & Cavanagh, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2019).

With the previously outlined development of language as a goal and language as a means in educational contexts as our basis, we now turn our focus to suggest crosscurricular teaching to be an arena where these two aspects can meet in meaningful ways.

### **Crosscurricular teaching: language as a goal meets language as a means of learning**

Since crosscurricular work involving languages can take different forms and serve different purposes, our attempt is not to provide an exhaustive account of possible combinations and outcomes but to reflect on enriching possibilities. We bring different practices to the fore, starting with how different language subjects can support each other and continuing with how encounters between language and content can bring different layers of promoting students' access to knowledge with the help of language support. The section ends with descriptions of practices illustrating how language education meaningfully can interplay with other areas of the curriculum, also contributing to transversal topics and skills as part of *Bildung*.

There are many benefits to be gained from a holistic view of language education that builds on and develops students' whole language repertoire for purposes of communication and learning. Within such a pedagogical approach, different language subjects collaborate to develop students' plurilingual competence (see Council of Europe, 2001), that is, the ability to draw on one's knowledge and skills in different languages in order to enhance learning or communicate effectively. Plurilingual competence is an important transversal skill with the help of which students can continue learning and using languages beyond the restricted time allocated for language learning in school. Collaboration can involve bringing in other languages besides the target language to contrast and compare, for example, grammatical structures, semantic differences, and vocabulary, in order to enhance students' noticing of similarities and differences and give them tools to be more sensitive and aware of how languages function, which, in turn, benefits language learning. Furthermore, in order to be able to communicate effectively in the languages they are learning at school, students need to develop strategies for coping with situations when their current knowledge of a language is insufficient. Such strategies include the use of body language, mimicry, paraphrasing or code-switching, all of which preferably can be practiced and developed across language subjects.

Seen from another angle, language as a subject in school is often dependent on other subjects in terms of content. Regardless of whether language is the goal or the means of learning, it has to be about something, and that something should be relevant to the needs and interests of the learners. In an ideal situation, the texts that students encounter, the texts they produce orally

and in writing, and the interactions they are involved in concern content that they can relate to and want to express themselves about. If, for instance, the students have been talking about wild animals in their own country in biology, the language teacher could connect to this theme. The students could learn the names of the animals in the language they study, how to describe them, and other specific features connected to the animals. They could then collaborate to make a presentation of a few animals that they subsequently present online to a group of students in another country, who would present their animals in turn. In this way, the content is reviewed, elaborated, and contrasted in different ways, which benefits learning. From a language point of view, the students learn to express themselves in another language about content they are currently learning and to an audience that is not already familiar with that content, which will make the exchange authentic and thus more engaging. Also, when knowledge of a topic is first developed in other school subjects, students are usually able to understand more challenging texts about the topic in a foreign language than they otherwise would. Thus, crosscurricular work can enable students to more efficiently develop literacy and subject-specific language also in languages other than the school's language of instruction, albeit with special attention to scaffolds for comprehension and language use depending on the students' level of proficiency.

Another way in which language subjects can benefit from crosscurricular collaboration is by combining language learning with aesthetic or creative subjects such as music, art, sloyd, or physical education. These subjects provide means by which language learning can be augmented, for example, through providing opportunities for embodied, holistic learning by means of combinations of cognition, emotion, and physical activity through employing different modes of expression (see, e.g., Jusslin et al., 2022) or through providing extended or additional opportunities for language use and repetition beyond actual language lessons, for instance, conducting a PE lesson in a foreign language.

As crosscurricular themes more often than not are part of other subject content than that of the language subjects involved, languages often risk being seen in an auxiliary role. However, considering the crucial role of language as a means of learning, the ability to support the development of transversal competences such as strategies for learning can rather be considered as expert knowledge. Here, crosscurricular collaborations involving language teachers as language and literacy experts can support teachers of other subjects to become aware of the language requirements in their own subjects (Fang & Coatoam, 2013). What is often needed is the realization that such language focus does not primarily involve details such as grammar and spelling, but how content knowledge is conveyed and communicated more broadly. For the most hands-on experiences, crosscurricular teaching can include co-teaching between colleagues with complementing expertise to jointly support the development of both language and content. Examining and discussing texts together with students provide opportunities for closer insights into their



structure and coherence. This can draw attention, for example, to the use of small words and phrases that are less striking than subject-related concepts, but which can be crucial to the overall argumentation and meaning of a text as they connect or otherwise relate text elements to each other in different ways. A concrete example is the crucial role played by the phrasal pair “the more, . . . the less . . .” in the following sentence in a chemistry textbook: “The more noble the metal, the less willing it is to give up its electrons.”

The classroom situation described in the following aims at illustrating not only the complexity but also the opportunities afforded with language as both goal and means in crosscurricular education. The setting is a Swedish-medium school in Finland, where you can attend school in either of the two national languages, Finnish or Swedish:

Welcome to grade 8! The theme for the ongoing crosscurricular work is “Environmental challenges and their solutions for major world cities.” The task is to explore particular environmental challenges facing huge cities such as Los Angeles and Singapore and suggest creative solutions to how at least some challenges could be mitigated or solved. Students from four homerooms work on their assigned city in small groups, scattered all around their classrooms, around small tables in the corridor, and in the school library. Two chemistry teachers, a geography teacher and a language teacher move between them, scaffolding the process at its different stages.

Language is central, constituting both a means and a goal of learning, as different steps of the work process involve a variety of different languages. In addition to Swedish, the school’s language of instruction, the fact-finding process involves sources in students’ (additional) first languages, e.g., Finnish and Arabic, foreign languages that they study as part of the school’s language curriculum (English, French and German), as well as Finnish as the second national language. For all students, the gradual expansion of everyday language into more academic registers is a central learning goal, supported by the incorporation of specific literacy strategies that students gradually adopt as part of the set-up of the project. These strategies entail scaffolding of oral presentations, which require students to include a set of expertise vocabulary to be explained orally or by flashing links with definitions as part of each group’s final presentation. Further strategies support the write-up of a report in Swedish.

The example shows how collaborative work around crosscurricular themes can provide important opportunities for literacy development and opportunities to develop and express content knowledge in and by means of different languages. Furthermore, crosscurricular work can offer students of foreign languages opportunities to practice and develop skills in linguistic and cultural mediation, for example, as they need to convey information from sources in

a foreign language to students who do not speak the language in question. It should also be noted that the inclusion of multilingual students' first languages in work around crosscurricular themes can contribute to important processes of identity affirmation and thus help create a sense of belonging (see, e.g., Cummins & Early, 2015).

### *Dialogic teaching for Bildung in the language classroom and beyond*

At this point, we put forward an approach to crosscurricular teaching which enables active and authentic use of language – whether it be a first, second, or foreign language – while also allowing for different perspectives to be explored around the specific theme at hand.

Following Vygotsky and Bakhtin in particular, Dysthe (1996; Dysthe et al., 2013) proposes a dialogic approach in a multivoiced classroom. Dialogue-based teaching (see also Chapter 6) entails the use of many different sources of knowledge for learning, in a process where students are involved in written and oral communication with the teacher, each other, and with the contents of what they are to learn. Although this can be achieved in single-subject classrooms, the possibility of crosscurricular collaborations to contribute even further perspectives is of specific importance here. Regardless, consideration needs to be taken concerning how activities are set up to provide ample opportunities for interaction and engagement to allow for both content and language development (see Chapter 6 for a more in-depth discussion of implementations of dialogic teaching, including issues connected to evaluation).

Through the contribution of different perspectives and the joint construction of meaning, the participants develop their understanding of a specific theme or topic (e.g., the forming and consequences of negative social stereotypes). In accordance with the concept of *Bildung*, a dialogic approach entails increased possibilities for restructuring one's own thoughts and personal integration of knowledge through work processes that can activate and engage, enhancing possibilities for student empowerment and motivation (compare Chapter 3). Dialogue-based teaching also helps students to develop a more critical and reflective stance to what they read and hear, for example, in social media. To these ends, a dialogic approach includes an abundance of authentic questions, that is, questions that give students the opportunity to think and test ideas, not just (re)produce answers. According to Dysthe (1996), a multivoiced, dialogic classroom is a necessity not only for more effective content learning and for developing independent thinking, but also because it is a model of a working democratic society. In this way, students learn how to listen to the voices of others, relate to others, see their perspectives, ask questions, and look for answers together.

Another important feature of dialogue-based teaching is that students' responses and other contributions in class are taken up and expanded on: as they are invited to contribute with new ideas to the class interaction, they are ensured that the teacher is interested in what they think and know. This also

means that the students' answers will be further "evaluated" beyond simply being placed into the categories "right" or "wrong." This approach to teaching and learning also challenges teachers to reflect on their own view of learning, whether they perceive knowledge as either predominantly fixed or jointly constructed, ultimately reflecting on the purpose of education itself.

Additionally, a dialogic approach can create more common frames of reference for educational experiences. The continued interaction makes students' expanding knowledge and thinking more visible for teachers, thus enabling them to better support the learning of individual students by noticing what could be added, restructured, or afforded new perspectives. This also concerns how students use language as a means of learning.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, we have explored the role of language in crosscurricular education. On the one hand, we have shown that the educational purposes of language learning go beyond the aim of simply developing communicative competence, and that language as a subject in many ways have crossed the boundaries of being an isolated subject without relevance for other areas in the curriculum. On the other hand, based upon experiences from bilingual and multilingual education programs, we have learnt that language as a goal as well as a means of learning are necessary to give students the linguistic tools they need. When teachers provide these tools, students get access to knowledge, and they can use their language skills to express their content-specific knowledge and make use of their whole language repertoire to engage and actively participate in increasingly diverse societies. We have noted how increasing diversity in student populations asks for the whole teacher community to embrace an inclusive and language-sensitive pedagogy to cater for optimized learning opportunities as well as identity affirmation. Crosscurricular teaching can contribute to these processes, with the development of literacy strategies as central in all subject teaching.

Society at large can benefit from educational opportunities where resources for encountering increased difference and diversity with more openness and respect are fostered, all in line with crucial tenets of *Bildung*. We suggest that crosscurricular practices involving language subjects, through reflective and dialogic approaches, can contribute to the students developing new insights and perspectives regarding both themselves, others, and the world.

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