



Differentiated Literacy Instruction for Multilingual Learners: Integrating AI and Culturally Responsive Practices within the IPC

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Abstract

This research presents a qualitative, practice-based inquiry through a case study conducted in an international school in the Netherlands, drawing from both theoretical insights developed regarding how culturally responsive literacy practices were implemented to support multilingual learners. The study explores how multilingual learners can be supported to achieve academic success in the language of teaching and learning through a framework that integrates the Science of Reading, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and differentiated small-group instruction. In multilingual international classrooms, the challenge of balancing explicit language instruction with meaningful, engaging content requires intentional pedagogical design. This case study highlights practical strategies teachers can adopt to scaffold language acquisition while maintaining rigorous expectations. Central to the approach is the use of differentiated small-group instruction informed by assessment data and learner profiles. Instruction combines systematic, explicit phonics teaching with opportunities for comprehension, oral language development, and engagement with culturally relevant texts.

A distinctive feature of this study is the integration of AI-generated, culturally responsive resources that support learners' linguistic and cultural identities. These resources were embedded within the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), providing a bridge between curriculum content and learners' diverse cultural backgrounds. By aligning AI tools with principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers were able to personalize materials, enrich scaffolding, and strengthen learner engagement. Findings from this practitioner inquiry suggest that combining structured literacy approaches with culturally responsive materials not only enhances language acquisition but also fosters a sense of belonging among multilingual learners. Furthermore, the strategic use of AI demonstrates potential in supporting teachers to differentiate more efficiently and responsively. While the context is situated within one international school, the insights contribute to broader conversations on how schools worldwide can leverage culturally responsive, technology-supported strategies to meet the needs of linguistically diverse learners.

Keywords: *culturally responsive teaching, multilingualism, IPC, differentiation*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of international schools has created uniquely multilingual learning environments, where learners bring with them a wealth of cultural and linguistic resources. Within these contexts, teachers face the challenge of balancing the development of the language of teaching and learning (LoTL) with affirming learners' home languages and identities. The International Primary Curriculum (IPC), with its emphasis on communication, inquiry, and global themes, provides both opportunities and challenges for literacy development in such diverse classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL CONTEXTS

An international school is a distinctive learning environment. Due to the rapid rise in global mobility, these unique learning spheres have become a growing phenomenon around the world. International schools are composed of learners and staff from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Bhandari, 2015). Each learner who enters a multilingual classroom brings with them a "fund of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) from the language they speak, and their cultural background and family composition (Bhandari, 2015). Therefore, the unique nature of these educational environments brings exceptional opportunities and challenges.

The most prominent challenge is the balance teachers are asked to maintain between fostering the learner's home language and drawing from it as an educational teaching tool, while still strengthening the child's skills in the Language of Teaching and Learning (LoTL) and preparing them for academic

success. Parveen et al. (2022) argue that language is significant to every branch of knowledge. Language, whether the learner's native language or the school's LoTL, significantly impacts how knowledge and understanding are both imparted and acquired. Therefore, within the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), as Bullock (cited in Parveen et al., 2022) said, *'every teacher may be a teacher of language'*.

The International Primary Curriculum explicitly lists communication among its learning goals and requires learners to demonstrate their learning through presenting, explaining, and justifying conclusions. These mediums of learning position oral and written discourse and communicative competence as a central part of language development within the IPC (Fieldwork Education, 2019). This aligns with Bhandari's (2015) earlier research that language in education is the medium through which distributing and articulating abstract ideas, views, concepts, and opinions occur.

An important aspect to understand, when considering the language acquisition amongst multilingual learners, is the distinction between "Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills" (BICS) and "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency" (CALP) as identified by Cummins (2008). Outlined in the figure below (Fig. A). Cummins' research identified that language used for everyday communication, such as among friends on the playground, was different from the academic language (CALP) required for learning within a subject area at school. The communicative competence as required by the IPC learner profile "Communicator" aligns with Cummins' notion of CALP, as it emphasises academic forms of communication such as presenting, explaining, and justifying.



Fig. A: Cummins' Iceberg Theory (BBBG, 2022)

Cummins observed that learners would be able to develop conversational language (BICS) within one to two years; however, their academic performance in the LoTL remained below expected. Cummins found that learners experienced difficulty with understanding subject area texts and completing assignments, due to the vocabulary being beyond their level of understanding (Cummins, 2008).

UNICEF, UNESCO, and the European Commission argue that multilingual educators play a critical role in ensuring diverse learners are able to access the curriculum, meet objectives, and achieve their potential (Parveen et al., 2022). Richard Ruiz's notion of "language as a resource" (1984, cited in McNelly, 2015) advocates that the incorporation of a learner's native language as a resource for learning and teaching is the answer to supporting academic success for all. Through fostering true multilingualism, educators have the opportunity to promote positive identities related to learners' home cultures.

Given the linguistic complexities in international classrooms, the challenge for educators is not only to teach language, but to do so in ways that recognise and affirm learners' diverse cultural and linguistic resources. This is where Culturally Responsive Teaching provides a valuable pedagogical framework.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) for language instruction focuses on merging cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse learners into daily teaching (Gay, 2000:29). Bhandari (2015) argues that effective multilingual education requires classrooms to connect learners' home cultures and identities to academic learning, thereby boosting performance. UNESCO (2003) advocates for native language education as a way to strengthen educational quality since it draws on the prior knowledge and experiences of both learners and teachers. In addition, UNESCO emphasises that language is a vital element of intercultural education, fostering mutual understanding among diverse groups and promoting respect for basic human rights (Bhandari, 2015).

Culturally Responsive Teaching offers a framework through which multilingual education enables educators to teach to and through the strengths of their learners by making learning culturally validating and affirming (Gay, 2000:29).

CRT's influence is especially visible in IPC vocabulary and language instruction and the resources selected for learners. Gay (2002:108) describes the "symbolic curriculum" as the images, books, displays, and celebrations that communicate powerful messages about whose knowledge and culture is valued. In literacy, this becomes evident through classroom reading corners, IPC bulletin boards, and the texts that learners encounter for theme discussions.

When learners cannot see themselves reflected in the books they read, or when portrayals are distorted or negative, they internalise a lesson of devaluation (Bishop cited in Stringfellow, 2019). Conversely, resources that highlight diverse characters, authentic voices, and culturally relevant contexts affirm identities and support deeper comprehension. In this way, instruction is not only about teaching decoding and comprehension skills, but also ensuring that learners' cultural and linguistic lives are woven into the very materials through which they learn (Smit, 2024).

Beyond the classroom walls, the societal curriculum also plays a role. Mass media, from television to TikTok, often provide the only exposure learners have to ethnic diversity (Gay, 2002:109). CRT, therefore, requires teachers to critically evaluate both formal literacy curricula and external texts that shape learners' worldviews. Stringfellow (2019) argues for a thorough review of how reading resources reflect learners' everyday realities, through illustrations, names of characters, vocabulary, and storylines, while Ngubane (2018:7) reminds us that any curriculum ignoring children's culture fails to address their life needs. Culturally responsive literacy instruction, as Sedita (2021) explains, is not a fixed programme but a practice shaped by the sociocultural setting and population. For this reason, true CRT in literacy combines ethnic content with instructional strategies that emphasise inquiry, critique, and analysis (Banks, 1975, cited in Gay, 2000:28), ensuring that learners are not only affirmed in who they are but are equipped to transfer their learning across contexts through integrated, meaningful, and brain-compatible experiences (Kelly, 2001).

Research across different educational contexts has found that teachers are often faced with a conflict between their agency as educators to act culturally responsive, and what is required from them by policy and standardized testing (Schlein, Wenger & Crump, 2019; Smit, 2023 & (Sleeter, C., 2024). Schlein, Wenger & Crump (2019) found that "standardised curriculum" often directly clashed with the diverse cultural identities and learning needs of learners. A shared phenomenon across classrooms is that educators often feel constrained by content and structure and by the need to meet external metrics of success (Sleeter, C., 2024).

While CRT emphasises the importance of affirming learners' identities through culturally relevant practices, literacy instruction must also be grounded in evidence-based approaches that explain how children acquire reading and writing skills. The Science of Reading offers such a framework, providing the systematic foundation needed to complement culturally responsive methods.

THE SCIENCE OF READING AND STRUCTURED LITERACY

Aligning with Cummins's (BBBG, 2022) theory regarding CALP, the IPC's "communicator" competency requires learners to become competent as readers to enable them to understand and discuss the curriculum content. The Science of Reading (SOR) is the comprehensive body of interdisciplinary research that explains how individuals learn to read. This includes becoming a competent reader, requiring a certain level of vocabulary and background knowledge to understand technical terms specific to the relevant IPC unit. As shown in Fig. B, language comprehension and word recognition are interdependent; developing both leads to fluent, strategic reading and skilled comprehension. Literacy resources such as reading books, posters, and vocabulary cards offer a medium to develop oral and written discourse and communicative competence needed for the IPC in a differentiated and scaffolded manner.

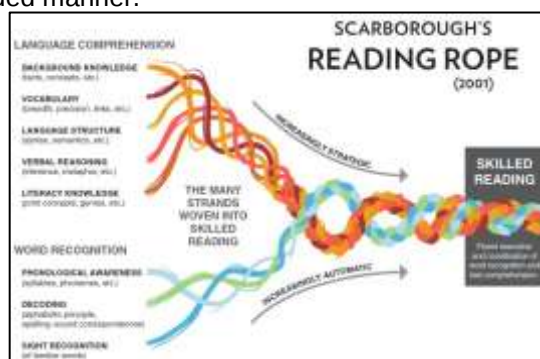
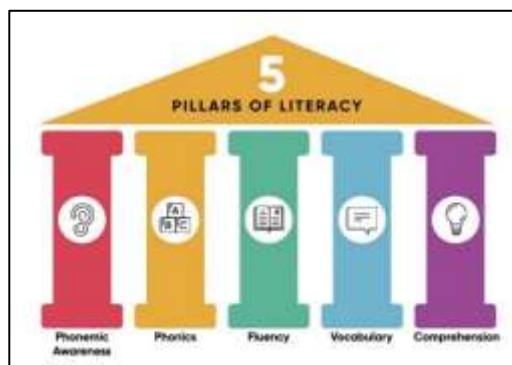


Fig. B: Scarborough's Reading Rope (Neuman & Dickinson, 2021)

According to SOR, there are five pillars of literacy development, as represented in Fig. C below. Each pillar of skills is interrelated with the others.



**Fig. C: The Science of Reading –
5 Pillars of Literacy (National Reading Panel, 2000)**

The aspects of literacy development, as shown above, do not develop separately from one another, but are interrelated. The fig. B above shows Scarborough's reading rope.

Evidence-based practice, grounded in the Science of Reading (National Reading Panel, 2000) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (Neuman & Dickinson, 2021), tells us that to effectively support dialectally diverse learners, explicit and systematic instruction is needed. Within the diverse linguistic context of an international school, this presents a complex challenge.

In international school classrooms, literacy instruction is complicated by the wide range of linguistic backgrounds that learners bring with them. Differences in vocabulary, phonological patterns, and idiomatic expressions between the LoTL and learners' home languages can render "standard" approaches insufficient. Added to this, the *grammatical distance* between English (or another LoTL) and certain mother-tongue languages means that learners struggle to transfer prior linguistic knowledge into academic reading and writing. These realities highlight why teachers in multilingual contexts cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all literacy model. Instead, they must adopt differentiated and scaffolded instruction that explicitly builds bridges from learners' home languages and dialects toward academic independence in the LoTL. Historically, teacher training programmes focused on outdated "whole language" approaches, believing that learning to read and write is a naturally occurring ability, but recent research (Snowling, Hulme and Nation, 2022) found that systematic and explicit phonological decoding and comprehension instruction, in the LoTL, alongside meaning-based scaffolding and strategic use of the learners' native language is needed to effectively improve literacy achievements (Kittle & Budde, 2024). To accommodate dialect diversity, teachers ought to implement a differentiated approach, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach, and providing learners with scaffolding that leads to academic independence (Hollie, 2018:27). CRT and the Science of Reading require pedagogical models that address diverse learner needs; differentiated instruction and small-group teaching provide the practical means to put these theories into practice.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND SMALL-GROUP TEACHING

International classrooms are inherently heterogeneous, with learners arriving from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This diversity makes a one-size-fits-all approach ineffective. Differentiated instruction, supported by small-group teaching, provides a practical way to meet these varied needs within the IPC curriculum. Bailey & Williams-Black (2008) identify three key dimensions of differentiation: content, process, and product.

DIFFERENTIATING THE CONTENT

Differentiating the content focuses on *what* knowledge and skills students gain. The curriculum is modified to give learners access to concepts and skills suitable for their level, while appropriately supporting and challenging them. Strategies to differentiate content include providing resources at differentiated reading levels, tailoring resources to match the learner's prior knowledge, skills, and frame of reference, or allowing learners to select a subtopic that aligns with their personal interests. Despite the differentiation in levels and time allowed, all are given clear expectations and deadlines to ensure accountability and ownership (Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008).



DIFFERENTIATING THE PROCESS OR ACTIVITIES

The second form of differentiation focuses on how learners engage with the curriculum content. Teachers employ strategies such as group work, role play, graphic organizers, learning stations, and literature circles to adapt learning activities for varied levels and learning styles. Incorporating a variety of activities ensures learning is interesting, intellectually challenging, and designed to promote higher-order thinking, discovery, reasoning, and research among all learners, regardless of their level of language competency (Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008).

DIFFERENTIATING THE PRODUCT

The last form of differentiation is the product, which refers to the way learners demonstrate their understanding (Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008). Gardner's multiple intelligences (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, & Gardner, 2011) encourages educators to incorporate product formats that highlight learners' strengths in accordance with linguistic, logical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, or naturalist preferences. This flexibility fosters ownership of learning and increases the likelihood of success (Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008).

In conclusion, differentiated instruction and small-group teaching constitute essential pedagogical strategies for addressing the heterogeneity of international classrooms. When situated within a culturally responsive framework, these approaches transcend mere accommodation of difference by actively integrating learners' linguistic and cultural resources into instruction. Coupled with the evidence-based principles of the Science of Reading, such practices ensure that multilingual learners receive explicit, systematic literacy instruction while simultaneously developing the communicative competence and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency necessary for academic achievement. This intersection of CRT, multilingual education, and SOR underscores the imperative of pedagogical models that are both inclusive and rigorous, capable of supporting diverse learners within the demands of international curricula.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a qualitative, practice-based inquiry through a descriptive case study conducted in an international school in the Netherlands. Data was collected through classroom observations, teacher interactions, and direct engagement with learners. A case study, as described by Bataller-Català (2024), enabled the researcher to enhance the nuanced understanding that arises when teachers are lead participants in research. Through practice-based inquiry the researcher explored which classroom practices and educational tools were deemed most effective in supporting multilingual learners within the IPC curriculum.

DATA COLLECTION:

The research drew from a range of sources to ensure effective triangulation of sources for the strength and credibility of data. Regular classroom observations, noting how teachers structured their literacy lessons and how learners responded, were key components to understanding the current practices within the school. Alongside this, the researcher's personal records from working with small groups of learners, including intervention notes, assessment results, and examples of their written work, were used to support recurring themes that emerged through observations. Informal conversations with teachers about the challenges and successes they experienced provided valuable insights into their practice. Finally, the data collected through observations, informal conversations, and personal practice were compared to the school's formal curriculum plans and literacy policy statement, to identify if there is true alignment between policy and practice. In this study, a range of sources was consulted to build a clear picture of how literacy is approached within this school.

RESEARCH SITE

As an international school, both the student body and the teaching staff are highly diverse. The student body consists of 135 learners ages 4 to 11, with 12 staff members. Among the staff and students, there are 30 different nationalities and 25 different languages and dialects spoken. There is a single language of teaching and learning (LoTL).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

THEME 1: ASSESSMENT DATA: A NEED FOR DIFFERENTIATION

In international school contexts, standardised testing is frequently employed to evaluate instructional quality and identify areas where learners require support. At the site of this case study, referred to as Dutch International Primary School (DIPS), policy requires the use of a standardised test each year. In this case, GL Assessments were administered twice annually to monitor learner performance across subject areas. Although these assessments are not directly aligned with the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), their use is widespread within international schools (UK Parliament, 2015).

A recurring critique among participants was that GL Assessments, by design, do not consider the cultural and linguistic diversity of international learners. The UK Parliament (2015) describes GL Assessment primarily as a benchmarking tool against UK academic norms, which may limit its appropriateness for multilingual contexts. Despite these limitations, the data generated offered important insights into individual literacy levels and instructional needs. As illustrated in Figure D, the results reveal marked variation in reading ability.

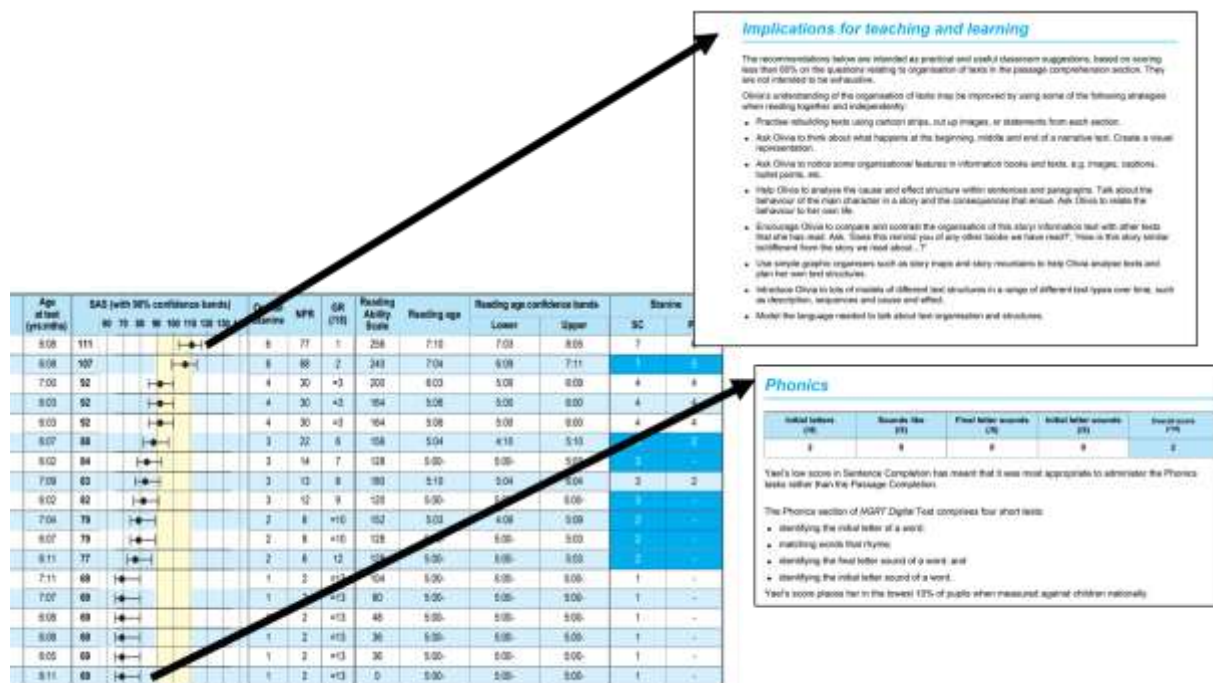


Fig. D: GL PTE Assessment Data

While some learners performed at or above age expectations, many were significantly below, particularly in phonics and text comprehension. This indicates a difference in educational backgrounds and foundational skills learners mastered before joining the same classroom. Such disparities confirm that a uniform instructional model is insufficient. Instead, small-group, targeted instruction is required, as this enables teachers to provide intensive support for those struggling with decoding and comprehension while extending learning for higher-achieving pupils. These findings correspond with Bailey and Williams-Black's (2008) argument that differentiation in content is essential for addressing the needs of diverse learners.

The extent of variation within this cohort also demonstrates the challenge of producing resources that meet all learners' needs. Teachers described this task as overwhelming. In this respect, AI-based tools offer potential as a supplementary resource, generating materials that are both linguistically tailored and culturally responsive while remaining aligned with IPC learning goals. This approach links curriculum objectives with learner diversity and the need for differentiated instruction.

THEME 2: FROM ASSESSMENT TO ACTION: DIFFERENTIATED LITERACY INSTRUCTION THROUGH AI-SUPPORTED RESOURCES



Within this particular case study, differentiated small-group instruction was observed through a structured rotational model. Guided by the IPC unit topic, each literacy block combines a teacher-led activity, an independent writing task, a technology station, and a practical or creative activity. Learners are grouped according to skill level and linguistic needs, informed by assessment data, enabling targeted support for phonics, comprehension, grammar, and writing development. Participants shared they found this to be an effective model to ensure all learners receive explicit and systematic instruction while also engaging with meaningful and creative tasks.

A major challenge identified by teachers has been the extensive time required to plan and prepare differentiated resources for multiple ability levels and learning styles. To address this, the school employs AI as a planning tool to generate culturally responsive, IPC-linked resources. One example found AI to be used to create decodable readers tailored to specific phonics levels, theme-related texts aligned with IPC units, and creative writing prompts embedded with targeted vocabulary. The EAL teacher shared that resources were not only differentiated for linguistic level but also designed to affirm learners' cultural and linguistic identities, strengthening engagement and comprehension.

Assessment data at the end of the academic year showed a positive curve across grades. Participating teachers shared that this approach led to increased participation, confidence, and ownership of learning among their learners. Teachers reported that AI platforms have significantly reduced planning time, allowing them to focus on instruction and formative feedback. Data collected through observations, assessment results, and conversations with staff confirmed that by aligning differentiated resources with both assessment data and IPC thematic content, the school has been able to bridge gaps in attainment more effectively. This integrated approach highlights the potential of AI-enhanced small-group instruction to meet diverse learning needs while sustaining academic rigour and cultural responsiveness in international school contexts.

CONCLUSION

The data provided through this case study highlighted that multilingual education within the international school context is multifaceted. Teachers are challenged with the diverse learning needs of their learner population while striving to meet the requirements of curriculum objectives and standardised testing.

Research conducted on the language development of multilingual learners has established that a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer effective. For effective communicative competence to develop, learners should be supported at their level and scaffolded in a manner that not only takes their literacy levels into account, but also through curriculum and instruction that draws from their cultural and linguistic heritage responsively.

This article has argued for an approach that differentiates in a manner that equally supports and challenges learners on their level. Drawing from the Science of Reading, this paper has established that explicit and systematic literacy instruction is required to support multilingual learners to develop the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 2008) needed to achieve success across the International Primary Curriculum.

Assessment data analysed during this study highlighted the vast needs of learners. Given the scale of differentiation required, traditional resource creation can be overwhelming for teachers. AI-driven tools present a promising supplement to create resources that not only differentiate for the linguistic levels of learners, but if implemented effectively, can be used to generate resources to reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners, all while placing them within the IPC curriculum context of the unit theme, bringing curriculum, learner needs, and linguistic levels together into a single resources. These resources, alongside a differentiated instructional approach, have proven effective within the context of an international school in the Netherlands, helping to close the achievement gap between diverse learners. The study has highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of integrating structured literacy, cultural responsiveness, and emerging technologies in international schools.

To achieve this, teachers require sustained professional development focused on combining structured literacy, culturally responsive teaching, and the ethical integration of AI. Further research is recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of AI-supported differentiation on equity, learner outcomes, and teacher workload in multilingual international schools.



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