

Supporting Harmonious Bilingualism in European early childhood education

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Abstract

This article starts from the assumption that all children in early education need an equitable chance to learn. For this to be possible, they need to feel comfortable and secure. For children who have a home language that is not the school language (even if they also hear the school language at home) the frequent ignoring of those non-school languages in early education does not contribute to children's well-being or solid social integration. Fortunately, through a Language-Considerate Approach, children with a non-school language at home can experience Harmonious Bilingualism from early on. In this educational approach all children's languages are actively considered, thereby valuing those languages and, importantly, their child speakers.

Keywords: early childhood education, bilingual, children, equity

Introduction

This article focuses on the language-related well-being of young children in early childhood education (ECE). ECE forms an important foundation of children's learning and development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025). Furthermore, "[E]arly learning and children's well-being are inter-related and mutually reinforcing" (OECD, 2020, p. 18). Specifically, "interactions with others help children learn to express their feelings and preferences, listen to others, share, self-regulate their emotions, solve problems, pay attention and concentrate. Children who develop this holistic set of skills are happier than children who do not have the opportunities to do so. These early skills influence how well children get along with others and how well they are able to make

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friends. Children's skills also influence the extent to which adults engage with them, further affecting their sense of connectedness and well-being, and their continuing skill development." (OECD, 2020, p. 20)

Indeed, it is through interactions with others that children develop their skills. In addition to what happens in the home, ECE plays a pivotal role in supporting children's developing skills and well-being. The need to stimulate and support young children's social and emotional development in ECE has long been recognized as a cornerstone of ECE staff engagement with children (Ho & Funk, 2018; Hyson, 1994; Katz & McClellan, 1997). Children thrive with warm teachers who recognize their needs (Twardosz, 2005), and children's overall learning is greater if preschool teachers focus on social-emotional skill enrichment compared to if they do not (Nix et al., 2013).

The term ECE here refers to educational group settings outside the home for children between approximately 2.5 to 6 years of age. I focus mainly on current practices in ECE in the European Union and affiliated countries (per 2025)².

Many different organizations organize ECE (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025). These range from a centralized Ministry of Education to a local church-based association. In some countries, ECE forms part of the national education system from when children are 2.5 or 3 (e.g., Belgium, France) and is free. Alternatively, like in the Netherlands, ECE combines child care and what is considered primary school (as of age 4), and may involve some cost for parents. In others (e.g., Germany), parents may need to pay for ECE (although subsidies are available). The number of hours and days of the week on offer in ECE differs greatly amongst countries and regions, as does the number of children in each group and the way children are grouped (according to birth year or not, for instance). Regardless of the system organizing ECE, I refer to institutions offering ECE as "preschools" ([here](#) you can find detailed information for both EU and non-EU European countries).

Nearly everywhere preschools need to be officially licensed. Yet the educational and professional backgrounds of staff working with children in ECE are quite varied, ranging from hardly trained volunteers to professionals with at least three years of specialized higher education. Regardless of their level of training, I call any person officially working directly with young children in

² The choice to limit myself mainly to studies done in and about Europe, rather than in other parts of the globe, is a practical one: the word count for this article is limited. For European studies I am additionally limited by my lack of reading ability in several European languages (such as Portuguese, Italian, Polish, or Lithuanian, to name just a few). Furthermore, although I have tried to include reference to studies from as wide a range of European countries as possible (including Estonia, see OECD, 2020), there are few relevant studies that have been published in the languages I read.

ECE a teacher. Any particular child group may have the same single teacher (and, possibly additionally, a teacher assistant) for an entire “school year”, or there may be several teachers responsible for the same group of children, with little predictability as to which teacher will be working the following morning.

Educational and play activities in ECE are wide ranging, and while many preschools do not offer formal literacy instruction, activities may prepare for literacy and numeracy development. Typically, there is no expectation that children will have learned to read and write by the time they exit ECE.

It is usually assumed that children entering ECE are well on their way towards learning the language spoken to them by their preschool teachers. Manuals and guidelines for ECE teachers stress the importance of supportive language use in interaction with young children (Nix et al., 2013; Redaktion Pro Kita-Portal, 2024), and generally assume that children share the language of the preschool. This implies a home-school continuity that indeed applies to many young children in ECE. These children are monolingual in the school language, and usually expected to remain so for several years to come (Monolingual First Language Acquisition, MFLA). My focus here is on language use in the many preschools where teachers basically speak just the local societal language (SocL) to interact with children, even though some “initiation” into another language (usually English) through songs and rhymes may occasionally take place³.

The local SocL spoken by preschool teachers is the language variety most commonly used in public life in the region where children attend ECE. However, all over Europe, more and more children in ECE tend to have a home language background that does not fully overlap with the SocL used in ECE (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023). Children’s home language input may consist of a language that is not used in ECE. There are also many children who hear two languages at home and where one of the languages is used in ECE but the other one is not. Hence, our children bring various languages to the classroom, including the school language. ALL children who live in a particular region must have a fair chance to learn the local SocL, and to learn it well.

The languages that young children hear that differ from the SocL used in ECE are non-societal languages (NonSocL), that is, they are not commonly used in daily interaction in local public life, government, and the education system. The NonSocLs that children bring to ECE from home are usually not used at preschool and often entirely ignored. Typically, teachers do not know the NonSocLs their pupils bring with them to the classroom. In addition,

³ Preschools may also offer a so-called “bilingual program”, with substantial amounts of time dedicated to staff using the local societal language as well as a (usually prestigious) foreign language that is not commonly used in public life in the region where the preschool is located. I do not discuss these programs here (see Thieme et al., 2022, for a recent review).

teachers may not share a language with children's parents. These basic facts are a challenge for all concerned, but can be particularly difficult for the many children who do not hear the SocL at home and hence experience an abrupt home-school discontinuity in terms of language use. Children who are used to a home where both the SocL and a NonSocL are spoken will also experience a home-school discontinuity that can have negative consequences for their lives. Since language is a highly symbolic means of communication that relates to cultural and personal identity, the linguistic home-school discontinuity that many children experience in ECE may represent a threat to their and/or their families' socio-emotional well-being.

As I have done before (e.g., De Houwer, 2015), the basic ethical standpoint taken in this article is that language use in ECE should help support children's Harmonious Bilingualism, that is, "a subjectively neutral or positive experience that members of a family in a bilingual setting have with aspects of that setting" (De Houwer, 2020a, p. 63). This standpoint is firmly rooted in a social justice perspective and goes on the assumption that researchers and teachers have a moral obligation to serve that perspective. It is anchored in the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, its 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*⁴, and its 2015 *Sustainable Development Goals*. Article 29, part 1), division c, of the *Convention* states that, amongst others, the education of the child shall be directed to "The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, **language** and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own" (my emphasis). All children, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds, need an equitable chance to learn and develop to their fullest. How language diversity is approached in ECE is of utmost importance in determining whether that chance can be realized or not.

The diverse group of linguistically diverse children in ECE

Depending on where a preschool is located, most children will be hearing a language variety at home that greatly resembles the SocL used by preschool teachers. Particularly in urban areas there are also many children who do not hear the SocL at home. These children will have been hearing at least one Non-SocL at home. Once these children start to regularly pay attention to the SocL

⁴ This Convention was ratified by many EU countries in the early 1990s (Estonia ratified it in 1991).

at preschool, they have a chance to begin learning the SocL. This is called Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA; De Houwer, 1990, 2021).

It takes some time before ESLA children begin to understand the school language. Some ESLA children start to speak it a bit already after a few months, but many take much longer. Although such “silent”, or, better termed, “non-verbal”, periods are often considered “normal” for ESLA children, I explain in the next section how they are to be seen as deeply problematic. Typically, ESLA children come from families who have recently immigrated to the region where the preschool is located. Children may be refugees, or part of families who recently immigrated for less traumatic reasons. In many cases, the parents of (future) ESLA children will not (yet) speak the local SocL (unless it happens to be the world’s *lingua franca*, English), but they may be able to speak a language that preschool teachers may also know. Outside anglophone countries, this common shared language often is English, facilitating teacher-parent communication (Ragnarsdóttir, 2021).

If future ESLA children hear a single NonSocL at home, they start out as monolinguals (like the MFLA children who hear just the SocL at home). The NonSocL is the single language children heard from birth, their L1. Children have started to learn to understand and speak their L1 before they are in a setting where they are regularly hearing a chronologically second language (L2), in this case, the new SocL used at ECE. Once children start to hear the SocL they become emergent bilinguals.

Most young bilingual children, though, do not grow up in an ESLA context. Instead, they start hearing *two* first languages at home right from the start, that is, from birth. These children are growing up in a Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) setting (De Houwer, 1990, 2009). The family languages that BFLA children hear from birth typically consist of the school language (the SocL) and another language (a NonSocL). At least one of the parents raising a BFLA child will be able to speak the SocL (after all, at least one parent speaks it at home); single parents who speak both the SocL and the NonSocL at home will also be able to speak the SocL with preschool teachers. Thus, preschool teachers will likely experience few language barriers in contacts with parents in BFLA families, and may be unaware that BFLA children are acquiring a NonSocL alongside the SocL (young BFLA children typically sound like MFLA children in each of their languages; De Houwer, 2009).

By the time BFLA children enter ECE, they understand quite a bit of the SocL and are usually able to speak it as well. Thus, they can communicate in the SocL from the very beginning and do not have the communication issues their ESLA peers have. Survey results from Belgium and the United States

suggest there are approximately three times as many BFLA as ESLA children (De Houwer, 2021), but proportions will differ according to region.

Summing up, a single classroom group in ECE may consist of all of the following: (1a) monolingual children who do not yet understand or speak the SocL but who understand and speak a NonSocL at various levels of proficiency, (1b) ESLA children who are well on their way to learning to understand and speak the SocL and who understand and speak a NonSocL at various levels of proficiency, (2) MFLA children who understand and speak the SocL at various levels of proficiency, and (3) BFLA children who understand and speak both the SocL and a NonSocL at various levels of proficiency⁵.

In most cases, children's linguistically diverse backgrounds are ignored in ECE. Instead, the focus is usually only on the SocL. Preschoolers may even be actively prohibited from speaking their NonSocL at preschool (Aarts, Demir-Vegter, Kurvers, & Henrichs, 2016; Mary & Young, 2017a; Young, 2014a), to the extent that they may be severely punished if they happen to be overheard speaking a NonSocL (De Houwer, 2019). As shown in the following section, an exclusive attention to the SocL does not serve children well: Ignoring children's linguistically diverse backgrounds in ECE does not contribute to their well-being or solid social integration. Furthermore, children who are "required to leave an intrinsic part of their identity at the school gate and who do not feel accepted for who they are by the school may feel uncomfortable at school and consequently may be unable to engage fully with learning" (Young, 2014b, p. 37).

Ignoring children's non-societal languages in ECE and its possible consequences

Children who do not hear the school language at home (ESLA children)

Case studies of children who do not hear or use the school language at home have shown what can happen when children's home languages are not given any attention. Examples from different countries show how devastating this lack of attention can be. For instance, Dahoun (1995) and Manigand (1999) described how children in France who came to preschool not understanding the SocL and whose L1 was not given any attention there retreated into a depressed silence

⁵ There are in addition children who have been learning to understand and speak two (or more!) NonSocLs. Given the scant research on such trilingual or quadrilingual children (De Houwer & Ortega, 2025) I do not discuss them here. Yet the general argumentation for children with just a single NonSocL applies to trilingual or quadrilingual children as well.

that lasted years. Many of these children did not start to speak any French until primary school. In addition, Dahoun (1995) reported on how she herself felt as a three-year-old Arabic-speaking monolingual who had just started attending a French-speaking preschool in Algeria. She was upset and shocked to find that she could not understand anything, that her teacher could not understand her, and that her teacher mispronounced her name (Zerdalia). After a year of listening silently and trying to decipher what was going on, Zerdalia noticed that some children received candy after they said something. She also wanted candy, and thought she had figured out something to say that the teacher would like. Excitedly, she got up and said something, but only got a cold stare back, pointing at her seat, and no candy.

Drury (2007, 2013) in the United Kingdom, Kostyuk (2005) and Thiersch (2007) in Germany, and Nap-Kolhoff (2010) in the Netherlands shared similar observations. For instance, Drury (2007) reported on Smita, who lived in England and heard Bengali at home from her recently immigrated parents. At age three, she was able to express herself very well in Bengali. She was a happy child who got along well with others. At three and a half, Smita entered a preschool where only English was spoken and where other languages were entirely ignored. Smita did not understand any English, cried every day, and did not want to go to school. She seemed depressed, but her parents wanted her to stay at school, where they were sure she would learn English, which they found very important (they were in the process of learning English themselves). Even by the time she was four and a half Smita did not speak at school. Smita told her parents she did not understand anything that was said at school. She simply imitated what the other children did and had no friends. Smita felt excluded at school, not understood, and depressed – she was experiencing a lack of well-being. At home she was progressing very well in her Bengali language development. When Smita was five, her teacher told her parents that Smita would not be able to enroll in primary school, because, she said, Smita “does not speak”. The teacher knew nothing about Smita’s abilities in Bengali and had never asked.

For children like Smita and Zerdalia, their lack of well-being in ECE was linguistically determined. First off, they did not understand the school language. In addition, they were unable to use the languages they already knew to make themselves understood. Yet, by age three, they had just started to experience a sense of control through language. Three-year-olds typically have developed language well enough to get what they want through using language (Clark, 2024). All of a sudden, in ECE, this newly discovered power was of no use. In not being able to verbally communicate, Smita and Zerdalia lost their sense of being recognized as a person and felt excluded. Also, not being understood if

they expressed their most basic needs (e.g., that they had to use the restroom, or that they felt ill) fell on deaf ears. Unsurprisingly, this did not make the children feel accepted, let alone welcomed. Thus, the lack of recognition for their languages in ECE had a direct impact on their sense of self.

Feeling excluded does not contribute to socio-emotional well-being, especially in young children. Yet, such well-being is of fundamental importance to learning. Additionally, if children feel no recognition or respect for their home language(s), they may not develop any motivation to learn the school language. In contrast, if children's NonSocL is used in preschool, their self-respect will be enhanced, as will be their motivation to learn the L2 (Verhoeven, 1991, p. 210).

Although a "silent" or "non-verbal" period is often considered "normal" for ESLA children and even "endorsed by early childhood educators" (Kan et al., 2025, p. 560), the examples from Zerdalia and Smita show that it can be quite traumatic, with some 5-year-olds having spent up to half their lives in depressed and retreated silence at preschool. Such prolonged periods of communicative silence must be avoided. If children retreat from interaction in ECE they cannot find an entry into the SocL and the learning that it entails, and they cannot learn about social relationships with peers and forge friendships. They need to be willing to interact with people speaking the SocL in order to be able to start learning it. Thus, contrary to popular belief, young children do not easily just "pick up" a new language in ECE, and their early traumatic experiences at ECE may have a lasting effect on their SocL skills and, consequently, future educational trajectory (see also Drury, 2007, 2013).

Children who hear only the school language at home (MFLA children)

Monolingual children who speak the same SocL as used in ECE soon learn that this SocL is highly valued. They may soon learn to devalue peers who do not speak the SocL according to SocL-speaking peer-group standards. Such devaluing is manifested when MFLA children ignore children who do not yet speak the SocL, and treat them as if they are invisible (Tabors, 1997). Studies have also documented bullying of ESLA children by their MFLA peers in ECE (Chang et al., 2007; von Grünigen et al., 2010). Several adolescents with a NonSocL at home remembered ridiculing and bullying and taking place in ECE when they were 5 or 6 years of age, indicating the extent of the traumatic impression their MFLA schoolmates' behavior left on them after more than 10 years (DJI, 2000). The discriminatory attitudes formed in ECE are at least partly to be blamed for language-related ridiculing and bullying by young MFLA primary school children of peers who do not (yet) speak the SocL well

(von Grünigen et al., 2012). As they get older, MFLA schoolmates may play an important role in perpetuating discriminatory monolingual ideologies in society at large, again pointing to the importance of what happens in ECE with regard to language use.

Children who hear the school language and a non-societal language at home (BFLA children)

Children who hear the school language as one of the two languages used in their home have learned to understand it. So far, these BFLA children have not been reported as experiencing difficulties with the school language. However, there is a remarkable report by Le Pichon and de Jonge (2016) from the Netherlands about the boy Amine, who spoke Berber and Dutch at home. It is not mentioned whether Amine heard those two languages from birth, but he spoke both languages at home already at the age of two, when he entered a Dutch-speaking preschool. There, he did not speak for two years (half of his life). Then, gradually, he started to occasionally whisper into the teacher's ears and was overheard speaking the SocL with other children outside (when no adults were watching; Manigand [1999] reports on three ESLA children who did the same). After another few months, Amine felt comfortable enough to say full Dutch sentences aloud inside the classroom with a teacher and a small group of children present. Le Pichon and de Jonge's (2016) report is the only one I have come across of a (likely) BFLA child in ECE who is retreating from using the school language. In contrast, there are multiple reports of young BFLA children who stop speaking the NonSocL at home soon after entering ECE, leading to the dramatic finding that 20 to 25% of BFLA children only speak the school language once they are in primary school (De Houwer, 2020b).

One main reason for BFLA children frequently rejecting their NonSocLs may lie in the fact that in ECE these languages are entirely ignored. The fact that a language they hear on a daily basis at home is totally absent in the first group setting outside the home that children experience signals to them that their NonSocLs are worth less than the school language, and, worse, have no value whatsoever. Speaking them is equally of no value, and, if you speak them, you have no value, either – at least, this is what children may think. If they do, it is understandable that they do not wish to be identified with their NonSocLs, and children hope to increase their own value by not speaking them (De Houwer, 2015).

The impact of children refusing to use a language that at least one parent speaks with them is immediate on parents, who feel rejected by their young children, ashamed that their children can no longer communicate with

grandparents, worried, and depressed (De Houwer, 2017; Hilbig, 2020). Parent-child communication may become difficult and emotionally distant because parents and children no longer speak the same language (review in De Houwer, 2020a). The fact that children no longer speak their NonSocLs thus detracts from bilingual families' and children's well-being.

Fortunately, there are some relatively simple and inexpensive ways in which ALL children in ECE can feel included from the very start, regardless of their language background. The following section describes a few positive examples.

How NOT ignoring children's non-societal languages in ECE can have positive effects

European research into language diversity in ECE and how it is handled is generally quite rare, and we certainly need much more of it (Alstad & Mourão, 2021). Langeloo et al. (2019) undertook a systematic review of Global North studies investigating interactions between teachers and ESLA children. They found only three such studies carried out in non-English-speaking European countries. Only one of these reported on NonSocL use by ECE staff: In his comprehensive study of 72 ESLA 6-year-olds with Turkish as L1 and Dutch as L2, Verhoeven (1991) examined several factors that might help explain children's proficiency in both L1 and L2. One of those factors was the extent to which teachers addressed children in Turkish. This happened in more than half the preschools involved, even though the numbers of hours that teachers spoke children's NonSocL was not very high (between 4 to 8 hours a week according to teacher report). The extent of teacher interaction in the NonSocL helped account for children's proficiency both in the NonSocL and in the SocL to a very high degree. Given that well-developed proficiency in two languages is a hallmark of Harmonious Bilingualism in children (De Houwer, 2020a), these findings are highly significant.

Verhoeven's (1991) study appears to be the only group study so far that has attempted to correlate teacher NonSocL use in ECE with children's developing bilingualism. There are, however, several case studies that have demonstrated the positive effects of what can happen if preschool teachers do not ignore children's NonSocL.

Dahoun (1995) described how a new preschool teacher visited Zerdalia's Arabic-speaking home in Algeria when she was 4, took an interest in Arabic, and tried to speak some Arabic to her. Almost immediately, Zerdalia was ready to try to understand and speak the teacher's French. Manigand (1999) was a French teacher trainer who had been called in to help with 11 Turkish-speaking children who did not speak any French at preschool in France, even

after two years of being there. He first observed the children and then tried to engage with them one-on-one. He first did so entirely in French. Children were reluctant to engage with him until he started to speak a bit of “tourist” Turkish with them – he received smiles, and children were then much more willing to engage with him. He “read” picture books with the children, where he first said a word in French and then asked the children to teach him the Turkish word. Gradually, the children started to also use French with him, and he continued to want to learn the Turkish versions from them. He also read from a bilingual book with them in Turkish, which made children laugh at his pronunciation but opened up “language awareness” conversations (in Turkish and French) about differences between Turkish and French. The planned one-on-one sessions soon became group sessions, with all the Turkish-speaking children gathering around Manigand and laughing and talking in both Turkish and French: “pour eux, j’étais le monsieur de l’école qui parle turc, ce qui signifiait que le turc existait en fin à l’école. Cette langue a ait acquis une légitimité” (64; my translation: “for them, I was the man at school who speaks Turkish, which meant that finally Turkish existed at school. This language had gained some level of legitimacy”). In addition, Manigand suggested that children were looking for recognition (p. 65).

Mary and Young (2017a, b) have documented the educational practices Sylvie, a French preschool teacher, used to facilitate the home-school transition particularly for children who knew a NonSocL but not the SocL upon preschool entry. As Mary and Young’s year-long video-based study showed, Sylvie created a safe context for children in which they could freely use their NonSocL. One important step in creating a safe space was that Sylvie invited children’s parents to come to the classroom (highly unusual in France) and partake in arts and crafts activities as well as book reading. This allowed her to find out more about the children’s home languages and to ask parents for the translation of key words she might need to communicate with children. Indeed, Sylvie was prepared to learn a few words and brief phrases in all the languages her pupils brought to the classroom. She then used these words as bridges to words in French. As Mary and Young stress, in her interactions with both children and parents Sylvie showed a warm and non-judgmental attitude. In my personal contact with Sylvie at a conference she told me she had had enough of children in her class crying all the time and not learning much of anything, and that this is one reason she decided to take a very different approach. Sylvie had not received any specific training but was an experienced teacher who was “[a]cutely aware of the linguistic resources, rights and needs of her pupils” (Mary & Young, 2017b, p. 125), and willing to act upon this awareness. It appears that this was to the great benefit of her pupils, who “were visibly at ease in the classroom and actively engaged in learning” (Mary & Young, 2017a, p. 69).

Kirsch and Seele (2020) investigated the language practices of four teachers of three-year-olds who had recently entered preschools in Luxembourg not knowing the SocL, Luxembourgish. The teachers flexibly and dynamically helped children learn the SocL through using children's NonSocL as a scaffold, and children were allowed to speak their NonSocL. They were thus not silent, and although they had not been at preschool long, children were starting to learn to say words in the SocL (see also Kirsch, 2021). Similarly, Ragnarsdóttir (2021) describes how Syrian refugee children in ECE in Iceland were making overall good progress in the learning of their new L2, Icelandic. She also notes that "the languages of all children in the preschools, including Arabic, were made visible and used for example in singing and talking to create trust and to empower the children" (p. 418). Neither Kirsch and Seele nor Ragnarsdóttir make an explicit link between these two findings (learning to speak the L2 and presence of the L1 in ECE), but there might well be one. Likewise, Gelir (2023) describes how in a monolingual Turkish-speaking preschool in Turkey the teacher allowed Syrian refugee children to use Arabic, and how she was willing to learn a few words of Arabic herself to use with the children. The children were learning to speak Turkish and did not remain silent. In his unique interview study with 36 Syrian refugee children in Turkey (mean age 5 years and 10 months), Erdemir (2022b) revealed that these ESLA children were very happy with the summer preschool program they had been attending for 8 weeks. One of the reasons was that children were allowed to use Arabic, their L1, at preschool. The program also relied on bilingual assistant teachers who used Arabic at school to help children learn Turkish. Children were proud of their developing Arabic-Turkish bilingualism (for a detailed description of the transformative summer preschool program, see Erdemir, 2022a). Finally, Tkachenko, Romøren, and Garmann (2021) documented the following types of support for children's NonSocL in Norwegian preschools: (i) including children's NonSocLs in songs, counting, and book reading; (ii) talking about knowing different languages, and (iii) involving children, parents and also staff to ask how they would say something in a particular NonSocL. However, this study does not mention anything about children's developing Norwegian or how they felt.

A Language-Considerate Approach in ECE

The key to helping children from diverse linguistic backgrounds feel included in ECE from the very start is to actively show attention to and respect for all children's languages (De Houwer, 2015; Young, 2014a). This stance shows that children's languages are considered, in the literal sense of being taken into consideration. It also shows a friendliness and openness that are associated

with the term “considerate”. Hence, the approach proposed here is termed a Language-Considerate Approach. This approach is closely related to that of the Linguistically Appropriate Practice (LAP) advocated and developed by Chumak-Horbatsch in Canada (2012; 2019; De Houwer, 2004, earlier advocated for a similar approach in primary schools).

A Language-Considerate Approach does not require teachers to know and speak their pupils’ languages. In classrooms in the United States where Non-SocL-speaking children all have Spanish as a NonSocL it is possible for teachers who know some Spanish to use it and thus support NonSocL-speaking children (Gort & Sembiante, 2015; de Oliveira et al., 2016; Surrain et al., 2023). In most European ECE classrooms, however, children come to school speaking a great variety of languages. Having a focus on just a single NonSocL is thus no option. Romøren et al. (2023) have pointed out that in European ECE settings where teachers may be able to speak other languages they might be unwilling to do so, fearful as they are of privileging one particular child’s NonSocL, and not others (see also Young, 2014b). Similarly, even when preschools specifically engage bilingual teaching assistants, those assistants might not feel free to openly use a NonSocL they happen to share with particular children who do not yet know the SocL, and might use it only in brief whispers (Robertson, Drury, & Cable, 2014). The fear of excluding some children is certainly a valid concern.

The reality of the mix of various languages children bring to European ECE classrooms means it is not workable for preschools to offer formally bilingual programs in which all the children’s languages are offered or to expect that teachers know several languages other than the school language. Instead, “Die Möglichkeiten eines Einbezugs [der Erstsprachen der Kinder] sind daher eher in einer offenen Haltung und einer Willkommenskultur gegenüber den Erstsprachen der Kinder, durch eine sprachförderliche Raumgestaltung, Berücksichtigung der sprachlichen Vielfalt in der Materialauswahl und der alltäglichen Peer-Kommunikation der Kinder zu sehen” (Kratzmann et al., 2017b, p. 133 [English translation (with help of DeepL): The possibilities of including [children’s first languages] are therefore to be seen more in an open attitude and a welcoming culture towards the children’s first languages, through a language-promoting room design, consideration of linguistic diversity in the choice of materials and the children’s everyday peer communication]. Kratzmann et al.’s (2017b) recommendations fit in well with a Language-Considerate Approach. However, in actively allowing and supporting the use of NonSocLs in the classroom, one must be careful to include ALL the children’s languages. As described in the following, this can be realized in several ways.

Within a Language-Considerate Approach, the following pedagogical actions are central. (1) First, teachers attempt to correctly pronounce children’s

names (if necessary, with the help of parents and a recording, e.g., on a smart-phone). (2) Importantly, with the help of parents, older children, or the internet, teachers learn to understand and say some key phrases in the languages their young pupils bring to the classroom and that they will need to communicate about basic needs (bathroom needs, pain, feeling unwell). (3) From the start of the school year, especially when children first enter preschool, teachers invite parents to the classroom to join in activities, read books, sing songs, and tell stories in each of the languages children in the group use at home. (4) Another important point is that teachers should make sure all children in the group learn to understand and say some key phrases like “hello”, “goodbye”, “thank you”, “sorry” in *all* the languages brought from home by children in the group. This learning experience shows that there are many different languages, that children can learn any language, and that there are thus no specifically difficult languages. This insight may foster all children’s motivation to learn additional languages later on because languages will not so much be thought of as “foreign”, and the fear towards “foreign” languages that many students have later on may decrease. All children’s metalinguistic awareness, including that of the monolingual children, will benefit from an openness towards all languages. By covering ALL the languages in the group the message will also be that ALL languages have a value.

The HaBilNet blog article “The Need for a Language-Considerate Approach in Early Childhood Education” goes into more detail as far as concrete tips are concerned. A French version can be found in the HaBilNet blog article “La nécessité d’une approche respectueuse vers les langues dans les dispositifs d’éducation de la petite enfance”, and a Dutch version is available as well: “Onze kinderen en hun talen: Hindernissen, behoeften en kansen: Een voorstel voor een Taalsensibele Aanpak in vroege educatie”. These blog articles are adaptations of an earlier article in German (De Houwer & Pascall, 2021), also available online. Tips that are particularly useful for the support of multilingual literacy can be found (in German) in Pascall and De Houwer (2021), and have been adapted in French and English for the blog articles “Littérature émergente multilingue dans des Établissements d’Accueil du Jeune Enfant” and “Emergent multilingual literacy in early childhood education and care”, respectively.

Parents form an important part of a Language-Considerate Approach. It is important for preschools to connect with parents, and parents feel empowered if their concerns are given attention (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016; Manigand, 1999). Yet parents may not always agree with preschools allowing children to speak their NonSocL (Stapor et al., 2025) and may not realize the educational benefits of the practice. They may also be unaware that language policies support multilingual practices in ECE (Stapor et al., 2025), which shows how

important it is for preschools to engage with immigrant background parents. Norheim and Moser's (2020) review of studies investigating potential barriers in the communication between these parents and teachers shows that facilitating partnerships with parents is a crucial task for staff working in ECE.

Conclusion

I am by no means the only one or the first to argue for an approach in early education that actively supports children's non-societal languages. Yet earlier calls (e.g., Cummins, 2005; Fthenakis et al., 1985; Kratzmann et al., 2017a; Leseman & Slot, 2014; Manigand, 1999; Verhoeven, 1991, and many more) have largely gone unheeded in actual practice, and non-societal languages unfortunately continue to be largely ignored in many European preschools (Jahreiß, 2018; Kratzmann et al., 2017a; Romøren et al., 2023; Van der Wildt et al., 2024). As Bergeron-Morin et al. (2023, p. 22) noted: "educational practices too often adopt a monolingual mindset that implicitly favours homogeneity and regards diversity (including multilingualism) as a problem to overcome, rather than a condition for learning". Thus, it is important to repeat the calls, and explain what it can mean for our young children in ECE if non-societal languages are ignored.

Young children's developing bilingualism may be hampered if their non-societal languages are ignored in ECE. For children who do not yet know the school language, such ignoring may stand in the way of their development of the school language. For children who know the school language as well as a non-school language, ignoring non-school languages may lead to their language loss. Neither case contributes to child and family well-being. Children in ECE with just a single societal language who experience only the societal language at school may develop discriminatory attitudes towards language diversity that are not conducive to the realities of multilingual life in Europe today.

Children with known developmental challenges and special needs stemming from neurocognitive and/or physiological issues may attend preschools. They may also be hearing a NonSocL at home. Similarly, children with a hearing impairment, whether born to hearing and speaking parents or to parents who use sign language, form another special population. This article has not focused on these populations, but it is obvious that children with special needs also should have our full support and attention through a Language-Considerate Approach.

By actively valuing all children's languages, a Language-Considerate Approach supports Harmonious Bilingualism: Emergent bilinguals (ESLA children) are given a chance to learn a new language in a safe space that does not attack their sense of self, and fluent bilinguals (BFLA children) are given a chance to continue flourishing in both languages rather than feeling that one of

them is not worth speaking. A Language-Considerate Approach will also show all the children in the classroom, including MFLA children, that linguistic and cultural diversity are nothing to be afraid of. Thus, societal integration for all will be fostered. Furthermore, a Language-Considerate Approach increases the language awareness of ALL children, regardless of how many languages they are growing up with.

Although a Language-Considerate Approach is, in essence, not very difficult to implement, there are hurdles that need to be overcome. In the many talks I have given to teachers about a Language-Considerate Approach I have identified a change in attitude as both the major desideratum and the major obstacle. As Kratzmann et al. (2017a) have shown, a main hurdle consists of the negative attitudes ECE teachers may have towards language diversity or particular languages. Bezcioglu-Göktolga and Yagmur (2018) have documented what such negative attitudes can mean for parents' use of the non-societal language at home. Likewise, Bergeron-Morin et al. (2023) point out the often deep-seated ideological hurdles that may need to be overcome (see also Young, 2014a). Although attitudes may be very hard to change (see Kratzmann et al.'s [2020] longitudinal intervention study with preschool teachers in Germany), it is fortunately not impossible (Young, 2014b). Fairly new European initiatives such as that of the Language Friendly School launched by the Rutu Foundation for Intercultural Multilingual Education (a non-profit organization in the Netherlands) show that change is happening. Language Friendly Schools "recognize and embrace their students' multilingualism, and take action to give space to these languages within the school community". Such initiatives are very encouraging.

Kratzmann et al.'s (2017a) survey of preschool teachers has shown that in addition to attitudes, teachers' knowledge about early bilingual development is an important pillar that helps explain teaching practices (see also Zheng, 2025), as is knowledge about how to best communicate with parents. The recommendations for professional development that Bergeron-Morin et al. (2023) formulate are therefore of utmost importance⁶. I hope they can be taken into account so that all children in Europe with a non-societal language at home may experience Harmonious Bilingualism.

⁶ However, in their longitudinal intervention study Kratzmann et al. (2020) failed to find any influence of increased knowledge about early multilingualism on teaching practices.

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