Unlocking the Linguistic Wealth: A Call for Bilingual Education in the Republic of Türkiye
Dilsel Zenginliğin Keşfi: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde İki Dilli Eğitime Çağrı

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Abstract

As Türkiye transitions from a sending to a receiving country for migrants, it faces new challenges and opportunities. The country has experienced a significant influx of migrants, notably Syrian refugees, which has strained its educational infrastructure while also presenting potential benefits. The current article examines the role of Türkiye's linguistic landscape in integrating diverse migrant populations, considering its historical emphasis on a singular national identity. Türkiye's evolving sociocultural context invites a reassessment of linguistic diversity policies, particularly for national minorities and immigrant communities. We propose a systematic bilingual education program to foster a bilingual future in Türkiye, advocating for educational policies that preserve minority languages and encourage linguistic pluralism in an increasingly interconnected global society.

Keywords: Multilingualism, migration, language policy, bilingual education, language education in türkiye, language preservation

Özet

Türkiye göçmen gönderen bir ülkeden göçmen alan bir ülkeye dönüşürken yeni zorluklar ve fırsatlarla karşı karşıyadır. Ülke, özellikle Suriyeli mülteciler olmak üzere önemli bir göçmen akını yaşadı ve bu durum eğitim altyapısını zorlarken aynı zamanda potansiyel faydalar da sundu. Bu makale, Türkiye'nin dilsel manzarasının çeşitli göçmen nüfuslarını entegre etmedeki rolünü, tekil bir ulusal kimliğe olan tarihsel vurgusunu göz önünde bulundurarak incelemektedir. Türkiye'nin gelişen sosyokültürel bağlamı, özellikle ulusal azınlıklar ve göçmen topluluklar için dilsel çeşitlilik politikalarının yeniden değerlendirilmesini gerektirir. Bu makalede Türkiye'de çift dilli bir geleceği teşvik etmek için azınlık dillerini koruyan sistematik bir çift dilli eğitim programı öneriyoruz ve artan bir şekilde dilsel çoğulculuğu teşvik eden eğitim politikalarını savunuyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çok dillilik, göç, yabancı dil politikası, çift dilli eğitim, Türkiye'de yabancı dil eğitimi, dilin korunması

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Introduction

The Republic of Türkiye, historically a sending country for labor migrants to Europe and beyond in the post-WWII era, has slowly evolved into a major receiving country for labor migrants and refugees from war-torn areas. Although Türkiye has had a constant influx of migrants and refugees throughout its history, a significant increase in the migrant population started with the fall of the Soviet Union mainly and the subsequent influx of migrants continued from former Soviet Republics (İçduygu & Kirişçi, 2009). Geopolitical conflicts in the region led to further migration from West and Central Asian countries. Tightening controls at European borders, as well as the externalization of European borders to the African continent, resulted in the rerouting of migrants traveling directly to Europe. Additionally, with millions seeking refuge within its borders since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Türkiye is the world's largest host country for Syrian refugees. The influx of refugees and migrants has brought forth numerous challenges, including those related to education and integration (Çelik, 2017). Despite previous and current challenges with educational infrastructure, there lies an opportunity to harness the linguistic wealth characterized by newcomer populations. Specifically, within current socio-cultural contexts, Türkiye has been presented with an opportunity to legitimize and preserve linguistic diversity in ways that have heretofore been considered incompatible with ideologies of Turkish nation-state development and that resulted in the loss of linguistic heritage among national minorities (Akın, 2024; Üzüm & Demir, 2017) and minoritized migrant and refugee populations (Hafed & Alabdulla, 2023). Considering current socio-cultural and sociolinguistic contexts, this inquiry calls for the development of systematic bilingual education programs as a means to capitalize on the nation's remaining and newly developing linguistic capital and for the expansion of educational opportunities for fostering bi-multilingual futures in Türkiye's increasingly diverse and globally interconnected society. To this end, in the following sections we discuss (1) Türkiye's linguistic legacy and landscape, (2) current bilingual and multicultural education policies and practices, (3) examples from comparable national contexts, and (4) the significance of these matters for the future of the nation. Ultimately, we make a case and proposal for widespread adoption of education policies that preserve and promote bilingualism in Türkiye. We recommend bilingual education for newcomers and heritage language preservation opportunities for Türkiye's national linguistic minority speech communities.

Türkiye's Linguistic Legacy and Landscape

The current struggle with languages of instruction in Türkiye is a direct extension of coercive language policies that have been promoted to create a singular national identity. As with indigenous diversity, so with new migrant speech communities: this struggle also mirrors the nation's unresolved ambivalent stance on its own status as a receiving country for migrants. The goal of "one language for one nation" has a very long history that started during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, specifically 1890–1910, and coincided with the increasing prominence of nation-states in the region. When faced with the prospect of governing a multilingual

populace and steering the diverse territory in the direction of an evolving Turkish identity, ruling parties had to address several issues related to language as a marker of identity and belonging (Çolak, 2004). In this section we discuss language reforms and language-related policies that were implemented during the early years of Republican Türkiye (1928–1932).[2] These policies continue to inform national and local attitudes regarding the value and desirability of linguistic diversity in Türkiye.

Ottoman Turkish to New Turkish – Language Purification

Ottoman Turkish was the common language of administrators and ruling elites of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the region for roughly 600 years starting in the late 13th century. Written in Arabic script, the grammatical frame was primarily Turkish with grammatical and syntactical borrowing from Arabic and Persian that incorporated vocabulary from Arabic, Persian, and other languages from neighboring territories. In other words, Ottoman Turkish was itself a collection of languages as well as social registers. According to Fortna (2011), the expansion of educational opportunities offered by missionary schools in the late Ottoman period (from the 1880s until the end of the Empire) required the mass production of printed materials for learners. The typographical requirements for printing in Arabic script were more intense than those of scripts with separate letters. This led to materials printed in Ottoman Turkish using Greek or Armenian script. For a polyglot empire with over 40 languages in circulation, this type of linguistic boundary-crossing was inevitable and useful.

In addition to technical challenges associated with Ottoman Turkish as the language of an increasingly educated population, there was a fundamental question of cultural fit. Ottoman Turkish was increasingly seen as a language associated with an Eastern-facing past and even imbued with Eastern morality and mentality (Fortna, 2023). Prominent thinkers in the waning years of the Empire argued that citizens could not be brought into modernity if they were imprisoned by a language such as Ottoman Turkish that kept them in the past. It was argued that language reform might save younger generations from outdated values, could result in greater access to information for speakers of everyday Turkish, and would possibly allow for easier transmission of the culture and values of the emerging Turkish nation-state (Çolak, 2004). Simplification of both the form and the content of Ottoman Turkish became an important goal during the early years of the new Turkish Republic, which saw linguistic identity as an inseparable component of national identity.

The Turkish Language Revolution was an aggressive political act of linguistic cleansing and erasure (Lewis, 1999; Spearman & Turfan, 1979). Its aim was to normalize a break with all former social and cultural elements that were not compatible with the new regime's vision of a modern Turkish Republic which was established in 1923 (Lewis, 1999). These incompatible social and cultural elements were thought to live within the language itself. Arabo-Persian

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[2] For an extensive account of the longer process of deliberating and conceptualizing language reform, see Güven Kılıçarslan (2022).

script, which was associated with Ottoman rulers and sacred texts, was replaced by a Latin alphabet. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic, introduced the new alphabet to Turkish citizens on August 9, 1928. Parliament formalized the acceptance of the new script on November 1st of the same year. Schools opened throughout the country, by law, to teach the new alphabet to citizens between the ages of 12 and 45. It would take roughly a year before all news publications and official signage were converted to the new script. The prescribed linguistic shift represented a definitive break between the new nation and its Ottoman past (Lewis, 1999).

With the more accessible script firmly established, the Turkish Language Society set out to "cleanse" all foreign elements from the Turkish language. There were several iterations of this process with varying degrees of extremism. The Turkish Language Society eventually decided that cleansing Turkish of all foreign influence would be unfeasible, in addition to being unnecessary once the Sun-Language Theory proposed that Turkish was the origin of all languages, thereby deeming all foreign influences in the language to be primordially Turkish (Çolak, 2004).

New Turkish and Turkishness for 72.5 Nations

The language revolution, starting with alphabet reform in 1928 and continuing into the 1930s with cleansing the language of foreign influences, happened during a time of violent transition from empire to nation-state, which resulted in a significantly smaller and even more linguistically diverse territory for the modern Turkish Republic.[3] Multiple wars, externally imposed population transfers with neighboring states, campaigns of ethnic cleansing, and forced migration in multiple directions led to a nation-state that was more Turkish than ever, yet one which was still quite diverse from ethno-religious and linguistic standpoints. A common saying in Türkiye is that it is a country of 72.5 nations. This saying acknowledges the legacy of a diverse empire as well as the imperative to prioritize a shared national identity. Vernacular Turkish was widely spoken and written in multiple alphabets by a diverse collection of speech communities (Strauss, 2011). Once access to Turkish language literacy was made possible through a simplified script and mandatory re-education, the next step in nation-building would be to promote the widespread embrace of Turkish citizenship and use of the Turkish language throughout the linguistically diverse nation. Vernacular Turkish language usage was a critical step in the direction of complete ethnolinguistic homogeneity, which was the ruling party's vision for successful nation-state development (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012).

Numerous acts of social engineering were codified to achieve unification and nation-building ends. The "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" campaign that started in 1928 was a nationwide effort to penalize (and ultimately silence) linguistic diversity (Bali, 2000). The Settlement Law of 1934 sought to weaken the social cohesion of non-Turkish ethnic groups within the Republic. In particular, Kurdish settlements were disrupted, and Kurdish citizens were forcibly relocated to more

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[3] This was one precursor to the development of the modern Turkish alphabet in the 1920s (Fortna, 2023). For further reading, see Kuzuoğlu (2020).

Turkish areas to promote cultural and linguistic assimilation (Ergin, 2014). The Kurdish language was frequently described by prominent nationalist figures as a dialect of Turkish spoken by "mountain Turks," thereby stripping Kurds of a distinct ethnolinguistic identity that deserved preservation or attention. As Türkiye's largest ethnolinguistic Muslim minority, Kurdish speakers were the target of the most comprehensive assimilation strategies, including a complete ban on the use of Kurdish in public spaces that was in effect until 1991. While there was a period of relaxing restrictions on the public use of Kurdish between 2002 and 2015, which led to the use of Kurdish in personal and place names, in political speeches, in publishing and broadcasting, and even in educational contexts, these freedoms were reversed when peace talks between the ruling party and PKK collapsed (Leinonen, 2022). To this day, permission to broadcast, publish, or teach in Kurdish is selectively and inconsistently granted. The resulting language shift is not surprising. Leinonen (2022) describes a speech community that now consists of monolingual Kurdish-speaking grandparents, bilingual Kurdish and Turkish-speaking parents, and largely monolingual Turkish-speaking children who have a passive understanding of spoken Kurdish. While there is no official count for the number of Kurdish speakers living in Türkiye, Sirkeci (2000) cites a Turkish Demographic Health Survey from 1993 in which 15.2% of ever-married females between the ages of 15 and 49 reported using Kurdish as a first language and 17.8% reported having an immediate family member who used Kurdish as a first language. More recent studies reveal that while 80% of parents living in Kurdish-populated areas report fluency in Kurdish, only 24% report using Kurdish as the primary language of communication with their children (Leinonen, 2022). The lack of usage has less to do with parental fluency and more to do with parental aspirations for their children. Kurdish is not seen as a legitimate language in the spheres of public discourse and education; therefore, parents are less likely to transmit the language to their offspring (Leinonen, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of consistent and inclusive language policies if linguistic diversity is to be preserved as a cultural, educational, economic, and global asset.

As with other modern nation-states that curate their profiles through census data (Duchêne et al., 2018), the Turkish Institute of Statistics stopped publishing language-related information from its census in 1965 and removed questions regarding language usage altogether in 1985 (Çolak, 2004). Thus, it is no longer possible to understand the extent of Türkiye's ethnolinguistic diversity. The last comprehensive field study of ethnolinguistic diversity in Türkiye was under-taken by foreign researchers and published in 1989 (see Andrews & Benninghaus, 2002). The study showed more than 40 distinct ethnolinguistic communities. According to Ethnologue, there are currently 19 heritage languages spoken in Türkiye, 14 of which are endangered. This means that while there are still speakers of these languages, the youngest generations are neither learning nor using these languages.[4]

At the dawn of the Turkish Republic's second century, ethnolinguistic diversity was still seen as a threat to the integrity of the nation. Language continues to be seen as a fundamental signal of identity, and the only fully legitimate identity is Turkish identity. As a rapidly transitioning

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[4] https://www.ethnologue.com/country/TR

host society where diversity is on the rise, Türkiye will face an increasing need to accommodate linguistic diversity.

According to a recent study of İstanbul's most diverse municipalities (Göç Araştırmaları Derneği, 2024), the five largest newcomer groups in the city are from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The term "newcomer" refers to individuals or groups of people who have recently arrived and settled in a new area, and they are typically migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers. The term emphasizes their recent arrival and the transitional phase they are experiencing through the navigation of financial difficulties, the integration into local communities, and the adaptation to a new cultural and social environment. In some municipalities, more than 52 countries of origin are represented, and more than 100 languages are spoken (Habertürk, 2024). According to the Göç Araştırmaları Derneği (GAR) report, the four municipalities examined in the study (Esenyurt, Beyoğlu, Zeytinburnu, and Kadıköy) are home to diverse newcomer populations who face similar hardships relating to financial challenges, integration and adaptation.

Additionally, Türkiye is home to 1,334,150 legal foreign residents, half of whom live in İstanbul (IOM, 2023). It is important to note that the category of legal foreign residents does not include the even larger number of those who come seeking asylum. The largest group of asylum seekers began arriving, after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Thirteen years later, Syrians have experienced multiple categories of temporariness and belonging, from guests, to neighbors, to brothers, all the while living precarious lives without permission to establish permanence.

Another recent study examined the lives of migrants and refugees in cities across Türkiye and found that one of the greatest obstacles to adapting to life in Türkiye was the language barrier (Yükseker et al., 2023). Arabic speakers living closer to or in areas where Arabic has been a heritage language have fared better than those living in central or Western Anatolia. Fundamentally, challenges facing migrants and refugees come from Türkiye, historically, not having institutions that facilitate acceptance and coexistence with newcomers (Ergin, 2004), particularly with regard to educating migrant children.

Language Evolution and Multilingual Education in Postmodern Türkiye

In Türkiye, a country that is rich in linguistic diversity, schools have had challenges in language teaching. Türkiye's multilingual landscape presents significant opportunities while at the same time significant educational challenges. Although a significant number of the student population speaks Arabic, Kurdish, and other minoritized languages at home, which can support their acquisition of Turkish, the language of instruction, there is a push for a monolingual education. Studies highlight that students who are not proficient in Turkish often struggle academically compared to their monolingual Turkish-speaking peers (Gür, 2019).

Language in Türkiye is deeply rooted with national identity and serves as a cornerstone for cultural and historical continuity. It's for this reason that Turkish language policy reflects

a strong connection between language and national identity. Despite significant reforms in language education, especially in teaching English, proficiency remains low due to societal attitudes toward foreign languages as potential threats to national identity (Kirkgoz, 2007). Such attitudes create a significant barrier to the development of linguistic competencies essential for Turkish citizens to effectively engage in global labor markets and access advanced professional opportunities (Aksit & Ezer, 2021).

Türkiye's educational system is highly dependent upon standardized testing, which makes proficiency in the Turkish language critical for academic success. Research indicates that students from non-Turkish-speaking backgrounds often enter school with lower levels of Turkish proficiency, which correlates with lower academic achievement (Demir & Erbaş, 2017). Language support programs, such as bilingual education and Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) classes, have been proposed to bridge this gap. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these programs vary widely across the country (Aydın & Kaya, 2019).

The influx of Syrian refugees has introduced additional language-related challenges in Turkish schools. Migrant students often face significant barriers due to limited Turkish language skills, which affect their ability to integrate and succeed academically (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Hadid & Hos, 2020). Educational policies have been adapted to provide language support for these students, but the resources are often insufficient, leading to varying degrees of success (Kirişci & Ferris, 2015).

In addition to teaching Turkish as an additional language, another challenge is the struggle to improve the teaching of English as a foreign language. While English has been emphasized in all curriculum updates as critical for global competitiveness, English language instruction is challenging because of the traditional focus on rote learning, and teacher-centered instruction (Kirkgoz, 2007). The frequent changes in curriculum also put pressure on Turkish teachers, who may not receive adequate training or resources to adapt to the new content. Teachers often report being unprepared due to insufficient professional development (Celik & Kasapoglu, 2014; Hos & Topal, 2012).

The rich linguistic diversity that Türkiye presents is a great opportunity for the design and implementation of bi-multilingual programs. Besides the well-known benefits of bilingual education for enhancing cognitive abilities (Poarch & Bialystok, 2015; Prior & MacWhinney, 2010), developing cultural awareness (Hakuta et al., 2000), and advancing academic achievement (García, 2009; Mehisto, 2016), research suggests that bilingual programs that incorporate student native languages alongside the target language can provide more inclusive and effective education (Cummins, 2000; García, 2009). Successful models from other multilingual contexts (Sweden and the U.S., for example) make evident that well-implemented bilingual programs can help students maintain their linguistic heritage while achieving proficiency in the national language (Baker, 2011; Rolstad et. al., 2005).

Bilingual education in Türkiye has evolved against a backdrop of nationalistic policies that have historically promoted Turkish as the sole language of instruction. The early Republican era prioritized the assimilation of minority groups through a monolingual Turkish education system (Coşkun et al., 2011). However, increasing recognition of linguistic rights and

continuing international pressures have led to more inclusive language policies over recent decades (Cevik, 2020). Recent bilingual education policies in Türkiye aim to support linguistic diversity while promoting proficiency in the Turkish language. The 2002 amendments to the "Basic Law of National Education" allowed for elective courses in minority languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, and Circassian (Kaya & Aydın, 2013). These policies reflect a shift toward accommodating linguistic minorities within the educational framework. Despite progressive policies, the implementation of bilingual education faces several challenges. One major issue is the lack of adequately trained teachers proficient in both Turkish and minority languages (Demir & Erbaş, 2017). Additionally, there is often insufficient instructional materials available in minority languages which hinders the effectiveness of bilingual programs (Özdemir, 2019).

Teacher preparedness to support linguistic diversity in the classroom is another critical issue. Many teachers report feeling inadequately trained to support students with limited Turkish proficiency (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Professional development programs focused on multilingual education and inclusive teaching strategies are essential for improving educational outcomes for all students (Gültekin, 2018). Additionally, there is a pressing need for teacher training on foreign language instruction for languages such as Arabic, English, and Kurdish. Specialized training programs can equip teachers with the necessary skills and methodologies to effectively deliver bilingual education and support the linguistic needs of diverse student populations (Çelik & Kasapoğlu, 2014). The language-related challenges in Turkish schools are multifaceted, involving issues of multilingualism, Turkish language proficiency, and the integration of migrant students. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policies and practices, including enhanced teacher training, language support programs, and inclusive educational strategies. Further research is needed to develop and evaluate effective interventions that can improve educational outcomes for linguistically diverse student populations in Türkiye. In the next section, we examine ways in which bilingual education is structured in other migrant receiving nations.

Bilingual Education in Two Migrant Receiving Nations: Viable Models for Türkiye

Sweden and the U.S. offer two successful models of bilingual education that can provide valuable insights for Türkiye as it seeks to implement or expand its own bilingual education initiatives. Both countries have developed robust systems that address linguistic diversity while promoting educational equity and social cohesion. Sweden emphasizes mother tongue instruction and inclusive policies for migrant and minority students, while the U.S. focuses on flexible, community-based programs such as two-way immersion and transitional bilingual education. These models are particularly relevant for Türkiye, which faces the challenge of integrating a multilingual population that includes speakers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic as well as refugees from Syria. The following sections offer a more detailed account of what Sweden and the U.S. can offer.

Sweden

As a nation with both heritage and newcomer languages woven into its national curriculum, Sweden presents a model for linguistic preservation and expansion that might be feasible in a Turkish context. While the Swedish model has documented aspects that need strengthening, we feel that the underlying assumptions of linguistic diversity as a strength, of nationally codified rights to education regardless of linguistic skills, and of the state's investment in mother tongue education could be equally viable in Türkiye.

As a receiving country, Sweden has been offering Swedish courses to newcomers since 1965 (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007). Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI) is an established policy in the Swedish education system and has roots in laws that were passed almost 50 years ago. It utilizes Study Guidance in Mother Tongue (SGMT) to promote access to the Swedish language and curricular content of coursework (Alisaari et al., 2023).

The Home Language Reform Act of 1977 was passed to serve Sweden's linguistically diverse newcomer population. The Language Act of 2009 added measures that would preserve Sweden's national minority languages (spoken in Roma, Hebrew, Finnish, Sami, and Tornedaler communities) in addition to newcomer linguistic diversity. In short, two overlapping policies intended to preserve linguistic diversity in Sweden, regardless of the origin of that linguistic diversity. Sweden is a country of 10 million people, with 27% of the K–12 student population being eligible for MTI. An estimated 150–200 languages are spoken in Sweden. There are more than 100 languages in the MTI curriculum (Cannizzaro, 2023).

To be eligible for MTI, there must be a minimum of five students in a school who use the requested language daily in the home. In this case, the school is legally obligated to offer MTI. SGMT is the prevalent strategy for preserving learners' linguistic integrity. As such, it does not offer beginner-level instruction in the students' home languages.

Swedish universities offer training as well as training programs for MTI educators.[5] These programs, like MTI programs, are funded nationally and administered locally. According to research, only 57% of the students eligible for MTI take advantage of it. It has been suggested that the hidden curriculum of MTI is an obstacle to greater participation in these programs (Alisaari et al., 2023).

Sweden's national minority languages are similarly preserved. However, unlike with newcomer languages, it is possible to study national minority languages from the beginner level. There is also no five-student minimum requirement for the study of national minority languages. These policies that aim to preserve linguistic diversity in Sweden have the potential to inform new Turkish models of multilingual education.

The United States

The U.S. is a nation made up of linguistic diversity and has enacted efforts to develop bilingual education programs to provide equitable education for decades. Bilingual education in the U.S.

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[5] These are less rigorous and less standardized training programs than other language training programs for teachers (Cannizzaro, 2023).

has a long history, with programs designed to support students who are English Learners (ELs). Successful bilingual education models, such as Dual Language Immersion (DLI) and Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), have shown positive outcomes in both linguistic and academic performance (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Genesee, 2008).

Dual Language Immersion programs are designed to develop bilingualism and biliteracy, academic achievement, and cross-cultural competence. In these programs, students receive instruction in both their native language and English. Research indicates that DLI programs result in higher academic achievement and greater language proficiency compared to monolingual education (Lindholm-Leary, 2012; Thomas & Collier, 2012). In DLI programs both languages are used for instruction equally, promoting balanced bilingualism (Howard et al., 2018). These programs foster cultural understanding and appreciation among students (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2014).

Transitional Bilingual Education programs aim to transition students from their native language to English. These programs initially provide instruction in the student's native language, gradually increasing the use of English over time. Studies have shown that TBE programs can effectively support academic achievement and English language development (August & Shanahan, 2006; Ramirez, 1992). Students move from native language instruction to English at a comfortable pace, reducing the risk of academic setbacks (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Ongoing support systems in both languages ensure students do not fall behind in core subjects (Calderón & Slavin, 2018).

A crucial component of successful bilingual programs in the United States is the emphasis on teacher training and professional development. Effective bilingual education requires teachers to be proficient in both languages and skilled in bilingual pedagogical strategies (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teachers receive training in bilingual education methods, second language acquisition, and culturally responsive teaching (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Ongoing training opportunities help ensure teachers remain current with best practices and new research (Baecher, 2012).

Call for Action

Valuing linguistic diversity in Türkiye is not only an educational imperative but also a matter of social justice. As Türkiye navigates its rich tapestry of linguistic heritage, embracing multilingualism represents a critical shift away from ethnocentric educational approaches that have long dominated its landscape. Recognizing and fostering linguistic diversity aligns with the broader goals of equity and inclusion, ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, have access to quality education and opportunities for success.

The transition from a monolingual mindset to one that celebrates multilingualism as an asset requires a fundamental change in attitudes and policies. The transition involves acknowledging the inherent value of all languages and dialects spoken within Türkiye, including those of minority and migrant communities. Such recognition not only enriches the educational experience but also promotes a more inclusive society that respects and honors the diverse identities of its members.

In practical terms, this shift calls for comprehensive reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment practices. It necessitates the development of educational frameworks that integrate multiple languages, fostering environments where students can thrive in both their native tongues and the official language of instruction. By doing so, Türkiye can leverage its linguistic diversity as a powerful tool for cognitive development, cultural exchange, and social cohesion. Furthermore, embracing language diversity significantly impacts students' sense of belonging. When students see their languages and cultures reflected and respected in their educational environment, they feel more valued and understood. The sense of belonging is crucial for their overall well-being, academic engagement, and identity formation. It fosters a supportive community where students are more likely to participate actively and achieve their full potential.

The influx of Syrian and other refugees/migrants presents an opportunity to enhance bilingual education in Türkiye. Many Syrian refugees are qualified teachers who could be integrated into the Turkish education system, particularly in bilingual programs. Leveraging the skills of these refugee teachers can address the shortage of bilingual educators and provide cultural and linguistic support to Syrian refugee students (Crul, 2017). The first step toward realizing these goals is establishing bilingual programs that are valuable to all. Such programs would provide robust support for multilingual education, benefiting students from various linguistic backgrounds and enhancing their academic and social outcomes. By investing in bilingual education, Türkiye can set a powerful example of how language diversity can be harnessed to create a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

Offering bilingual education requires two uncomfortable but necessary shifts. First, Türkiye must recognize its new role as a host or receiving society and adapt accordingly. This means acknowledging the demographic changes brought by migration and the need to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds within the educational system. Second, acknowledging and accommodating linguistic diversity will allow Türkiye to address educational disparities proactively and invest in its workforce. By doing so, Türkiye can harness the potential of all its citizens, fostering a more skilled and inclusive labor market. Giving newcomers the tools to adapt and contribute to society in meaningful ways takes them out of the holding pattern that they are currently experiencing in Türkiye. Acknowledging and accommodating linguistic diversity through bilingual education will instill a greater sense of affinity and belonging in newcomers (as well as native heritage language speakers) and ultimately in their host society as well.

Successes and challenges of bilingual education programs in the U.S. and Sweden provide valuable lessons for Türkiye. Implementing similar programs can help address the linguistic diversity in Turkish schools and improve educational outcomes for minority language speakers. As such, here are our recommendations:

- Adopt Dual Language Immersion Models: Implementing DLI programs can promote bilingualism, academic achievement, and cultural competence among students in Türkiye.
- Develop Transitional Bilingual Education Programs: Supporting both language and academic development, TBE programs can provide a gradual transition for students from minority languages to Turkish.

- Enhance Teacher Training: Investing in specialized teacher training and continuous professional development is essential for the success of bilingual education programs.
- Cultural Integration: Promoting cultural competence and appreciation can foster a more inclusive educational environment.

Implementing bilingual education in Türkiye presents an opportunity to enhance educational outcomes, foster social cohesion, and embrace multilingualism as a national asset. However, realizing this vision comes with several challenges that require careful consideration. One of the primary challenges is navigating the political and social sensitivities surrounding language and identity. Introducing bilingual education (particularly in Kurdish, Arabic, or other minority languages) could be perceived as controversial by segments of society concerned about national unity. Another challenge is the shortage of qualified teachers proficient in both Turkish and minority languages like Kurdish or Arabic. In addition, there is a need for specialized teaching materials and curricula to support bilingual instruction.

To overcome these challenges, Türkiye must focus on several key areas. First, fostering dialogue and raising awareness among communities, educators, and policymakers is essential to building consensus on the benefits of bilingual education. Promoting bilingualism as a tool for social integration and economic advancement can help shift public perception. Second, investing in teacher training and recruitment programs is crucial. By creating specialized programs and partnerships with universities to train bilingual teachers and developing high-quality teaching resources in minority languages, Türkiye can build the necessary workforce to support bilingual education.

Additionally, legal and policy reforms are needed to establish a clear framework for bilingual education, drawing on the successful models of countries like Sweden and the U.S.. These policies should ensure linguistic inclusion while maintaining national cohesion. Finally, launching community-based pilot programs in regions with significant bilingual needs, such as Kurdish or Arabic-speaking areas, can demonstrate the benefits of bilingual education and provide valuable data for scaling up the initiative nationwide.

To unlock the full potential of its diverse population, Türkiye must take action to embrace bilingual education. By addressing linguistic diversity through inclusive, well-structured programs, Türkiye can build an educational system that celebrates its cultural heritage, strengthens national unity, and equips future generations for success in a globalized world. Now is the time to invest in bilingual education and ensure that every child, regardless of their linguistic background, can thrive. Ultimately, valuing linguistic diversity and promoting multilingualism as an asset aligns with the principles of social justice, as it empowers marginalized communities, bridges cultural divides, and fosters a more equitable society. Embracing this paradigm shift will not only enhance educational outcomes but also contribute to a more just and inclusive Türkiye, where all languages and cultures are celebrated and valued and every student feels a profound sense of belonging.

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