



Language and learning disadvantages of learners with a migrant background in Germany

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Benachteiligung der Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund an deutschen Schulen

Language Policy Division

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1. Disadvantages facing children from immigrant backgrounds at German schools

“Children and young people from immigrant backgrounds” are children and young people who themselves or whose ancestors have immigrated to Germany over the last few decades. Their first language may be either German or another language and they may have either German or another nationality. I will use the term “children and young people from immigrant backgrounds”, though other experts use other terms. Most statistics concern children and young people with a nationality other than German and some education statistics include children and young people whose first language is not German. Children and young people from immigrant backgrounds and with German nationality who state that their first language is German are hard to identify statistically. However, this group may still have language or learning difficulties because they come from an immigrant background.

Children and young people from immigrant backgrounds form a very heterogeneous group as far as variables such as culture of origin, first language, social background, parental levels of education or command of the second language are concerned. Any generalisations made below are made in full awareness that they cover typical aspects and not all individual cases.

1.1. Situation when children from immigrant backgrounds start school

Many children from immigrant backgrounds do not have a good enough command of German when they start school to be able to benefit from primary education. Investigations into language levels show that their knowledge of German is often far below that of children whose mother tongue is German. Indeed, it is now acknowledged by the public at large that, by the time they have finished kindergarten, many children from immigrant backgrounds do not have a good enough command of German to succeed at school.

1.2. Moving on to and completing higher levels of education

Children from immigrant backgrounds are clearly under-represented at the more academic secondary schools (*Gymnasien* and *Realschulen*) and, after primary school, the vast majority of children from immigrant backgrounds move on to a technically oriented secondary school (*Hauptschule*). There is also a much higher proportion of children and young people from immigrant backgrounds than German children in “special schools”, in particular schools for children with learning difficulties.

Some 20% of young people from immigrant backgrounds leave school without a school-leaving certificate. Approximately 10% of non-German pupils manage to obtain a higher school-leaving certificate (*Abitur*), compared with 25% of the population as a whole.

1.3. PISA survey and DESI survey

The PISA¹ survey shows that young people from immigrant backgrounds perform much less well at school than non-immigrant children. 24.9% of the group in which the young people themselves and at least one of their parents were born in another country and 14.3% of the group where the young people were born in Germany but at least one of their parents was born in another country are so-called ‘students-at-risk’ (*Deutsches PISA-Konsortium* 2000).

¹ PISA: *Programme for International Student Assessment* (OECD)

Germany is one of the countries in which the difference between the educational achievement of pupils from immigrant backgrounds and native children is most striking. It is also one of the few countries where second-generation children obtain worse results than first-generation children (OECD 2006), which tends to suggest that the support given has had little effect.

According to the DESI² survey, young people (in the 9th school year) whose first language is not German perform much less well in German language classes than young people from families where German is spoken. Young people who have grown up in families where several languages are spoken perform much better. While the vocabulary skills of young people who do not speak German as a first language lie “dramatically” below those of native German speakers, their performance in spelling is not particularly poor, bearing in mind the other disadvantages they face (Klieme 2006).

2. Language development

2.1 *Pre-school second language acquisition*

There is very little information about the first-language skills of children from immigrant backgrounds when they start school, but it can be assumed that they often have a better command of their first language than of the second. Their command of the language spoken by their family is, as a rule, normal for their age (Hepsöyler & Lieber-Harkort 1991; Karasu 1995; Jeuk 2003).

Surveys show that, when they start primary school, children from immigrant backgrounds have a much poorer command of the second language, ie German, than those whose mother tongue is German. Statistics frequently show that from 70 to over 90% of children from immigrant backgrounds perform below average or are deemed to be ‘at risk’ (Berlin Department for School, Youth and Sport, 2001; Penner 2005). These values apply to various areas of language such as vocabulary, morphology, syntax and pragmatics. They also have very poor auditory skills and phonological awareness (Penner 2005; Grimm et al 2004).

There has been much speculation about whether bilingualism hinders or helps language acquisition. It is now recognised that the success or failure of children who have grown up speaking two languages depends mainly on the circumstances in which the language is learned (for example, social background, parents’ level of education and aspirations, and the language support offered) (Apeltauer 2004; Siebert-Ott 2001).

Penner’s observation (2005) that second language learning slows down in the last year of kindergarten is particularly noteworthy. One would expect pre-school establishments to stimulate language development in a wide range of ways, thus providing strong support for second language acquisition. This does not, however, always appear to be the case. It may be assumed that many children from immigrant backgrounds take a relatively limited part in communication in kindergarten. Their command of German is apparently too poor, for example, to understand a story told in German and talk about it. They cannot therefore absorb the linguistic input which does exist in pre-school establishments, which explains why second-language development stagnates. Even when language support measures are provided, the children who have the poorest command of German may well have fewer opportunities to speak than the others.

² DESI : *Deutsch-Englisch-Schülerleistungen-International* (German English Student Assessment International)

2.2 Second-language skills in schools

For the purposes of classification, children from immigrant backgrounds can be divided into three groups as far as their second-language skills when starting primary school are concerned.

The first group has as good a command of the second language, German, as the native speakers, or at least a good enough command for them to catch up with native speakers during their school years and do well or at least as well as the average pupil.

The second group has such a poor command of the second language, German, that they can scarcely understand the lessons. There is little hope that the second-language skills of this group will improve during their school education. The oft-held view that primary education almost automatically reinforces language acquisition does not apply because the difference between the level of the language used in teaching and the level of language skills of the second language learners is too great. As a result, children from immigrant backgrounds cannot take an active part in lessons, which often leads to a loss of interest and disciplinary problems. Difficulties in the second language increase over the years, owing to the increase in the proportion of written work, the complexity of the written language, the fact that the language used in teaching is based on the written language and the increasing use of abstract concepts.

In the third group of children from immigrant backgrounds, there are “concealed language difficulties” (Knapp 1999). On a superficial level, these children can express themselves fluently in spoken language. They use camouflage and avoidance strategies (they do not pronounce words clearly, speak at great speed, swallow the ends of words, avoid difficult constructions and use general-purpose words such as “do”) to cover up their second language difficulties. In the classroom many teachers do not notice such language difficulties at all or fail to recognise their full significance because they are not trained to identify them, especially from oral communication. As the amount of written work increases – particularly in the 3rd school year – the children’s language difficulties become very clear.

Second language learners not only have particular difficulties with vocabulary but also with morphology and syntax. As a result, pupils cannot establish the important relationships between the words in a sentence (text-intrinsic relations) and consequently cannot absorb or produce more complex sentences. This has an impact on textual skills in that pupils have particular difficulties both in understanding and in writing texts. It is obvious that the children and young people concerned subsequently have a limited, if any, understanding of more complex conversations in the classroom and of the exercises and texts set out in textbooks.

2.3 Explanations for insufficient command of the second language

The “threshold hypothesis” and the “developmental interdependence hypothesis” (Cummins 1979) go a long way to explaining the difficulties of children from immigrant backgrounds in learning a second language. The threshold hypothesis assumes that those aspects of bilingualism which might positively influence cognitive growth are unlikely to come into effect until the child has attained a certain minimum or threshold level of competence in a second language (Cummins 1979, p. 229). The developmental interdependence hypothesis proposes that the level of L2 competence which a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins (Cummins 1979, p. 233). Cummins’ hypotheses have also been confirmed in German-speaking countries (eg Baur/Meder 1992; Knapp 1997).

The conclusions that can be drawn from these hypotheses are that children from immigrant backgrounds should be given support in acquiring their first language both at pre-school and school age. In addition to providing indirect support for the acquisition of a second language and for the child's cognitive development, the advantage of having a good command of the first language is that those concerned have two languages with which to communicate in the global community.

There is much to be said in favour of fostering first language acquisition, but it would be wrong to assume that there is a systematic link with second language acquisition. In individual cases, the situation may be quite different. There are many children and young people who acquire an excellent command of the second language despite the fact that they have only a poor command of their first language. On the other hand, a good command of the first language does not automatically mean that a child will successfully learn to speak a second language.

For financial and organisational reasons, it is hardly realistic to imagine that the acquisition of first languages could be systematically fostered, especially in the case of those which are rarely spoken in Germany or in regions with a small immigrant population.

Fostering first language acquisition is an important aspect of an overall language support approach but not the only one. It is at least equally important to foster the acquisition of the second language, which is the language of communication in the country in which the children and young people concerned live and which will have the greatest impact on their career prospects and ability to become full members of the community.

3. Language skill surveys

Language support should be based on the assessment of language skills. There are, of course, many means of doing this, depending on the target group, and many ways of measuring the various skills, but they have seldom been put to the test. Standardised and calibrated methods which can be put into practice only exist for certain aspects. There is, above all, a need for the determination of pragmatic skills (Fried 2004; Ehlich et al 2005).

4. Strategies to support language acquisition

4.1 At pre-school age

4.1.1 Fostering second language acquisition

It obviously cannot be assumed that attending pre-school establishments alone helps to acquire a sufficient command of the second language. It is unrealistic to believe that a "linguistic bath", in the sense of simple immersion in the language, suffices. Although most children from immigrant backgrounds attend pre-school establishments for several years, their language skills are usually not sufficient to ensure that they are successful at school. However, it has been noted that if children attend a pre-school establishment long enough, it is easier for them to learn the second language. The first aim should therefore be to ensure that children from immigrant backgrounds attend pre-school establishments as early as possible and on a regular basis.

The view that children should be given targeted support at pre-school age is gaining ground. However, there are widely varying approaches (Jampert 2002) with various aims and it is often the case that very little thought goes into how such support should

be provided. Sometimes there are poor attempts to imitate school lessons, to little didactic effect. The following are some of the criteria for successful language support:

Taking the child's mother tongue acquisition as a model

Children learn their mother tongue perfectly well without needing any kind of formal instruction in the language. Certain features of language learning in the family could therefore be used in pre-school establishments (Kolonko 2001; Merkel 2006). In language acquisition through role-play (Dannenbauer 1999), methods are used which reflect the intuitive behaviour of adults in natural communication with children. The key features here are prompting children to communicate, implicit correction, expanding on what children say to form full sentences and encouraging them to repeat newly acquired words and structures.

Targeted support for individuals or work in small groups

The success experienced by children in acquiring the first language in mother-child, one-to-one relationships and the failure to acquire the second language in bigger groups underline the need to work in small groups. Children who are usually uncommunicative cannot be expected to speak in language support groups if they comprise 8 to 12 children as is often the case. At least some of the language support offered should therefore be provided in small groups and in specific cases it may be necessary to provide individual support.

Language support as an integral part of the daily routine in pre-school establishments

Language support should not be restricted to isolated periods of 20 to 60 minutes, during which children from immigrant backgrounds are brought together for language lessons. It is important to make use of all sorts of everyday activities, games and forms of communication to foster language acquisition (Merkel 2006). The current trend towards rote-learning of words and structures, sometimes using elaborate support material, poses problems (Apeltauer 2004; Merkel 2006). Instead, the aim should be to get them involved in real communication structures (Kolonko 2001).

4.1.2 Using children's first language

According to reports currently available, the use of children's first language at pre-school level has a positive impact on language acquisition (Apeltauer 2004). Pilot projects along these lines should be encouraged and scientifically assessed, and support for the first language should be as widespread as possible. One useful way of doing this is undoubtedly to recruit teachers from immigrant backgrounds, since they not only know the children's first language but are also familiar with their lifestyle and can foster intercultural education.

4.1.3 Involving the parents

Parents can be involved in various ways in helping their children to acquire the second language. The following are useful examples:

- Providing further education for parents and explaining to them how the family can help a child to acquire the second language.
- Encouraging parents to help their children acquire a good command of their first language.
- Language courses for parents to help them learn the second language, not least because it is well known that the fact that the parents are learning the second language has a positive impact on the child's acquisition of the language.

- Education programmes for parents in both the first and second language, as educated parents are obviously better equipped to help their children learn languages and do well at school.
- Literacy courses for parents who are either illiterate or have a very poor command of written language.

4.1.4 Ensuring that nursery school teachers are properly trained

Unlike in many other European countries, it is not compulsory for teachers in pre-school establishments in Germany to have a university education. It would seem obvious that, in order to provide appropriate language support, among other things, pre-school teachers should have academic training. For the time being, steps should be taken to ensure that all pre-school teachers receive intensive training in providing language support. Since such support needs to be given in all aspects of everyday activities, it is not sufficient to train only specific people to provide language support.

4.2 *Language support at school*

4.2.1 Ongoing teaching of basic language skills

Complaints about young people being ill prepared for apprenticeships or further training and lacking in basic skills, excessively high levels of pupils leaving school without any qualifications, the high proportion of functional illiterates in a country with compulsory schooling and the insufficient reading skills pinpointed in the PISA survey are all indicators that too many schools are failing to attain at least minimum standards. Particularly in technically oriented secondary schools, lessons should focus more on basic content, which should be studied in depth and repeated until firmly rooted. It is better to ensure that pupils have a firm grasp of what they have been taught or of the skills they have acquired than to teach them a wide range of subjects.

4.2.2 Support lessons

When providing language support at school, it is necessary to distinguish between support given within the mainstream class and in separate classes. It continues to be necessary to provide support in separate classes, if children and young people have absolutely no command of the German language or not enough to take part in the lessons when starting out at German schools, regardless of the school year concerned. So-called preparatory measures should be provided for these pupils, involving approximately 20 to 25 hours per week of intensive German classes. Partly integrating them and gradually moving them into mainstream classes should help speed up their overall integration. These preparatory measures should, as a rule, not last more than one year.

Extra support lessons, whereby pupils who need support are given a few extra hours of targeted coaching per week, are a second form of external support. The following are some of the criteria that should apply to these support lessons:

- *Pupils who require support should be properly identified* (as opposed to the inappropriate criteria sometimes applied in practice, eg pupils who do not wish to attend religious instruction are placed in these classes to ensure that they do not have any gaps in their timetable).
- *Arranging timetables for support lessons and work in small groups.* The difficulty with many children from immigrant backgrounds is that lessons go by without them really understanding or being able to make much of a contribution. The same applies to language support in big groups, which reduces the impact

of support lessons. There should therefore be enough support lessons to be able to form small groups.

- *Support plans should be drawn up for individual pupils.*
- *Support lessons should prepare pupils for subsequent lessons.* Very often, previously studied subject-matter or the questions asked in the latest class test are gone over again in support lessons, but this is usually unproductive because there is a lack of motivation and functionality. It is much better to use support lessons to prepare the main content of subsequent lessons, as this increases motivation and encourages weaker pupils to take part in those lessons.

The question that needs to be asked is whether language support lessons should be used to make up for a lack of basic skills or whether it would be better to focus on the subject-matter currently being taught elsewhere in the school.

4.2.3 Classroom communication

An important factor in successful second language acquisition is appropriate input, corresponding to the learners' command of language. The language used in teaching basically provides two essential learning aids: it provides both a very high level of largely correct input and also opportunities to use the language.

It is, however, necessary to have language skills in order to communicate and not all children from linguistic minorities have sufficient skills to be able to take part in the lessons and thereby secure easier access to the German language. Klein (1992,

p. 28) refers to the paradox facing second-language learners: "In order to be able to communicate, they must learn the language, and in order to learn the language they have to be able to communicate". In the classroom, too little support is often given to help children from immigrant backgrounds take part in lessons. Communication models which foster learning should be used.

Active participation in classroom communication helps foster various aspects of language acquisition. The frequent use of vocabulary and linguistic structures that have already been acquired has a practice-makes-perfect effect, thus helping pupils feel secure in expressing themselves.

In order to improve the language skills of children from linguistic minorities, they should be given far more opportunities to communicate and language input should be adjusted to suit their level of language.

4.2.4 Using the first language and bilingual learning

Focusing too much on difficulties in the second language runs the risk of making children and young people from immigrant backgrounds appear backward. I should therefore point out here that children and young people from immigrant backgrounds have particular language skills.

The result of the DESI survey is particularly revealing here, as it shows that pupils learning German as a second and a foreign language learn English as a foreign language relatively easily. Under otherwise identical learning conditions, they are some six months ahead of other pupils. Children and young people from immigrant and exclusively non-German-speaking backgrounds perform comparatively well in English (Klieme 2006).

There are indications that contrasts between languages have a positive effect on awareness of phonological phenomena, which in turn helps with spelling, so that

pupils with German as a second language have fewer problems with dictation-type exercises than the average pupil (Fix 2002).

School lessons can benefit from the range of languages spoken by pupils. Advantage should be taken of the large number of insights into linguistic principles offered by contrasts between various languages. Many of the rules governing German do not become fully clear until they have been compared with rules in other languages. Linguistic conventions really become clear when compared with other languages. Pupils learn to use the appropriate form of speech (eg the polite forms used in various situations and languages) by examining how this is done in different languages. If languages are the focus of the lesson, this can have a positive impact on language awareness (*Sprachreflexion*) (Oomen-Welke 1999).

The first-language skills of children and young people from immigrant backgrounds are also very useful in bilingual learning using approaches such as language across the curriculum (LAC).

5. Summary

- Support in the second language is required from pre-school to school-leaving age. The main focus of such support should be ongoing instruction in basic skills.
- Such support should be targeted and provided in small groups.
- Children and young people from immigrant backgrounds must be constantly encouraged to take an active part in classroom communication.
- The first language must be fostered so that children and young people from immigrant backgrounds have the best possible command of both spoken and written forms. This will not only broaden their language skills but also help them to learn the second language.
- Use should be made of first-language skills during lessons, particularly when teaching language awareness.

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