

# *Adapting to Change: Evaluating the Multilingual Turn in Xiamen's Secondary English Education System*

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**Abstract:** This study critically evaluates the implementation of the Multilingual Turn within secondary English education in Xiamen, Fujian Province, against the backdrop of global linguistic diversity. It scrutinizes the prevalence of monolingual pedagogical approaches within Chinese educational settings and their congruence with the innovative principles of the Multilingual Turn. This analysis particularly focuses on the efficacy of these traditional methods in accommodating and leveraging the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity intrinsic to the student body, and examines the integration of such diversity within English language pedagogy. Highlighting the significant repercussions of examination-centric curricula that disproportionately emphasize grammatical precision at the expense of communicative fluency, this research navigates through the shifting pedagogical terrain. It probes into novel educational methodologies, including the incorporation of students' native languages and cultural milieus, addressing the limitations of conventional teaching practices. The results underscore the urgent need for educational approaches that not only acknowledge but effectively utilize the multilingual prowess of students, thereby championing a paradigmatic transition from deep-rooted instructional methodologies to a more inclusive and efficacious language education paradigm.

## **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary landscape marked by rapid globalization and the proliferation of linguistic diversity, over 7,000 languages are actively spoken around the globe. This evolving linguistic milieu has given rise to the 'Multilingual Turn', a concept increasingly pertinent in the realm of language education. Under the edicts of the Chinese Ministry of Education, According to China's Ministry of Education, English is a compulsory subject in compulsory education. In addition, in universities, English majors must take another foreign language in addition to English, rendering a significant portion of the student population in China bilingual, if not multilingual, including English, Mandarin, and the dialects of each province. This paper is based on the author's experience of two semesters of internship and in-depth observation at a public secondary school in Xiamen, Fujian Province, China. In the light of such a context, it is crucial to understand whether the traditional teaching methods that dominate in China have adapted to Multilingual turn, and what the lessons, changes, and challenges are. This essay will elaborate on the concept of Multilingual turn and, in response to the relevant context, provide a critical analysis from the perspective of learners, teachers, and policymakers.

## 2. Contextual Overview

This school is a typical Chinese public secondary school and is representative of most secondary schools, with three grades, each grade has about 15 classes with 60-70 students each. The teachers they have are all postgraduate students from normal teacher training universities, some of whom have studied overseas. According to the author's observation, not only do students have to attend English lessons every day, but they are also under immense pressure. English as a language test is given a very high weighting of 150 points in the secondary school examinations, with a focus on grammar, reading, and writing. In particular, there is a strong focus on grammatical correctness, which is the basis for scoring points. If a student has poor grammar, they will struggle to score highly in the exam. Therefore, the ability to learn English well becomes an important factor in whether a secondary school student can get into a good high school. Parents are frantic to see their students excel in English and are very concerned about every test their students take. However, the author questions whether this excessive focus on form develops excellent English language skills in students. In this essay, we will critically evaluate whether this traditional approach to teaching and learning can still withstand the new wave of times, or whether it needs to change to meet the changes and challenges.

## 3. The Multilingual Turn: An Academic Discourse

The Multilingual turn in language education has become a heated issue in recent research, especially in the context of education. However, the meaning of the concept at the individual and societal levels is a matter of debate and is still a long way from being unequivocally understood (Melo-Pfeifer, 2018)<sup>[1]</sup>. As Garc ía (2009)<sup>[2]</sup> claims that bilingualism is so closely linked to social and political structures that it cannot be analyzed without reference to the social order. As a result of deepening globalization and population migrations, ethnicity and culture have seen an unprecedented boom in diversity. Individuals and communities use languages not only to communicate with others but also to seek employment, to integrate with other language groups, to be more engaged, and participate in social interaction. The view of bilingualism and multilingualism has changed from the past and the present, with the old view focusing more on form from a monolingual perspective, assuming that bilinguals must be able to use both languages as fluently as native speakers (Garc ía, 2009)<sup>[2]</sup>, while the current view is different, focusing more on the purpose of communication and participation in society, asserting that bilinguals use both languages to communicate in everyday life, without having to be equally fluent or optimal in both languages (Grosjean, 2020)<sup>[3]</sup>. In the light of this statement, the fact is that we have to admit that multilingualism has become a reality for most people. Following Melo-Pfeifer's point in 2018, that the point needs to be recognized that multilingualism is unstable, dynamic, and changing, hence a paradigm shift which is also known as Multilingual turn comes into play.

As discussed above, many changes are being realized, such as the nature of linguistic diversity, the complex reality of language use, and the end of the prevalence of monolingual mindset in second language acquisition and education. Multilingualism has undergone a shift in emphasis from language to language users or learners, calling attention to their agency, intelligence, and creativity in communicative behavior, while questioning the social hierarchies that can undermine these characteristics. Multilingualism was thought to be an integration of two or three monolinguals, even thought to harm children's intellectual performance in the past. In addition, the 'purity of language education was strongly advocated, with the belief that the original language detracted from the learning of the second language (Laurie, 1890<sup>[4]</sup>, as cited in Coyle, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>). Hence, the Multilingual turn invites us to understand learners as "diverse, multilingual and social practitioners"(Meier, 2017: 131)<sup>[6]</sup> and languaging as "an activity rather than a structure" (Pennycook 2010: 10)<sup>[7]</sup>. In addition,

translanguaging is also a concept that has to be mentioned in the context of MT. As García and Li (2014)<sup>[8]</sup> point out is that it is the act of a bilingual person accessing different linguistic features or various patterns known as the autonomous language to maximize their communicative potential. In essence, bilinguals are not simply two separate monolingual languages mixed in the brain, but people with an integrated repertoire.

In brief, it is disrupting the entrenched ideology of monolingualism as the norm and advocating for the linguistic rights of multilingual and reshaping the conversation on languages and learners. Learners are reconceptualized as being diverse and may already be multilingual with a repertoire of rich resources in different languages. L1 is valued up to and is no longer seen as damaging to L2 or Ln, but as a rich asset to be fully utilized. Furthermore, rather than a simple linear relationship where a bilingual speaker equals the sum of two monolingual speakers, the understanding of language is a recognition that languages are complex, dynamic systems. Hence, it is a paradigm shift in that it destabilizes a certain kind of stability and changes the way the world is viewed and is therefore also considered a new world view.

#### 4. Critical Appraisal in the Context of Xiamen

In the same way that perceptions of bilingualism and multilingualism have shifted, so too have the theories and practices that have dominated this school in the past and the present. In the past, English was mostly taught in Mandarin due to the limited capacity of teachers, and now, although teachers encourage students to speak only English and to speak as little or no of their mother tongue as possible, this is still monolingualism, as Mandarin and English are treated and used as two different entities, rather than an integrated multilingual language system, contrary to the tenets of multilingualism. (García & Li, 2014)<sup>[8]</sup>. The first language is thought to undermine second language learning, which goes against what MT upholds, that every learner has a coherent repertoire, being a combination of all their language knowledge and a rich resource and asset for second language learning (Block, 2009)<sup>[9]</sup>. With Multilingual turn, the learners themselves are receiving a growing amount of consideration that their personal experiences, social backgrounds, identities, national cultures, and so forth form the entire repertoire, which is what the teacher should not ignore. This implies that students are not able to use the rich resources of their first language effectively in the second language learning process, which is also a major loss. Moreover, the excessive focus on grammar and formatting undermines students' communication competence in second language learning. In the classroom, students become fearful and anxious about speaking English for fear of getting the grammar wrong, which reduces the effectiveness of second language learning. Furthermore, teachers remain the dominant figures in the classroom, while students are seen as passive receivers. On a psychological level of students, the real purpose of language learning, that is, to communicate with people, to express oneself, to participate in social activities, or to build the identity of the relevant communities, is not realized, instead, it is only singularly compressed into an examination. The repertoire of students is not being utilized and the learning process is more passive and lacks intrinsic motivation.

However, all this is not set in stone. According to the author's observation, with the Ministry of Education's policy adjustments, some innovations catering to the macro trends are being implemented. Workshops have been introduced as the latest teaching method that students are divided into groups and have different roles. The teacher is no longer the leader of the class, but a guide, and the students are the main speakers. In this model, students no longer have to worry about being corrected for speaking grammatically incorrectly, thus reducing anxiety levels and improving communication competence. In turn, from the school's perspective, the syllabus has changed and the content is more attuned to the cultural and social environment abroad, emphasising the social

function of the language, as well as combining it with other subjects to achieve interdisciplinary second language learning. As Scarino (2016)<sup>[10]</sup> argues, language learning should be expanded and take into account an interdisciplinary approach that enables learners to act across cultures while transdisciplinary is also promoted by Douglas Fir Group (2016)<sup>[11]</sup> as a response to the Multilingual turn challenge, assuming that language learners develop not only their multilingual language skills but also a deep awareness of cultural, historical and institutional meanings and social actions. The learners' own experiences and cultures are valued and the accumulation of L1 becomes a rich resource for L2 learning. The teacher combines the whole class repertoire to make the second language learning more interdisciplinary and intercultural.

## 5. Challenges and Opportunities: Navigating the Multilingual Turn

The impact of Multilingual turn is undoubtedly huge, both in terms of opportunities and challenges for teachers, students, and schools as well as policymakers. As learners and language are re-conceptualized, teachers' theories themselves need to be brought up to date. Many teachers have realised that change is imminent and have taken steps to try to change the pattern of the classroom and the character of the teacher in the classroom. However, whether the feedback on these innovative initiatives is effective, the author as a teacher believes that this needs to be critically analysed comprehensively. Moreover, the attitude of students and parents towards language learning is also changing. Inspired by the internet, students and parents are increasingly influenced by the globalisation of the idea that learning English is not just for exams, but are also aware of the important role it will play in future career and cultural interaction. Learners are placing more emphasis on their communication competence rather than on lexical skills. Furthermore, the school promotes a more diverse approach to English language learning, offering a more interdisciplinary and intercultural curriculum and programmes that allow students to explore a wide range of cultural and social contexts. In addition, the Ministry of Education has also issued a double reduction policy in 2020, calling on teachers and parents to reconsider the purpose of English language learning and not to place too much emphasis on performance in examinations.

Challenges also exist, for example, the pluralistic approach advocates that teachers should be adept at creating whole-class retellings, mobilising students' own identities, cultures, and first languages as resources for learning, with a student-centered focus on language practice. This is certainly a significant innovation to traditional teaching methods. However, as a teacher, the author has observed that teachers are faced with a lack of proper guidance and appropriate teaching methods. For example, there are more than 60 students in each class and they are all very active teenagers. It would be very challenging for the teacher's organisational skills and the quality of the students if the classroom were to change from traditional teaching where the teacher coordinates everything to student-centred teaching. Moreover, although some adjustments have been made in schools, the syllabus is fixed and the teacher's mobility is still very restricted. Therefore, it is also a task for schools and governments to consider how to combine the ideal pedagogy with the reality of having to face the pressure of examinations and the systematic integration of interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches into existing traditional teaching methods.

## 6. Conclusion

Multilingual turn breaks with deeply entrenched ideologies of monolingualism, advocates for the linguistic rights of multilingual and reshapes the conversation about language and learners. And brings a new world view to education. In the context of this essay, the school is trying to attempt to cater for MT based on traditional pedagogy, although it is still challenging from the perspective of teachers, schools, and policymakers. It is the responsibility of every educator to constantly innovate

theories and pedagogies in response to the changing trends of the times, but this does not mean that traditional pedagogies have to be replaced by new ones, and each method should be applied flexibly in different contexts. The author believes that there is no turning back the tide of the times and that the only way to survive the changes is to keep changing and combining different theories and methods with the practice.

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