

The TAPPEO Project: Embracing Linguistic Diversity in Early Childhood Education in Romania

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the "Teacher Academy for Plurilingual Preschools: A path towards equal opportunities" (TAPPEO) project, under the Erasmus+ Programme. The TAPPEO project aims to promote plurilingualism among young learners by providing educators with advanced knowledge and innovative teaching practices such as CLIL, immersive language experiences, and culturally responsive teaching. The project uses digital and artificial intelligence tools to enhance young learners' linguistic capacity and cognitive development. It fosters a community of practice where both in-service and pre-service teachers will collaborate, share expertise and cultivate a sense of belonging. A key focus of TAPPEO is the development of engaging and effective educational materials that support linguistic diversity and cognitive growth, with particular attention given to inclusion for migrant students and children with different mother tongues than the language of instruction. The project's deliverables are designed for widespread dissemination and open access for the educational community, encompassing a diverse range of resources. By fostering a collaborative environment, TAPPEO aims to empower educators to better meet the needs of all students, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive in a supportive learning environment. The article outlines the objectives and outputs of the project while highlighting the main research findings related to bilingual education in Romania. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating bilingual education strategies into standard curricula, promoting linguistic diversity as an invaluable asset. Furthermore, the project stresses the necessity of ongoing professional development for teachers to effectively implement these innovative approaches in their classrooms.

Keywords: *bilingual and plurilingual education, teacher professional development, research, digital and AI tools*

1. European Context

Contemporary society is marked by mobility and constant change, which significantly influence the linguistic landscape. Migration, cultural contacts, and the internationalization of education have introduced diverse languages into societies. Languages are intertwined with societal and political contexts, shaping and being shaped by historical developments. Students now are equipped with complex and diverse repertoires of languages and cultural backgrounds, shaped by their life trajectories across different communities, countries, and educational systems. Digital communication further amplifies this diversity, enabling learners to access and engage with multiple languages and cultures beyond formal education. Traditionally, language proficiency was viewed as a monolithic, independent skill. As recently as a few decades ago, the separation and purity of languages was unquestioned, both socially and scientifically [1]. Consequently, bilingual education was seen as dangerous, as a source of reduced language proficiency, linguistic insecurity, psychological problems, and exclusion from a language-specific community [1]. Modern research, especially in Europe, emphasizes plurilingualism, which recognizes the fluid, interconnected use of multiple languages within individuals and communities. This context of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among learners, often overlooked in traditional language education models has led to the emergence of plurilingual education. Plurilingual education promotes pedagogical strategies that critically engage with students' entire repertoires - encompassing multiple languages and cultural experiences - rather than focusing only on a single target language. It acknowledges that these languages and cultural experiences are interconnected and fluid, reflecting the reality of learners' lives, especially in multicultural contexts, where many individuals speak multiple languages at varying proficiency levels. Plurilingual education aligns language learning with learners' experiences, fostering an inclusive environment that values their linguistic and cultural identities as assets for further learning and social participation.

2. Plurilingual Education

The Council of Europe describes plurilingualism [2, 3] as an individual's *dynamic, uneven repertoire* of languages and varieties - plus related cultural and semiotic resources - that are activated flexibly depending on task, audience, and context. Unlike *multilingualism* (which is a societal fact: many languages in a space), *plurilingualism* centers on the *person* and their strategic use of all linguistic resources [4].

Plurilingualism is a view of language use and learning in which individuals draw on a single, integrated, and evolving repertoire of multiple languages and cultures (rather than keeping them in separate “boxes”). Plurilingual competence is the ability to mobilize one's whole multilingual - multicultural repertoire to communicate and interact interculturally, with uneven or partial proficiencies across languages that work together as a common competence (not a stack of separate monolingual skills).

Traditionally, languages were viewed as separate and pure entities. Bilingual education was often considered problematic, associated with reduced proficiency and social exclusion. Recent research highlights the benefits of language plurality, such as enhanced cognitive flexibility, transfer of knowledge across languages, and creative thinking. There are several theoretical foundations supporting the shift. Firstly, there are psychocognitive reasons, as modern brain studies show multilingual brains as complex, distinct systems, challenging earlier monolingual models. Knowledge of one language scaffolds comprehension and production in related ones (e.g., Romance or Slavic families). Plurilingual practice includes speech, writing, visuals, gesture, and digital media. Literacy is multimodal; learners aim at meaning-making across modes, orchestrating resources across languages and modes to achieve communicative goals or using cognates, morpho-lexical patterns, and contrastive analysis to accelerate learning. Competences across languages are typically partial and complementary. Users combine languages within interactions to make meaning, rather than “switching” between sealed systems. Proficiency is not a stack of native-like proficiencies. Secondly, language acquisition is seen as a social process involving interaction within cultural and sociological contexts. Individuals are shaped by multiple socializations; identities are complex, fluid, and evolving. Their experiences accumulate to form a “map” that supports a plurilingual/pluricultural identity and comfort with change. Plurilingualism positions learners as social agents whose languages index identities and affiliations. It challenges monolingual norms, foregrounding equity, linguistic rights, and the legitimacy of minority/home languages in schooling. Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, language teaching emphasizes active, reflective learning, viewing errors as part of progress, and recognizing the interconnectedness of all languages a learner knows. Teaching and learning should be based on multiple languages and cultures in play (contrasted with “singular” one-language instruction). It will raise awareness of links between languages and between language and culture, including insights into one's own language(s). Learners will reflect on their repertoire, strategies, and experiences to navigate “in-between spaces.” In addition, crossing boundaries builds creativity, symbolic competence (making/reading meanings across contexts), and learner agency [2,3,4] .

Plurilingualism has brought about implications for language education and policy. It emphasizes the relationships and dynamic interplay among all languages an individual possesses, fostering integrated and fluid language use - sometimes described as “*linguaging*.” To this end, plurilingual education should value all resources learners bring (dialects, registers, partial skills, etc.). Classrooms focus on tasks that mix languages (comparison, translation, collaborative mediation). The shift relies on learner repertoire-based design: translanguaging, CLIL, project work, intercomprehension tasks, and learner-designed artefacts. Goals move from “native-like proficiency” to *strategic communicative capability* and intercultural awareness. Assessment approaches target *mediation, reception/production across languages*, collaborative tasks, and repertoire deployment. They assess growth in the overall repertoire, not language-by-language boxes, encouraging strategic switching, translanguaging, and reflection on how learners learn. This shift advocates for a more interconnected, flexible, and inclusive approach to language learning and teaching, moving beyond traditional notions of language purity and compartmentalization.

3.The Teacher Academy for Plurilingual Preschools: A Path Towards Equal Opportunities project

The European Union's motto, “United in Diversity,” underscores languages as core expressions of culture and essential public values. From early childhood onward, the EU advances plurilingual and multilingual education, couples this with protections for minority and regional languages, and invests in language

technologies to lower communication barriers. Because access and quality in preschool still vary across member states, EU strategies target equity - especially for disadvantaged children - by treating early childhood education as a lever to reduce inequalities. Intercultural competence and language proficiency are framed as key lifelong learning skills, exemplified by models such as the European Schools [2,3].

The European project, Teacher Academy for Plurilingual Preschools: A Path Towards Equal Opportunities (TAPPEO), builds a strategic partnership among teacher-education institutions, training providers, and schools to strengthen cooperation and teacher professional learning across career stages. The project advances EU priorities by promoting plurilingualism for educational inclusion, protecting linguistic and cultural diversity, and deepening the European dimension of teacher training.

The TAPPEO project equips pre-service and in-service educators with advanced, research-informed practices - CLIL, immersive language experiences, and culturally responsive teaching - together with digital and AI tools that personalize learning and support young children's linguistic development, cognition, and well-being. By recognizing and leveraging children's full linguistic repertoire, the project fosters engagement, identity affirmation, and intercultural competence, with a particular focus on migrant learners and children whose home language differs from the language of schooling. A cross-border community of practice underpins the work, enabling peer mentoring, shared inquiry, and a sustained sense of professional belonging.

Its outputs are designed for open access: a comparative literature review, teacher-led action research findings with classroom-ready solutions, training workshop packs, teacher handbooks, and video exemplars from real classrooms. Practical guides for AI-supported personalization and multilingual digital content creation help educators design inclusive, high-quality learning experiences. By elevating teacher expertise, modernizing training, and centering plurilingual, inclusive pedagogy, TAPPEO strengthens the attractiveness of the preschool teaching profession and improves the quality and equity of early education across participating countries.

4. Early Childhood and Primary Education in Romania

Romania's education system has undergone substantial reform over recent decades to improve inclusivity, access, and quality - from preschool through upper secondary. The 2019 preschool curriculum and the 2011 primary curriculum align with EU key competences, using play-based, thematic learning in preschool and an integrated competence approach in primary school (communication, math/science, digital skills, learning-to-learn, social/civic education, and cultural awareness). Methodologies emphasize inquiry, projects, group work, and formative assessment, with teachers adapting instruction to developmental levels - especially in the Preparatory Grade and Grade 1 [5].

Migration dynamics since 2022 have reshaped priorities. Romania rapidly expanded access for Ukrainian refugee children, introducing Romanian-as-a-second-language support, hiring Ukrainian-speaking assistants and cultural mediators, easing documentation barriers, and partnering with NGOs to provide psychosocial and material support. Enrolment among Ukrainian children has been high, particularly at primary level, yet challenges persist: uneven availability of trained staff for intercultural education, variable alignment to the national curriculum, and limited systematic monitoring of outcomes [6,7].

Language policy is a relative strength. Romania supports minority-language education in public preschools (e.g., Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, Serbian, Romani) and hosts a vibrant private and international sector where bilingual and plurilingual models are common. In public settings, foreign language exposure typically begins informally around age five; private settings often offer immersive experiences from earlier ages. These pathways support early bilingualism and development of cognitive flexibility and literacy [5].

Teacher preparation combines initial degrees in pedagogy/primary education with requirements in child development, language acquisition, and inclusive/intercultural practices. Continuous professional development - supported by national initiatives (e.g., CRED) and international partners (Erasmus+, Goethe-Institut, British Council, Institut Français) - targets bilingual pedagogy and Romanian as a SL. Nonetheless, provision is uneven, with rural areas facing capacity constraints and variable training quality [5].

Overall, Romania has made notable progress in modernizing curricula, widening access to early/primary education, and strengthening plurilingual provision. To consolidate gains, policy and practice should focus on expanding high-quality institutions - especially in rural areas, scaling language and psychosocial supports for refugee and immigrant learners, enhancing teacher expertise in intercultural and second-language didactics, and improving data systems to track participation and learning [5].

5. Plurilingual and Bilingual Preschool Education in Romania

Romania's participation in plurilingual and bilingual preschool education is intertwined with broader issues of national identity, minority rights, and inclusive education, shaped by its socio-cultural history and European Union goals promoting linguistic diversity and intercultural competence. While policies support minority language inclusion - particularly for Romani, Hungarian, Ukrainian, and German communities - implementation varies due to regional disparities, resource limitations, and socio-economic barriers, especially affecting marginalized groups like the Roma. Classroom practices often employ immersive and translanguaging pedagogies to foster linguistic and cognitive development, but teacher training remains insufficient for effectively supporting plurilingualism. Despite legal frameworks advocating for minority languages, cultural resistance, resource shortages, and institutional rigidity hinder progress. Innovative initiatives, including community collaborations and digital platforms, show promise, yet systemic challenges persist. Moving forward, comprehensive strategies involving policy reform, teacher professional development, community engagement, and technological integration are essential to advancing equitable, inclusive, and effective plurilingual education in Romania, ultimately transforming language from a barrier into a bridge for social participation and identity [8,9].

Classroom practice depends on teacher training and confidence, institutional support, and access to age-appropriate materials. Where capacity exists, preschools use immersive, communicative approaches - embedding the target language across routines, play, storytelling, song, and drama - so children acquire language naturally while building cognitive flexibility and social belonging. Co-designed thematic units and translanguaging are emerging as effective strategies, enabling children to draw on their full repertoires and move fluidly between languages. [8].

Roma inclusion remains a critical test of the system's equity. Persistent socioeconomic barriers, mobility, and discrimination depress enrollment and continuity, even as community-based initiatives show that culturally responsive, family-engaged programs can foster thriving multilingual literacy. Prioritizing Romani in early education and co-creating curricula with Roma families are pivotal to shifting from deficit framings to asset-based practices that honor identity [10]. Key barriers include the policy-practice divide, resource scarcity, administrative rigidity that limits curricular adaptation, and limited data on linguistic diversity and learning outcomes. Cultural resistance also persists in some communities, where minority-language use is seen as competing with Romanian and academic success.

At the same time, promising directions are taking shape. Local collaborations in cities like Cluj and Sibiu align schools, authorities, and minority groups to co-design sustainable bilingual pathways. Cross-sector models (e.g., linking early education with health and family services) increase reach for immigrant and multilingual families. Digital tools and interactive story apps can extend access in rural areas - provided that device availability and teacher digital literacy are addressed [9]. Overall, Romania has the policy scaffolding and a growing repertoire of practices to advance plurilingual preschool education, but impact hinges on implementation: sustained investment in teacher expertise, robust family partnerships (especially with Roma communities), context-sensitive curricula, and better monitoring. Reframing language as a bridge—not a barrier—positions preschools to nurture identity, intercultural competence, and foundational literacy, laying the groundwork for more equitable outcomes across a linguistically diverse generation.

6. Survey Results on Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Plurilingualism

The online questionnaire administered to primary school teachers gathered demographic and professional information about teachers' backgrounds, home language, foreign language proficiency, and the training received related to supporting the language development and inclusion of linguistically diverse children. The questionnaire aimed to provide insights into teachers' attitudes towards and perceptions of plurilingual education, as well as to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences, practices, and challenges in supporting linguistically diverse learners.

The survey clearly revealed that the teachers were trained for monolingual mother tongue teaching and were challenged by the linguistic diversity. Thus, firstly, they had to provide many pupils from other language backgrounds with second-language support to help them develop sound skills in the language of instruction for other subjects and enable them to utilize this language as a learning tool. Secondly, their classroom had to respect their pupils' linguistic diversity, which led to the concept of plurilingual education, where all subjects contribute to the development of pupils' plurilingual repertoires, for which they had not been trained.

The questionnaire revealed a clear divide: teachers view plurilingualism either as a valuable resource or as a challenge. Most see it as enriching for language education, curricula, teaching practices, and development across all levels. However, many also regard plurilingualism as a challenge requiring solutions. While trained for monolingual teaching, most language teachers now face the demands of supporting pupils from diverse linguistic backgrounds. They provide second-language support and must adapt classrooms to respect linguistic diversity, integrating it into a plurilingual education concept where all subjects foster pupils' plurilingual repertoire. Plurilingual education aims to increase awareness, appreciation, and enhancement of linguistic and cultural repertoires, enabling independent development [2,3]. There is still uncertainty about how to manage classroom diversity. Participants reported varying levels of support in policies, curricula, and resources, highlighting an ongoing need for consistency and standardization.

Our survey also focused on teachers' strategies in dealing with the challenges of plurilingualism and the ways school systems have found to support these teachers in different domains (school organization, curriculum development, and teacher training). The survey results revealed that teachers often lack clear strategies for managing diversity, highlighting a demand for increased promotion of plurilingualism through curricula development, teacher training, and classroom practices. Teachers frequently feel unprepared to handle increasingly linguistically diverse classrooms, partly because of rapid demographic changes and insufficient training. Many classroom practices tend to treat the majority language as if all learners shared the same linguistic background. Even in schools with experience in linguistic diversity, policy changes and curriculum adaptations tend to be slow, hindering the full integration of plurilingual approaches. Recognition of plurilingualism is often limited to educated or migrant communities, with many viewing it as a resource only among certain groups. However, some comments advocate for breaking down the traditional boundaries between language subjects - mother tongue, foreign language, minority language - and promoting a more integrated, collaborative approach to language teaching across disciplines.

The survey, conducted among a dedicated group of teachers, is not statistically representative but shows the urgent need for further development of plurilingual teaching approaches. Most experts agree that integrating plurilingualism into curricula is highly important and beneficial. Many teachers and policymakers still see it as a challenge, often due to a lack of clear guidance or resources. The survey underscores the critical importance of advancing plurilingual teaching methodologies, curricula, and teacher training. To effectively address the dilemma, a comprehensive approach that includes curriculum reform, teacher education, and organizational change is necessary.

6.1 Plurilingual Practices

All practices highlighted by teachers share many common features. The teacher is a facilitator who works with students to co-create knowledge that benefits the entire class. The prior knowledge of students is valued and is integral to the success of these lessons. Metalinguistic skills across languages are developed, ensuring that students' language development is holistic and well-rounded, valuing their linguistic and cultural knowledge and identities.

The teachers agreed that these practices are useful in concretizing the goals of plurilingual pedagogy, providing them with a starting point to begin practicing plurilingualism. The teachers listed various strategies promoted by plurilingual education [11,12,13,14,15,16], but none mentioned all of them. Most cited only two or three and expressed concerns about their lack of awareness and limited use of the full range of strategies necessary to effectively address their students' diverse needs.

Translanguaging, or fluidly using different languages, is an effective strategy for making meaning of content in a new language. Students can read, write, or listen to a podcast in a language other than English and bring the knowledge to class to be discussed in English or in another language. Students can also start writing an essay in English, and if they feel "stuck," they can switch to another language and later check for the meaning in English. By using languages other than English, students can continue communication, getting their message across, which can make communication more effective and language learning more relevant. Translanguaging affirms students' linguistic and cultural identities and can be used not only to work toward goals but also to increase student confidence, autonomy, and language abilities.

Contrastive analysis focuses on students' knowledge of their previously learned languages by using pedagogically motivated comparing and contrasting to help students develop skills in a new language. Together with the teacher, students co-create collective knowledge and skills in the new language while using their previous knowledge and skills to guide them.

Cross-linguistic comparisons. Students compare their languages with their target language. Comparisons can effectively engage students in learning by focusing on linguistic features, such as grammar, syntax,

phonology, and morphology, or on language use. For example, when learning a new feature, such as discourse markers, students can compare where they are positioned in sentences in different languages and discuss their use in oral and written texts. Through cross-linguistic comparisons, students actively engage in learning and have their repertoire valued during the lessons.

Grammar is a relevant pedagogical practice that seeks to develop learners' inductive reasoning skills and metalinguistic awareness. It utilizes students' prior knowledge and is based on how language is used.

Cross-cultural comparisons. Learning a new language can provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into new cultures. Making cross-cultural comparisons can help students develop criticality, learn about and understand different cultural viewpoints. For example, when discussing topics such as nutrition and environmental issues, students can gather texts in different languages and compare the content, how knowledge is communicated in different languages, and how language connects to culture. It offers opportunities to question values and ideas across languages and cultures, which can develop different ways of knowing and creative ways of thinking.

Intercomprehension focuses on developing passive competencies, namely reading and listening, across languages that students may or may not have studied explicitly. This approach values students' partial competencies across different languages and aims to foster their metalinguistic awareness. By emphasizing inductive learning, it encourages students to take ownership of their educational process, using their problem-solving abilities to make sense of linguistic patterns. For instance, each student speaks their own language, but because their languages are closely related, they understand each other using shared roots, cognates, context, and prior knowledge. No one switches languages; comprehension comes from cross-linguistic similarity.

Translation for mediation. Whenever there is a new expression, vocabulary, or grammatical item in the lesson, teachers can plan activities that engage students in making use of the languages in their repertoire. For example, teachers can ask students to translate the new items into languages they already know and, in small groups, share their translations with other peers, who will have translations in another language. Students can compare meanings across languages, whether there is a direct translation in another language, how to pronounce these words, etc. By translating into different languages and comparing them, students have more opportunities to engage with meaning and are likely to learn new vocabulary more effectively.

6.2 Benefits of Plurilingual Education

The teachers highlighted the benefits of plurilingual education, which creates inclusive, student-centered classrooms by valuing learners' full linguistic and cultural repertoires and linking language learning to equity, diversity, and inclusion. By recognizing languages as interrelated and interdependent, it encourages students to reflect on the similarities and differences among their linguistic and cultural repertoires, fostering a deeper understanding of diversity. This approach provides opportunities for both students and teachers to learn from one another, promoting mutual respect and cultural awareness. It also enables students to anchor new learning to their existing knowledge, making education more relevant and meaningful. Classroom activities, assignments, and real-world tasks enable students to use their linguistic repertoire, validating their plurilingual and pluricultural identities and fostering agency and confidence. Additionally, plurilingual education facilitates critical discussions about language, worldview, and ways of knowing. Ultimately, this approach creates an environment where the languages and cultures of all learners are recognized and valued, empowering students from diverse backgrounds to participate actively and contribute positively to society.

The benefits identified by the teachers align with those mentioned by studies [15, 17,18,19]. Language classes relying on plurilingual pedagogy are viewed as more engaging and inclusive [17]. Llanes and Cots [20] found that students in a plurilingual classroom had increased feelings of inclusion, participation, and mutual understanding. Additionally, the development of less formal or rigid relationships between teachers and students and among students increases engagement, participation, and mutual understanding while fostering relaxed, collaborative climates [17, 20]. It strengthens cognitive outcomes - attentional control, flexibility, working memory, metalinguistic awareness, and problem-solving [21] - and supports literacy transfer across languages, as strong L1 skills scaffold L2 academic language [22]. Such programmes are associated with gains in reading and overall learning. Plurilingual approaches also stimulate creativity, perspective-taking, and intercultural awareness; they promote well-being and a sense of belonging by encouraging the use of home languages; and reframe learning as joyful, exploratory meaning-making [15], shaping learners as confident plurilingual citizens who can connect prior knowledge to new contexts and contribute positively to diverse societies [2,3].

7. Future Developments of the Project

The teacher training plan combines online, face-to-face, and blended formats to build expertise in multilingual education for young learners. It includes online seminars on multilingual pedagogy; workshops on cognition and linguistic development; blended modules on culturally responsive teaching and family engagement; and practical, immersive sessions on language-rich experiences (games, storytelling, visual/contextual supports, “home-like” reading, and parent involvement). A dedicated blended program develops competence with digital and AI tools for multilingualism, offering sample scenarios (songs, digital games, digital stories, visual aids). Capacity-building is reinforced through a structured peer-mentoring scheme and reflective practice groups, plus a two-day ICT-focused workshop on plurilingual curricula and digital inclusion in preschool. The plan is supported by video tutorials for pre-service and in-service teachers, followed by pilot implementation in selected schools and systematic assessment of learners’ cognitive and linguistic development.

8. Conclusions: Why plurilingual education must start in primary school

The questionnaire shows teachers trained for monolingual mother-tongue teaching are already supporting many pupils as L2 learners of the language of schooling. Without early plurilingual approaches, pupils who are still developing the language of instruction face barriers in other subjects. Plurilingual strategies (scaffolding with home languages, multimodal meaning-making, collaborative mediation) expand access to content learning from the start of schooling.

The survey’s attitudinal split (plurilingualism as resource vs. challenge) indicates that teacher beliefs track available training. Where teachers see workable models, they perceive enrichment; where they lack tools, they perceive a burden. Early adoption accompanied by training realigns perceptions and practice. Younger learners naturally move across languages, registers, and modes. Primary schooling can legitimize flexible note-taking, translanguaging, and multimodal tasks [17]. Plurilingual education treats learners as social agents who build a composite, evolving repertoire; it values partial, uneven competencies and targets strategic communication rather than native-like monolingual norms. Starting in primary school allows this repertoire to grow systematically over time.

The shift from single language to plurilingual educator involves new task design, assessment, and classroom language policies. Introducing this at primary level - with ongoing professional learning - normalizes practices before monolingual routines solidify. If all subjects contribute to developing pupils’ plurilingual repertoires, early implementation enables cross-subject coordination and assessment redesign. Early plurilingual education aligns with the Council of Europe’s aims to value, develop, and autonomously extend each learner’s linguistic-cultural repertoire, supporting social inclusion and linguistic diversity from the outset of schooling. From this perspective, the purposes of plurilingual education, whatever its institutional character and the way it is organised, will be to make everyone aware of and value the nature of their linguistic and cultural repertoire, to develop and improve this repertoire, to give all speakers the means of developing it themselves through autonomous acquisition [2, 3].

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