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Nicole Marx

Linguistic Risk–Taking and Multilingualism Pedagogies: Encouraging Plurilingualism in Lower Secondary Education

Abstract

This school project, carried out regularly within a university education course at master's level, explores the application of the Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative in promoting plurilingual engagement among younger secondary school students. During these week-long classroom projects, participants engage in a range of self-selected language-related challenges and reflect on their experiences during classroom discussions and in an individual written survey. Results for one such project are described here. Most school students reported developing a more positive attitude toward multilingualism and greater interest in language learning over the course of the short project, and they experimented with diverse linguistic tasks. However, they also experienced challenges with task difficulty and lack of motivation. Recommendations for further classroom projects include extending the duration of the LRT project and integrating regular structured discussions to encourage long-term student participation.

Das hier vorgestellte schulische Projekt wird regelmäßig im Rahmen eines universitären Lehramtsstudiums auf Masterniveau durchgeführt. Es untersucht die Anwendung der *Linguistic Risk-Taking* (*LRT*) Initiative zur Förderung plurilingualen Engagements bei jüngeren Sekundarstufenschüler*innen. Während der einwöchigen Unterrichtsprojekte bearbeiten die teilnehmenden Schüler*innen eine Reihe selbstgewählter sprachlicher Risiken und reflektieren ihre Erfahrungen in Klassendiskussionen sowie in einer individuellen schriftlichen Befragung. Die Ergebnisse eines solchen Projekts werden hier dargestellt. Die meisten Schüler*innen berichteten im Verlauf des kurzen Projekts von einer positiveren Einstellung zur Mehrsprachigkeit und einem gesteigerten Interesse am Sprachenlernen und erprobten vielfältige sprachliche Aufgaben. Gleichzeitig traten Herausforderungen in Bezug auf die Aufgabenschwierigkeit und mangelnde Motivation auf. Empfehlungen für zukünftige Projekte umfassen eine Verlängerung der Projektdauer sowie die Integration regelmäßiger strukturierter Diskussionen zur Förderung einer langfristigen Teilnahme.

Keywords

Linguistic Risk Taking, practice example, pre-service teacher training, multilingualism pedagogies

Linguistic Risk-Taking (*LRT*), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Praxisbeispiel, Lehrer*innenbildung, Mehrsprachigkeitsorientierte Didaktiken

1. Plurilingual Repertoires, Multilingualism Pedagogies and LRT

Plurilingualism, i.e., an individual's "ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168), is not only the worldwide norm—it is also a goal of many educational systems. This goal of plurilingualism has led, in recent decades, to the development of a wide variety of pedagogical approaches to language learning which go beyond a monolingual focus on the *one* language currently being learned and taught within *one* language class to include broader measures to support the development of multilingualism and skills for multiple language learning. Such integrated approaches to language teaching and learning (Marx & Hufeisen, 2026)—also termed "multilingualism pedagogies" (Melo-Pfeifer & Ollivier, 2026)—attempt to recognize and include all languages of an individual's linguistic repertoire in language teaching. They thus incorporate not only the second/foreign (i.e., additional) languages being taught, but also the language(s) of schooling and other languages that students may use, such as heritage languages or further languages learned outside the school. Multilingualism pedagogies thus strive to expand students' plurilingual repertoires as highly individual and dynamic sets of resources that evolve over time (cf. Beacco et al., 2016; Candelier et al., 2012; Jessner & Kramsch, 2015) and that can be flexibly drawn upon in communicative settings to support both concrete communicative needs and further linguistic and cognitive development.

Multilingualism pedagogies focus on specific language skills which are translingual, i.e., cross individual language boundaries. One of the best-known examples of an attempt to delineate such skills for educational practice is found in the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 160–162), which specifies pluricultural and plurilingual *competence*, the "practical functional ability to exploit plurilingualism" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 127), as a central goal of language(s) learning. In contrast to the original CEFR, it includes a number of descriptors, scaled to the CEFR levels A1–C2, for this ability. These include being able to recognize internationalisms common to different languages (CEFR level A1, see Council of Europe, 2020, p. 126) or to use words or phrases from different languages to uphold communication (CEFR level A2, see Council of Europe, 2020, p. 128). In the same context, but through a much more detailed catalogue, the FREPA (Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures, Candelier et al., 2012) looks specifically at pluralistic approaches, provides descriptors for plurilingual competence, and offers a wide range of suggestions for teaching in the context of multiple language use and development.

The acceptance and further development of plurilingual repertoires becomes particularly relevant in linguistically diverse classrooms, where students' individual plurilingual repertoires are often neglected or even dissuaded when they extend beyond

the language of schooling and the specific target language. Further languages—such as family languages other than the language of schooling or heritage languages (Brehmer & Mehlhorn, 2018)—can be, at best, overlooked and, at worst, seen as problematic or devalued. For these students, multilingualism pedagogies not only encourage skill-building for lifelong language learning, but also may help empower students by validating their plurality of cultural and linguistic identities (Cummins, 2021, p. 67). By including diverse languages, schools can create linguistic safe spaces where plurilingualism is viewed as an educational and intellectual resource, and students' interest in and respect for different cultures and languages is cultivated.

Multilingualism pedagogies and their goal of plurilingual repertoire development thus can help educators to understand language as a flexible and highly individual tool for communication which goes beyond specific school subjects. Consequently, motivating students to engage with their own plurilingual repertoires in everyday activities is a cornerstone of multilingualism pedagogies.

However, in the classroom context, a number of hurdles become apparent when multilingualism pedagogies are considered (Hufeisen & Marx, 2024). In addition to aspects of teacher training and motivation, curricular restrictions, and classroom management (Fäcke et al., 2024), insecurities which language learners face when communicating in an additional language can become a central problem for individual development of plurilingual repertoires. These may stem from, amongst others, a fear of making mistakes, difficulty in understanding spoken or written communication in the language, or misinterpreting interlocutors using that language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), and can result in learners being less willing to engage in communicative activities ("willingness to communicate", Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546).

One promising approach to encouraging willingness to communicate among learners of additional languages is the Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative (Slavkov, n.d.). Originally developed at the bilingual University of Ottawa, it aimed to encourage university students learning French or English to use their less-active language in daily life and to enhance language confidence by engaging in "risks", defined in the language learning context as "authentic communicative acts in learners' second official language (French/English), which may be 'risky' due to discomfort about making mistakes, being misunderstood, misunderstanding others, being judged, taking on a different identity, and changing previously established language choice patterns" (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 1). Engaging in such linguistic risks allow students to move beyond their linguistic and cultural comfort zones, while ensuring that the risks involved are manageable, can be autonomously chosen by learners, and have a good chance of positive outcomes (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Slavkov, 2023). Importantly, the initiative aims to support students' willingness to engage with a target language by allowing them to choose which communicative situations they seek out outside of the classroom (Griffiths &

Slavkov, 2021; Slavkov, 2023). As such, it is based on the principles of task-based language teaching and learning (Long, 2014), involving learner-centered engagement in meaningful communicative activities of their own choosing.

The development of linguistic risks extends beyond the descriptors of the CEFR Companion Volume and offers a selection of 89 concrete activities in a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport (available in print and over the website in French and English, see Slavkov, n.d.). Risks are designed around everyday activities and situations where learners engage with a specific target language outside of formal coursework. Examples include using the target language to order food at the university cafeteria, compose an email to an instructor, or watch a YouTube video. Risks are chosen individually by the learners, attempted, and then reflected upon according to their level of perceived risk and difficulty, and students' work with the passport can be integrated into language coursework and university language requirements.

The initiative has garnered wide interest, and has been applied to and adapted for further university contexts in, for example, Japan (MacDonald & Thompson, 2019), Austria (Cajka et al., 2023), and Germany (Goethe Institut et al., n.d.).

The LRT initiative is thus a promising concept for reducing communicative anxiety, increasing willingness to communicate, and supporting the autonomous development of (one) language in authentic communicative contexts. However, its applicability to other populations and contexts is unclear. First, since it explicitly focuses on one target language, its usefulness in expanding plurilingual repertoires is yet to be determined. Second, the LRT initiative has to date generally focused on highly educated adult learners at university, who are generally good learners, are capable of and interested in autonomous learning experiences, and have the motivation and self-concept to engage in new learning behaviors, especially if these are directly related to a specific target language required for their course of studies.

Considering these limitations, it would be informative to evaluate the expansion of the LRT initiative into multilingualism pedagogies by allowing learners to choose not only which risks they will engage in, but also the language in which the activity is carried out. As well, its application in further contexts such as adults with less formal education or schoolchildren should be considered.

Children are an especially intriguing learner group: they possess very different cognitive capabilities, learning autonomy, and motivations for language learning compared to the target groups of previous LRT initiatives, and they may themselves be growing up in multilingual contexts and developing a wide range of individual plurilingual repertoires. This stands in contrast to learning situations in the classroom, which are often highly monolingual (Gogolin, 2008). The present project thus turned to this relatively underexplored group of schoolchildren in linguistically diverse learning contexts, aiming to raise awareness of plurilingual repertoires and to encourage linguistic risk-taking in a number of different languages selected by the students themselves. The

following sections present the project and its iterations, examining the constraints, opportunities, and challenges involved in implementing the LRT initiative with younger plurilingual learners.

2. Plurilingualism Teaching Project at the University of Cologne

In the Master of Education (MEd)[1] program at the University of Cologne, the author regularly teaches a course entitled *Multilingualism Pedagogies in School Contexts*. The course is embedded within the "DSSZ-Modul" (commonly referred to as the *DaZ* or "German as a Second Language" module), which is designed to prepare pre-service teachers for work in linguistically diverse classrooms. This module, composed of a lecture and a further course, is compulsory for all MEd students, regardless of their subject specializations, though it offers a wide range of course options. Since the *Multilingualism Pedagogies* course is conducted in both German and English, it tends to attract students who have chosen English as one of their two main subjects, although this is not exclusively the case.

Within the *Multilingualism Pedagogies* course, students select one of four plurilingualism projects to implement in a school of their choice. One such project is LRT; the others include multilingual and multilinear story writing (Marx, 2022), multilingual explorations (Behr et al., 2005), and a mathematics unit on linguistic diversity in the classroom (Brockmann & Marx, 2024). As part of their chosen project, students engage with relevant literature on multilingualism pedagogies, design and adapt teaching materials for the specific classroom context, implement the project, and subsequently evaluate the outcomes using project-specific questionnaires. The course is therefore structured around the primary pedagogical aim of familiarizing pre-service teachers with concepts of plurilingualism and multilingualism pedagogies. At the same time, it pursues a secondary aim: to bring these approaches directly into schools by encouraging pupils to draw on their individual plurilingual repertoires and by supporting in-service teachers in adopting practical, accessible strategies for multilingual pedagogy in linguistically diverse classrooms.

To date, the LRT project has been implemented across six different courses with successive cohorts of MEd students. For the purpose of illustration, and given the variability of classroom contexts, the discussion here focuses exclusively on the course and materials from the Winter Term 2023/2024.

[1] In Germany, all Education students must complete both a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education degree in order to receive a teaching certificate. The official length of study is three years for the Bachelor of Education degree and an additional two years for the Master of Education degree.

2.1 Project Goals

The overarching goal of the project is to provide concrete opportunities for students to develop their awareness of and willingness to communicate in languages other than the language of schooling (German) and the first additional language taught as a school subject (English). In alignment with the goals of multilingualism pedagogies and the expansion of students' plurilingual repertoires, there are three main goals:

1. Promote plurilingualism: In predominantly monolingual school environments, bilingualism and plurilingualism can be marginalized. The LRT project aimed to make the use of multiple languages in daily life more visible and accepted, help students develop strategies for facing language challenges, and spark students' curiosity about languages they might not use themselves.
2. Emphasize the intrinsic value of all languages: Beyond students, teachers and educational institutions need to foster recognition and respect for all languages. The project aimed to promote an understanding of language practices as constructive learning opportunities, irrespective of the languages involved.
3. Increase learner autonomy: Within multilingualism pedagogy, a main goal is to reduce the active role of the instructor and encourage learners to seek appropriate opportunities for authentic language learning outside of the classroom.

2.2 Context and Participants

The Linguistic Risk-Taking project reported here was conducted in a fifth-grade English class at a *Realschule,* a lower-secondary, non-academic school form. The school is situated in a culturally diverse area of northern Cologne, a large city in western Germany, and thus reflects the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of its surrounding community. In alignment with this demographic, the school operates under the guiding principle of "Learning Together in Cultural Diversity", which emphasizes the promotion of intercultural competence and fosters a general attitude of tolerance and appreciation for diverse backgrounds. The school's educational approach also includes a commitment to language-sensitive instruction, ensuring that students from multilingual backgrounds receive the necessary support for acquiring and using German effectively.[2] However, when asked about the support of plurilingualism, the teacher of the participating class reported that only newly immigrated students were offered additional assistance in German; other languages were not mentioned beyond English and French, which are taught as school subjects.

The language curriculum at the school includes English as the first obligatory additional language and French as an elective second foreign language from sixth grade onwards. Grade 5 is the first year of secondary education in Germany, so students had been attending the school for only four months, but they had been learning English

[2] To ensure anonymity of the school, the references to its website are not included here.

since Grade 1. The project aligns well with one of the stated overall goals of language instruction in the state's schools: "der Mehrsprachigkeit [kommt] in einer globalisierten Welt eine besondere Bedeutung zu. Das differenzierte Fremdsprachenangebot [...] trägt der Vielfalt an Sprachen und Kulturen Rechnung und ermöglicht den Schülerinnen und Schülern den Erwerb einer breiten Fremdsprachenkompetenz." ("Multilingualism [is] particularly important in a globalised world. The diverse range of foreign languages on offer [...] takes account of the diversity of languages and cultures and enables pupils to acquire a broad range of language skills.") (Ministerium für Schule, Jugend und Kinder, 2021). The teacher agreed to allow a focus on plurilingualism in the LRT project, i.e., English was only one of many possible languages with which students could decide to engage during the project.

The class consisted of 28 students aged 10–11, of whom 22 participated in the LRT project; a further six were absent on at least one of the project days. Notably, the class was linguistically diverse: 20 students reported speaking a language other than German at home, including Turkish, Arabic, Italian, Persian, Vietnamese, and Swahili. Despite this rich linguistic environment, a short classroom discussion conducted at the start of the project indicated that most students rarely engaged in discussions about their plurilingualism and generally did not use their home languages in the school environment.

2.3 Modification of the LRT Initiative for the Project

Building on the University of Ottawa's LRT initiative, the project was adapted for a lower-secondary school context with a particular emphasis on plurilingual competence. As stated above, a notable advantage was the class's linguistic heterogeneity: nearly all pupils used heritage languages at home and were accustomed to shifting between languages depending on context (for instance, using German at school and Arabic within the family).

Earlier iterations of the project employed the *Sprachen-Challenge: Handbuch für Geheimagenten und -agentinnen*, a translated version of the LRT passport provided by the Council of Europe (Goethe Institut et al., n.d.). This resource, adapted from the University of Vienna's LRT passport (Sprachenzentrum et al., n.d.), incorporates both activities designed for the target languages as well as risks explicitly designed to engage multiple languages. However, because the *Handbuch* was originally developed for older students (Grade 9), it was considered too advanced for younger learners in a non-academic track. In addition, time constraints—the school allocated only two class periods within a single week for the project—necessitated a significant reduction in scope.

The *Handbuch* was modified by the project group (Galetke et al., 2024) in consultation with the course instructor and the classroom teacher. It was shortened to include only 13 simplified tasks to support willingness to participate in the project without causing undue stress. The tasks included productive skills (speaking and writing) and recep-

tive skills (reading, listening, and watching), and were designed to be relevant to students' daily lives and experiences. Tasks are listed (in English translation) in Appendix 1.

Classroom time was divided between introduction of the project (Lesson 1) and its review (Lesson 2; see Results). In the first lesson, the project group asked participants to reflect on their own plurilingualism before introducing the concept of linguistic risk-taking. Each student was then provided with an LRT passport. To familiarize students with the structure of the activities, several exercises were completed collectively in class. This included learning greetings in different languages and practicing basic signs in German Sign Language. Students were encouraged to actively share their knowledge of different languages with peers. At the end of the lesson, they took their LRT passports home and were given one week to select and complete further risks independently.

The second and final lesson, one week later, was reserved for evaluation (see below). The students retained their language passports and discussed how they might continue to use them in future.

3. Results of the Project

After completing the project, students were asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their experiences with the language passport, the activities they had undertaken, and their attitudes toward multilingualism and language learning (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire, intended primarily to inform future iterations of the project within MEd teacher training, included both closed (Likert-scale) and open-ended questions, although many students left the latter unanswered. A classroom discussion followed, providing students with greater flexibility to articulate their views on the project.

Whilst the project is exploratory in nature and was not intended to be accompanied by an empirical study, the findings of the 22 completed questionnaires point to several interesting aspects. These include aspects regarding both the classroom context itself and the broader application of the LRT initiative in plurilingual lower-secondary settings.

First, with respect to attitudes toward multilingualism (Q7–9), the responses were generally positive. Fifteen students reported feeling comfortable in multilingual settings, 20 indicated an intention to make greater use of their plurilingual repertoire in the future, and 19 expressed a desire to continue to learn additional languages. While these findings do not directly evaluate the project itself, such positive attitudes can facilitate students' engagement with the LRT tasks.

Second, students provided insights into the specific risks they chose to undertake (Q1). Of the 14 students who responded to the open-ended question, five indicated that they had watched a video in another language. Additional activities mentioned included trying out a recipe in another language, listening to a song, and learning to greet someone in a different language. These activities were seen as enjoyable (Q2). Conversely,

activities perceived as more challenging included watching an entire film or translating (Q3). Only one student reported feeling uncomfortable engaging in LRT activities (Q5), while 16 students indicated that the project helped them to become more interested in other languages (Q6).

Finally, the follow-up classroom discussion revealed that most students were enthusiastic about the various activities and exchanged ideas with their peers. The LRT project, albeit brief, provided an opportunity to deviate from conventional language instruction, encouraging students to incorporate multiple languages into their everyday activities and consider heritage and family languages in school settings where they are typically excluded.

4. Limitations and Recommendations

Several challenges of the application of the LRT initiative in this context were also apparent. Despite modifications to ensure the tasks aligned with the linguistic realities of students in Grade 5, many still found tasks overly demanding, and some students lacked motivation to complete any activities at all.

To enhance engagement and effectiveness, future iterations of the project should, first, be extended over a longer period, incorporating regular, brief guided exchanges with the project group to discuss risks, future plans, and experiences, to guide choices for risks, to rank them according to perceived interest and difficulty level, and to provide explicit time within the classroom to attempt risks. Second, more low-risk tasks could be included, such as ones that can be carried out easily within the classroom context. Third, students might be given more space to develop their own risks; however, this could also be difficult with younger children, as the present project suggests; only three students made suggestions for new risks (Q4).

Finally, although the cooperating class teacher initially expressed interest in the project, she did not implement it during the project group's absence and discontinued its use immediately following the final discussion. Greater support for the teacher, along with a more continuous and structured integration of the project into the classroom curriculum, could help promote its sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The LRT project demonstrated potential for encouraging students to explore their plurilingual repertoires beyond the formal classroom setting and support curiosity both about languages already present in their individual repertoires and about new languages. However, difficulties resulting from task complexity and limited teacher involvement show potential challenges in the application of the LRT initiative, particularly with younger learners in non-academic streams. Future iterations should include

longer implementation periods, structured and regular peer discussions of language activities, and increased teacher support to encourage engagement. Overall, the LRT projects have been received positively by students, pre-service teachers and teachers, indicating their potential to promote the development of individual plurilingual repertoires as well as greater acceptance of different languages in the school context.

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About the Author

Nicole Marx is Full Professor of German as a Second Language at the University of Cologne, Germany. Her main research interests include multiple language acquisition, language learning in diverse settings, and biliteracy.
Email: n.marx@uni-koeln.de

Appendix 1: Risks included in the passport

1. Learn and use a greeting in a new language.
2. Introduce yourself in another language (e.g., name, age, hobbies).
3. Order something in another language (food, drink).
4. Cook a recipe in another language.
5. Watch a film/series in another language (with subtitles).
6. Read a short story/fairy tale/comic in another language.
7. Learn a word in sign language.
8. Listen to a song in another language.
9. Watch a short video in another language (TikTok, YouTube).
10. Change the language on your mobile phone/computer/tablet/video game.
11. Ask a relative to teach you a new word in another language.
12. Help someone translate something from one language to another.
13. Tell a joke in a language other than your usual one (explain it if necessary).

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

(N.B. Questions 1-4 were open questions; 5-9 were closed with limited options).

1. Which risks did you try out?
2. Which risks did you like most?
3. Which tasks did you find difficult?
4. Do you have any ideas for other risks you think should be included in the buddy book?
5. How well did you feel when working on the individual risks?
6. Would you say you have now developed more interest in other languages?
7. How comfortable do you feel when a number of languages are being used (for example, not just German)?
8. Will you try to use your language skills more often in the future?
9. Do you want to learn more languages?