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What is the value of plurilingualism?

Josephine Moate

This article seeks to answer the question, 'What is the value of plurilingualism'? by first of all exploring some different terms from Finnish and English that suggest different ways of understanding the world. The article then goes on to outline the importance of mother tongues as a way of rooting a child into a culture, whilst plurilingualism provides the child with different ways of understanding the world. The second half of the article uses a story to explore the challenges of sharing different understandings with others and outlines how these ideas can be introduced to children.

According to linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, plurilinguals "think in more flexible and divergent ways than monolinguals ...; they innovate more, create more new knowledges and dreams" (ibid. 2002: 17). Skutnabb-Kangas says that this is so in 'modern' societies as well as in indigenous communities and that when plurilingualism is ignored, denied or destroyed it is a loss for individuals and whole societies. I agree that this is a loss and a strong argument in favour of plurilingualism, but I would like to answer the question in a slightly different way by thinking instead about the way in which language maps different experiences of the world.

This is a complex notion to unpack, so I will begin with some 'small' examples. In English, for example, arms and hands are considered to be separate parts of the body. I was initially surprised and confused by the Finnish word 'käsi' that includes both hand and arm, but then hands and arms do belong together, so why not name them as one entity? Another example is the Finnish word 'vaaleanpunainen'. It had never occurred to me that pink was light red before I learnt the Finnish term, I had always thought of

pink as a separate colour, now I 'see' pink differently. The word 'family' is also an interesting example as it can refer to different relational ties in different languages and familial terms can depict different social and blood relations. 'Eno' and 'setä', for example, are submerged into one word 'uncle' in English; and the English 'niece' and 'nephew' are less informative than 'siskonpoika' - my sister's son, but more embracing. I have two nephews through my husband's brother, for example. Even the word 'mother' does not necessarily refer to an immediate blood relative in all cultures. Language, however, maps and traces different understandings between and even within languages. The words 'sunrise' and 'sunset' are unlikely to be replaced by the phrase 'beautiful earthly rotations' even though our understanding has changed over time. As I said, these are small examples, yet they point to the richness of language and the way in which language is rooted in our histories as well as reaching out into the world around us.

The idea of language being 'rooted in' and 'reaching out' works at an individual level as well. Note, for example, how important it is that a child has a strong mother tongue or mother tongues. A well-established mother tongue supports emotional, social and cognitive development, not only in the mother tongue, but in other languages too (Cummins, 2001). When a mother tongue is lost, there can be catastrophic consequences, creating artificial boundaries between generations and reducing the cultural and linguistic resources of communities (Cummins, 2001). Just as with the roots of a tree, a mother tongue provides stability and nutrients. Plurilingualism, however, is like branches and leaves reaching out and gaining nourishment from the surroundings. As we engage with the world through different languages, we can begin to understand in different ways and to imagine new possibilities. The more languages an individual has, the greater the possibilities for enriched understanding. In the same way as a tree receives nutrients from below and above, an individual's understanding is enriched through the mother tongue as well as other languages.

The different ways in which languages affect thinking is highlighted in a recent study with bilingual children (Byers-Heinlein & Garcia, 2015). In this study monolingual and bilingual children were asked what they thought would happen in different scenarios. For example, if an English-speaking child was adopted into an Italian-speaking family, what language would the child speak? The children's responses seemed to depend a lot on their own experiences of language learning. The monolingual children and children that were bilingual-from-birth thought that the English-speaking child would continue to speak English. The children that were bilingual-from-an-early-age recognised, however, that the child would learn to speak a different language (Italian).

The researchers involved in this study suggest that children's own experiences of languages fundamentally affect the way in which they see and make sense of the world, in other words, the children's own experiences of learning another language increased the possibilities for richer understanding.

Richer understanding, better thinking - this is the argument of Skutnabb-Kangas that I referred to at the beginning of this article, but how well does one need to know a language for better thinking to take place? My answer to this question comprises the second half of this article and my answer begins by sharing a short story from Leo Lionni. Lionni wrote and illustrated over 40 books for children. These books often deal with issues of community and creativity. Lionni's book *Fish is Fish* (Kala on aina kala) beautifully illustrates the way in which sharing understanding is not always easy. In Lionni's story two friends, a baby fish and a tadpole, play together in a pond. Over time, however, the tadpole transforms into a frog and hops off to explore the wider world. Later the frog returns to tell his friend what he has seen - birds, cows and people. The fish is fascinated and dreams of fish-shaped birds with wings, fish-shaped cows with horns and carrying pink bags of milk, and fishy people. When the frog hops off again, the fish decides that he too would like to see this wider world, and with a "mighty whack of his tail the fish jumps out of the pond". If this was the end of the story, it would be terribly sad, but the frog is nearby, hears his friend's cry for help and pushes the fish back into the pond. This is a delightful story to read and enact with children. It can help children reflect on the differences between fish and amphibious animals, and the story nicely illustrates the developmental changes of a tadpole into a frog. Moreover, children can grasp the humour of the story as they look at the strange animals the fish imagines as he hears about the world which points to the deeper moral of the tale - that what we imagine can be seriously limited by our experience of the world.

The 'moral' of this story connects to plurilingualism in various ways. The frog generously shared what he had seen in the world, but as his friend had only ever lived in the small world of the pond he wasn't able to grasp what the frog was saying or go beyond his own 'fishy' understanding. The fish was intrigued, but also misled. The fish needed the possibility of something different being explained to him to make it possible for him to begin to imagine something non-fishy. The frog enthusiastically shared what he had seen, but the fish's imagination was limited to what he already knew. Birds, cows, people were all fish in different forms. What the fish needed was for the frog to remind him of how he had transformed from a tadpole into a frog and to open the possibility that even greater differences exist. The limitation of the fish's

understanding is reminiscent of the monolingual and bilingual-from-birth children in the study above. They understood the world as it seemed to them, creating a glass ceiling for their imagination. The monolingual and bilingual-from-birth children could consider only one possibility that a child born speaking English would continue to speak English even in a new family. The bilingual-from-an-early-age children, however, recognised that different possibilities exist, that children can learn new languages as well. This possibility to think 'bigger' is what we should be offering in language education. This challenges us as language educators to consider how we share our understanding of the world with our pupils. Are we doing a better job than the frog at sharing different experiences of the world? Can we remove the 'glass ceiling' from our children's imaginations by promoting plurilingualism?

Actually I think we can, and I think so for a couple of different reasons. Children are not born inherently monolingual. Children are born with a fantastic capacity for being able to make sense of the world around them from a very young age. New born babies anywhere in the world make an incredible range of different sounds, yet within three months the noises children make are limited to the sounds of their community. Neuroscientist Patricia Kuhl (2004) explains that babies filter out sounds that don't belong to their community; the remaining sounds, however, are full of potential meaning and the building blocks for words within that community. As the sounds of young children are rooted into their own communities, however, they cease to listen out for other sounds and boundaries are created. This perhaps explains why older foreign language learners find it very difficult to 'hear' sounds that don't belong to their mother tongue, why 'sh' is difficult to discern in Finnish ears and why double vowels and consonants often bypass the English ear.

In Kuhl's study new sounds from different languages were successfully reintroduced to the children and the seeds for plurilingualism were sown. This, of course, is the goal of second and foreign language education - to increase the range and number of languages that belong to individuals. That takes me to back to my question, how well does one need to know a language for better thinking to take place? I'm not so sure, however, that the better thinking is contained in the language itself, but perhaps more in the opportunity language provides to recognise that different ways of understanding exist. Let's take a simple example. Most animals make the same sound wherever they are in the world but the way in which that sound is 'heard' is culturally different. In English dogs 'woof', in Finnish dogs 'hau'; in English pigs 'oink', in Finnish pigs 'röh'; in English frogs croak or 'ribbit', in Finnish frogs 'kvaak'. The list goes on and as other languages are included, so the range of sounds increases. This is both a fun and

simple activity to do with young children. It introduces them to the sounds of different languages, but also to the notion that the same sound can be 'heard' in different ways. Too often language education just adds new labels to 'old' understanding. Of course, learning new words is an important part of language education, but the heart is learning to see the world through new eyes and to hear through new ears. In language education, we should sow seeds for richer understanding, we should use a new language to explore new understandings of the world and not just give new labels to things we already know.

The new curriculum boldly states that "Kielten opiskelussa on runsaasti sijaa ilolle, leikillisyydelle ja luovuudelle" (OPS, 2014: 127) reiterating the goals of plurilingualism. If we recognise that languages are a valuable way of seeing and making sense of the world in different ways, if we can go beyond notions of language learning as just adding labels to what we already know, then we are well on the way to enriched understanding. Enriched understanding begins with an appreciation of difference and recognising value in different perspectives. Language education is a wonderful opportunity to explore different perspectives and to support plurilingualism.

In this contribution I have tried to illustrate this idea with simple examples and to show that different understandings don't need to be too complicated. Children are born with fantastic potential. As they put their linguistic roots down in their own communities, their cultural understandings begin to take shape. It is important to recognise, however, that cultural understandings can also form glass ceilings that can limit imagination and restrict understanding. Yet this is not the end of the story. Glass ceilings are brittle and it doesn't take too much pressure to break through limited visions and to begin to explore new horizons. Children are designed to engage with the world around them, to reach out as well as to root down. Small beginnings can lead to big adventures as new connections and possibilities begin to take shape.

In answer to the title question, *What is the value of plurilingualism?* I would briefly say that plurilingualism is an important way of exploring different understandings, different views and insights into the world through new words. The structures and expressions of different languages map experiences and understandings of the world in different ways. It is in recognising the existence of these differences that new knowledges and dreams become possible. It is the privilege of language education to be able to share these differences with children and young people, to enable them to see more than their own 'world' and to thrive in the wider world.

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