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Functional multilingual learning – what is it?

Source (reproduced with permission): Onderwijscentrum Gent (Ghent Education Centre), https://stad.gent/nl/onderwijscentrum-gent/diversiteit-en-meertaligheid/meertaligheid#Functioneel_meertalig_leren.

This document was written for the schools in the Flemish Community context. This context might be very different from the ones in other regions/countries.

Would you like to know how to get more out of your multilingual students, and how to actively incorporate their linguistic capacities in your teaching practice? Here you will find more information about functional multilingual learning, a concept conceived by the **Centre for Diversity and Learning** (Ghent University – Belgium), which the **Ghent Education Centre (City of Ghent)** developed for use in secondary education. With this project, the Ghent Education Centre won the European Language Label 2020.

This text is written for schools in the Flemish part of Belgium. So sometimes we refer to the ‘Dutch’ language, being the instruction language in Flanders. You can replace ‘Dutch’ by the instruction language in your region or country. The context in Flanders might be very different from yours, but we hope to inspire you anyway.

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Why start with functional multilingual learning?
Why is it important to integrate your students' home language into your teaching practice?



For young people whose home language is not Dutch (or any other instruction language in your country), a flawless school career is far from self-evident. In Belgium, they are less likely to go on to higher education, they have a harder time finding their way in the school system, they end up in certain types of education more frequently (e.g. vocational education), and they have a higher chance of leaving school without a qualification compared to students who have Dutch as their home language. Moreover, international PISA research shows that the gap between strong and weak students in Belgium is wider than in most other countries, with both the socio-economic context of the family and the home language being determining factors.

At the same time, research shows that focusing on multilingualism, by recognising students' home language and using it in the classroom, has positive effects on the acquisition of new languages and boosts students' school performance. It is therefore important that schools are (or remain) committed to a constructive and open language policy, in which language awareness and the functional use of home languages in the classroom are important elements.

See how multilingual students experience learning in another language:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6HUV2eFdLg&ab_channel=EALTeamSIS (The Importance of ELL Strategies - Immersion - Moises in Math Class)

What do you need to know about functional multilingual learning?

What exactly is functional multilingual learning?



Functional multilingual learning (FML) is a concept developed by the Centre for Diversity and Learning (Ghent University, Belgium) that stands for the strategic and integrated use of the linguistic resources of (nascent) multilingual learners in mainstream education, with the aim of **increasing opportunities to unlock knowledge** (Sierens & Van Avermaet 2014*).

FML works on **several dimensions**:

- a **didactic dimension**: stimulating learning strategies that allow multilingual learners to use their full language repertoire;
- a **socio-emotional dimension**: stimulating multilingual resources to foster communication and personal relationships (trust) between teacher and learners and among learners themselves.

We already know from research that the mother tongue or home language can be a scaffold in acquiring or strengthening a second language. However, the home language can also be used in the **acquisition of new learning content**. This makes students' home language a useful tool in the learning process. If multilingual learners do not have to limit themselves to the language of instruction, they can also handle more challenging tasks and are able to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Tackling some myths surrounding functional multilingual learning

Do we need to change much in the curriculum or organisation of our school?

The didactic use of home languages can be a **common thread** in teaching, and in itself does not require **major changes** in the curriculum or school organisation. It often just involves small and easily integrated actions that can be perfectly grafted onto your current lesson planning and the topics you cover in class as a teacher.

Does functional multilingual learning mean lowering the bar and lowering the level?

The aim of functional multilingual learning is precisely to provide **more opportunities to unlock knowledge**. Multilingual learners therefore do not have to wait until their language proficiency in Dutch is high enough to cope with more challenging tasks: they can already do so now, by using their multilingual potential.

In addition, multilingual learners can also develop a **deeper understanding of the subject matter** by engaging in meaning negotiation in multiple languages, by engaging in conversation in different languages, and by consulting multilingual resources. Learners can also reinforce each other by explaining the subject matter to each other so that everyone understands it.

Research clearly shows that committing to multilingual education and acknowledging the home language in the classroom positively affects the acquisition of a new language (Cummins, 2012). Moreover, it also improves school performance (Collier, 1995). This is also shown by the **2012 MARS study (Multilingualism as a reality at school), conducted by Ghent University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel**: it shows that positively approaching the home language has a **positive impact on educational performance**. Approaching multilingualism positively contributes to greater wellbeing and a better self-image, which enhances motivation and educational performance and thus also raises rather than lowers educational attainment.

As a teacher, do I have to master all my students' home languages?

As a teacher, you do not (of course) need to know all of your students' home languages. By creating an **interactive classroom environment**, in which students are allowed to use their home language to gather and discuss information among themselves, for instance, you allow students to use their full linguistic potential. If you draw up **clear rules** with students about when Dutch should be used (e.g. in post-assignment feedback), as a teacher you are still in control and have an overview of your students' learning.

I don't understand what students say among themselves in their home language. How can I know they are engaged in the lesson?

Recent research shows that students who are allowed to use their home language during group work use that language in a **meaningful way**. Dutch is not supplanted, and moreover, students are usually **engaged in the task**, also in their home language. However, clear

agreements and instructions beforehand are important (so students know when the home language is allowed or not), as is feedback in Dutch afterwards. For students, this ensures 'confirmation' of what they have learned in Dutch; for teachers, it means a way of monitoring the learning process.

Can functional multilingual learning be used with all my students?

Using functional multilingual learning can strengthen **all students**. Students whose home language is strongly developed will certainly benefit, but there are also **positive effects** for students whose home language is less strong. After all, the home language is not a goal in itself, but a means to achieve greater learning gains. **Engagement and motivation** also increase. And for those whose home language is Dutch, FML has equally positive effects: those students turn out to look at **multilingualism and (linguistic) diversity** in a more positive way, and learn a lot from **comparing languages and language systems**.

Does functional multilingual learning mean that students now always work in their (home) language groups?

Let the composition of groups (language homogeneous / language heterogeneous groups) vary depending on the lesson objectives, group dynamics, class composition,... Alternate so that all students remain equally **involved and motivated**.

Critical success factors: what should you consider if you want to get started with functional multilingual learning?



Functional multilingual learning has more chances of success and can be used more easily and deeply in the classroom if:

- the **learning environment** is powerful and rich,
- the **subject teaching** is language-oriented and
- the teacher **differentiates** in a thoughtful way.

In addition, as a teacher it is important to have a good insight into the **linguistic background** of your students and to have sufficient knowledge of exactly how multilingual language development proceeds.

Sources

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