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Multilingualism as an asset – devising a Toolkit for academic staff at a British University

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a practitioner-oriented research project that explored the often invisible aspect of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in UK Higher Education: students' multilingualism and its potential mobilisation as an asset for learning. The project applied a collaborative, emergent methodology to gather three different sources of data to better understand the complexity of students' multilingual repertoires and how these could be exploited as an educational resource. The data sources included a literature review, a student questionnaire investigating the extent and uses of multilingualism in a cross-section of students across different disciplines, and two online workshops with faculty which explored their responses to the questionnaire results and possible educational strategies for promoting multilingual approaches. The findings from these sources were utilised to devise an Inclusive Multilingualism Toolkit for Educators aimed at promoting debate and the design of more effective pedagogic practices, across our university and the wider learning and teaching community.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism; higher education; EDI; pedagogy; Toolkit

Introduction

> A student takes notes in lectures in both English and Mandarin. We overhear two students chatting in a mix of English and Polish about their upcoming assignment, switching mid-sentence between one and another. A third student describes how they used Yoruba, the language of their family, in interviews for their post-graduate dissertation.

[1]The scenarios above are all everyday uses of multilingualism by students we have noticed at our university in the United Kingdom, and yet they often remain invisible in university discourses relating to learning and teaching, as well as equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Multilingualism can be defined as 'the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives' (European Commission, 2007, p. 6). In our work as practitioners delivering a course in pedagogy for Higher Education (the Post-graduate Certificate in Higher Education), we became increasingly aware that the academic staff on our

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programme, many of whom were multilingual themselves, were interacting with students who also employed a wide variety of languages in their day-to-day lives. This led us to investigate the pedagogic implications of this further, with the aim of helping staff to mobilise students' multilingualism to improve their learning.

Our study is uniquely grounded in the context in which it was conducted, at a multilingual and diverse higher education institution in London in the UK. We understand universities to be part of an environment that is complex, turbulent, and changing rapidly. The constant change and complex interdependencies of Higher Education (HE) are clearly in evidence when considering the language backgrounds of students in the UK. Increasing globalisation means that even young learners come to the classroom with rich and dynamic linguistic trajectories (Cenoz & Gorter, 2023) which is certainly the case for our university students, too.

In the specific context of our institution, this means that our multilingual student body includes not just international students whose first language is not English, but also British-born students who may be the children of immigrants or refugees and have grown up speaking other languages besides English at home, and students who speak English as a mother tongue but may speak a non-British variety or have learned other languages as well (Lazar, 2020).

Multilingualism as a hidden aspect of diversity

In recent years, there has been greater emphasis in universities in general on promoting EDI in learning and teaching (Advance HE, 2025). Despite this current preoccupation with diversity, we have noticed that multilingualism is a hidden aspect of diversity which is not frequently made visible. Since language and linguistic competence are not included as a protected characteristic under the (UK Equality Act, 2010) (see endnote), there is little incentive for universities to gather data on the linguistic profiles of their students. As pointed out by Advance HE (2025) 'While most institutions collect monitoring data on the protected characteristics of their students, there are gaps in the information for certain groups'. UK society is multicultural and multilingual, yet universities seem to adhere to a monolingual paradigm that fails to openly treat multilingualism as part of diversity, and as a resource. In fact, multilingualism is often regarded from a deficit perspective, with an institutional focus on ensuring there are 'remedial' measures to counteract 'non-native', 'poor' or 'weak' English, but scant interest in the additional resources that multilingualism provides (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Martin, 2010). Preece and Martin (2009) argue for an imagining of English-medium universities as multilingual spaces where such linguistic diversity is seen primarily as an asset, not a problem. Recognising the value of multilingual repertoires and not treating the multilingual student population as a homogeneous group (Preece, 2019) can promote equity and social justice and avoid 'othering' (Heugh et al., 2017).

Research design

To explore this further from our positions as both academics and practitioners in learning and teaching in HE, we set up a project to investigate this hidden aspect of

diversity and to contribute to conversations around EDI. Our main aims were, firstly, to gather more information on the wide range of linguistic repertoires used by students at the university, so that faculty and management are able to make more informed decisions when it comes to supporting students. This kind of data is not collected by the institution despite other data being collected relating to other aspects of EDI. Secondly, we also wanted to use this information to encourage dialogue and debate amongst faculty regarding the practical implications of including language and multilingualism in the EDI agenda.

We devised a tri-partite process, which included an extensive literature review about multilingualism within HE, a survey about multilingualism among a range of students at the university, and two two-hour workshops with university academic staff.

Methods

Literature review

The literature review was conducted in 2022 using the Web of Knowledge database applying the following search terms: Multilingual* AND higher education AND UK or EMI (EMI – English medium instruction); Plurilingual* AND higher education; Multilingual* AND supporting learning within EMI and higher education. This resulted in identifying 88 relevant studies. We did not include the term 'International Students' as there is a very extensive literature on this subject, and we wished to narrow our focus to sources directly relevant to the extent of multilingualism in universities and the promotion of multilingual pedagogic strategies. The analysis of these articles confirmed that there is significant interest in multilingual education; however, there is a paucity of data available on the extent and varied nature of HE students' linguistic repertoires, something that this article aims to address.

Survey

To address the lack of existing data around students' multilingual repertoires, in the first stage of our project, we piloted a linguistic survey among students across the university. The goal was to provide a snapshot of the range of languages which students use, and the different purposes for which these are deployed, information which has not been captured hitherto in any university data.

The survey focused on three main areas:

(1) Demographic information of the participants (e.g. their programme of study, the country they were born in and what languages their primary, secondary and higher education were conducted in).
(2) The participants' use of languages in various life situations (e.g. it had detailed questions about what they considered their mother tongue, what languages they used in day-to-day exchanges, such as for talking to friends, family, work, study, religious and entertainment purposes … etc. and their level of comfort when listening/understanding/speaking/reading/writing).

(3) Open questions to understand their perception of being bi- or multilingual and its implication for their studies. Participant responses to these questions were coded as S (for student survey) for quotation purposes.

This online survey was piloted with three multilingual colleagues in the department so that the questions could be refined for precision and clarity. We aimed to include at least two programmes each from our four faculties, and thus involve students from a range of disciplines. The limitations of the pilot study and this voluntary sample are acknowledged in that the findings are not representative of the entire university population. Nevertheless, the findings serve as a starting point for further inquiry as they indicate that multilingual students are not a homogenous group, despite what the often used labels of 'home' vs 'international' students suggest, and that there is a very wide range of languages used in different contexts by students.

Workshops

Building on the findings of the survey, we ran two pedagogic research workshops with 17 academics. The purpose of the workshops was to explore with staff possible pedagogic approaches, classroom activities and forms of assessment which draw on students' multilingual resources so as to extend notions of EDI to incorporate the hidden dimension of language. We aimed to utilise some of the findings from the workshops in a pedagogic Toolkit for wider dissemination within the University and beyond.

Voluntary and snowball sampling was used to contact staff to arrange two two-hour online workshops. The workshops included 17 academics from a range of disciplines, including Finance, Mental Health Nursing, Midwifery, Early Childhood Studies, Environmental Management and Student Wellbeing as well as staff whose roles focused more explicitly on language, such as staff teaching academic writing, translation, Spanish and applied linguistics.

Each workshop was designed to engage in participatory pedagogic research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) with the academics attending in order to prompt creative ways of incorporating linguistic diversity into pedagogic approaches. We began by sharing the results of the survey with the participants and presented three selected student profiles from the survey (see appendix), as well as student strategies which demonstrated how students were using their multilingual repertoires in their studies. The discussion was guided by the four core questions below but was designed to flow freely to allow participants to express ideas creatively.

(1) How can we capitalise on the multilingual nature of students?
(2) What are the implications for curriculum design and classroom teaching?
(3) What teaching strategies can be used to encourage students to make use of their multilingual repertoires?
(4) What might be the barriers and how to overcome these?

The workshops were conducted on Zoom and the automatic captions were used as transcription text. The contributions were anonymised and respondents labelled P1–17. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2012) was used to identify some key

themes around how best to acknowledge the added value that multilingual students bring to higher education.

All three of these processes fed into the production of a what we describe as an educational artefact – a seven-page booklet we entitled 'Inclusive Multilingualism: A Toolkit for Educators'. This is designed to promote debate and discussion across our university community and encourage the adoption of practical pedagogic strategies that value and promote multilingualism in learning and teaching. Each one of these aspects of the research process is now discussed in detail with relevant findings and outcomes highlighted.

Literature review

While our literature review was extensive, in this article we report only on those key themes which informed the content of our Toolkit for Educators. Following Lin (2020), the Toolkit advocates for a shift towards a complexity view and an asset model of teaching, which values multilingual approaches, both in institutional policies and among instructors. A strong reason underpinning this is that many research studies highlight how the mobilisation of multilingual repertoires can be advantageous for learning (Álvarez & Pérez-Cavana, 2015; Andrews & Fay, 2020; Arafat & Woodin, 2022; Davila, 2019; Liu & Fang, 2022; Marshall et al., 2019; Ndebele & Zulu, 2017).

One key theme in the literature is the widely used concept of translanguaging which can refer to both spontaneous and intentional practices of using multiple languages for communication (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). While a number of studies attest to the value of translanguaging in classrooms where English or other languages are taught (e.g. Fang & Liu, 2020; Galante, 2020), there is also some evidence that students studying other subjects, taught through the medium of English, benefited from the use of translanguaging (e.g. Asfour et al., 2020; Muguruza et al., 2023). The translanguaging paradigm promotes a complexity perspective that adopts a holistic view of languages and cultures, aiming to embrace and liberate students' full linguistic and cultural repertoires (Baker & Huttner, 2017; Fang & Liu, 2020).

The literature suggests that contextualised pedagogic initiatives are needed to embed new practices (Fang & Liu, 2020; Galante, 2020), such as translanguaging. These practices could include explicitly incorporating the strategies that multilingual students already use for studying, such as encouraging the use of dual language notebooks (Preece, 2022); designing classroom activities that require the use of different languages (Álvarez & Pérez-Cavana, 2015) and encouraging the use of other languages in PhD research (Arafat & Woodin, 2022).

Faculty need help to fully understand the potential of these new practices (Archila & de Mejía, 2017; Gyogi, 2022; Odeniyi & Lazar, 2020). Odeniyi (2022) makes numerous recommendations for how both staff and institutions can embed multilingual practices as a way of promoting social justice. The Toolkit we devised also aims to support staff in understanding the benefits of multilingualism for learning, and suggests approaches and strategies for doing so which academic staff can then apply and adapt to their own contexts.

Findings

Survey findings

About the participants

Responses were collected from 145 students across 22 different programmes (e.g. Healthcare, Business, Law, Education, Science, Computing, Social Science). It included students at various levels of study: foundation (11%), undergraduate at year 1 (72%), year 2 (1%), year 3 (11%), postgraduate (5%).

Forty-three different countries and 75 languages (see Figure 1) were represented in the student body participating in the project. The majority of respondents (70%) reported that they were not born in the UK. We did not collect data as to whether they were therefore classified as home or international students by the university administration since we were simply focusing on students' linguistic repertoires; however, we recognise that this data might be needed in future.

The languages listed in Figure 1 are as described by students themselves, rather than conforming to any prior linguistic categorisation of a named language. We have not attempted to change this as this naming represents the participants' own perception of their linguistic repertoires.

The level of proficiency in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening in different contexts (home, study, work, family, friends, religion … etc.) varied considerably. When asked about their mother or native languages, 30 different languages were listed and 8% of participants mentioned they had multiple native languages.

Languages used in education

The students in the survey were educated internationally. When asked where they received their education, 32 different countries were mentioned for primary education, 29 countries for secondary, and 10 countries for higher education.

Figure 1. Languages declared by participants in the sample.

A variety of languages were used in students' education. For example, when participants were asked what language was used in primary education, 18 different languages were mentioned, 33% of respondents used more than one language, and only 41% used English in their primary education. The survey suggests that there is a small increase in English language use going from primary to secondary, as for 46% secondary school was conducted in English, while 17 other languages were also mentioned and 37% respondents reported using more than one language. With regard to higher education, 6 different languages were mentioned as being used previously in HE with 14% respondents using more than one language.

Languages used in day-to-day exchanges

The survey asked students in what context they used various languages (for talking to friends, family, work, study, religious and entertainment purposes … etc.). Overall, 75 languages were mentioned among the 145 respondents.

The figures in Table 1 therefore indicate that with family there is extensive use of multiple languages, while work and study seems to be mostly, though not exclusively, concentrated around English. Friends and entertainment sit somewhere between these two, leaning towards an English base but also remaining multilingual to a lesser extent.

Students' perception of multilingualism

The survey included some open questions relating to students' own perception of their multilingualism and their use of other languages for studying.

Students' perception of their multilingualism was overall very positive and comments included describing it as privilege which gave them 'a wider opportunity to communicate with other people' (S5) and which provided 'a different perception of the world and understanding cultural differences' (S6). The link to identity and heritage was also emphasised with S1 asserting that 'It means being part of my culture, connection to family and friends and a shared experience'.

In response to the question 'How do you use other languages (not English) to help you with your studies?' some respondents pointed to the benefits of their knowledge of another language in supporting their studies. This related particularly to understanding words or terminology. For example, S2 stated that 'The Greek language involves medical terms which I use to help me in my adult nursing studies'. Other respondents described communicating with others in other languages in order to make more sense of their

Table 1. Languages used in day-to-day exchanges.

	English	Other Language(s)	No Response
Work	120 (83%)	2 (1%)	2 (1%)
Study	121 (83%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Family	23 (16%)	71 (49%)	1 (1%)
Friends	44 ((30%)	15 (10%)	2 (1%)
Entertainment	64 (44%)	10 (7%)	6 (4%)
Religious practices	34 (23%)	47 (32%)	19 (13%)

studies: 'I can speak to other students in that language to help me' (S3). Finally, comments were made on the usefulness of other languages in work placements, for example, S4 stated 'in terms of practice placement, it helped me build a therapeutic relationship with one of my patients'.

Workshop findings

On the whole, the staff were not particularly surprised by the result of the survey as they were generally aware of the wide variety of languages spoken by the students. However, in both workshops, participants mentioned that the terms bilingual or multilingual 'actually encompasses a really wide-ranging group of people' (P1) with a great diversity of backgrounds and is not confined simply to what the institution would classify as international students. This confirms the overall finding that different languages are used in different domains for different purposes, but that knowledge of these languages and skill in deploying them may be uneven. There was some debate about what constitutes a 'mother tongue' (is it what an immigrant child speaks at home, or the language they learn at school and ultimately work in?) and what proficiency in a language might mean (is it always formal reading and writing, or the ability to communicate effectively in specific contexts?).

In light of the concept of translanguaging as suggested in the literature (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017), there was discussion as to what extent and in what ways other languages and translation should be used formally or informally in a British university classroom. For instance, one lecturer (P3) explained how he had encouraged students from the same country to use their mother tongue to translate key terminology from English. However, another participant (P4) argued that international students in particular come to the UK precisely because they wish to learn about British culture and to improve their English, so such strategies are counter-productive. A few participants raised the objection that much can get lost in translation, and that if translation is widely used, then lecturers who do not speak that particular language have 'no way of verifying if they are relaying the message you want them to relay' (P1).

When questioned about whether students should be encouraged to use sources in their own languages and/or use Google Translate or other AI tools, there was concern about whether or not lecturers could adequately gatekeep so as to avoid plagiarism. Participants generally took the view that machine tools for translation were here to stay, and cited practices they have recently encountered, including students writing essays in their own languages and then using software to produce an English version, as well as students using software to translate the interface of the university virtual learning environment into their own language in order to improve navigation. P2 expressed concern that using Google Translate 'encourages a mechanistic view of language that somehow language is just a question of transmission … a vehicle into which you put meaning and then you send it down the tube and it comes out the other side. It's not. I would suggest that thats actually contrary to developing intellectual skills'.

Another theme emerging from the discussions pointed to the link between language use and personal identity, with discussions on whether students should be actively encouraged to make their multilingual repertoires more visible. It was acknowledged that for some students using a particular language might involve painful memories (e.g.

when language use is enforced for political reasons). Other students might prefer to keep particular languages for personal use with family and friends, so they are not co-opted for more official purposes. Participants agreed that students should be given choices as to whether to engage with their multilingual resources at university or not.

One suggestion which was received positively was that students should be encouraged to use other languages in research and to complete part of some formal assessment. One participant (P6) gave the example of a Turkish student who was encouraged to use Turkish when interviewing parents at a school in Türkiye, even though her final project was written in English. Another example (P7) was that of a Film Studies student whose short documentary was made in Romanian, although all the supporting documentation for this coursework was in English.

There were varying responses in both workshops to the idea that encouraging multilingual practices could enable students to work even more effectively on placements or in their professions. A midwifery lecturer, for example, committed to developing students' communication skills in hospitals, was of the view that it would be 'really interesting to capitalise on all the languages we've got and use them to teach communication and explain communication differences' (P8). There was some debate, however, as to whether using another language in a professional setting was potentially undermining of social cohesion by giving some groups preferential treatment (e.g. a nursing student speaking to patients in their own language). On the other hand, two examples were mentioned where students were able to draw on their multilingual repertoires to perform more successfully on placements – the first was Teaching Assistants who drew on their own multilingualism to work effectively with multilingual pupils in a primary school, and the second was law students working as interpreters in a legal aid clinic.

Discussion of findings

The results of the survey provided specific data, previously unavailable, to show that students at our university call on a wide variety of linguistic repertoires both for general life activities and for informal learning. This is in accord with perspectives on multilingualism (e.g. Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert et al., 2005; Preece, 2011) claiming that many students actively draw on multi-lingual repertoires (Odeniyi & Lazar, 2020). As a result, the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers sometimes becomes difficult to sustain as students may speak a range of languages even though their command of these may be incomplete or uneven (Blommaert, 2010; Piccardo, 2013).

In addition, the findings from the workshops pointed the way to more controversial areas for academic staff, especially with regard to how multilingualism can be regarded as an asset rather than a deficit. Therefore, we suggest that the issue is conceptualised as a complex or 'wicked problem', i.e. 'a complex issue that defies complete definition, for which there can be no final solution' (Brown et al., 2010, p. 2). Wicked problems are socially complex and have multiple causes and interpretations, and often evade clear definition. Our survey and the study profiles collected demonstrate that multilingualism has multiple causes and is socially complex in encompassing a wide range of speakers, as well as social and linguistic practices.

Furthermore, wicked problems resist a simple solution and rarely sit within one person or organisation, and thus their resolution necessarily involves changes in personal and

societal behaviour and a shift in mindset. The workshops with staff demonstrate divergences of opinion and different attitudes towards multilingualism, which require a shift in mindset. Therefore, *The Inclusive Multilingualism Toolkit for Educators* we designed was developed by embracing this spirit of complexity. It is not a 'one size fit all' guide and instead encourages debate and the meaningful adoption of appropriate strategies.

The Toolkit

The Inclusive Multilingualism Toolkit for Educators (available online at https://doi.org/10.60528/1x1297) describes our research project, explaining how we drew on the findings from the literature review, student surveys and staff workshops in devising the Toolkit.

The Toolkit provides a brief definition of multilingualism, and makes the vital point, arising from the student survey, that multilingual students are not a homogenous group. To illustrate this point clearly, three different student profiles from our study are presented, demonstrating the complex and varied range of linguistic resources that multilingual students often draw on. A major part of the Toolkit makes the case for why multilingualism should be promoted at university, and suggests five main areas in which academic staff can capitalise on the linguistic repertoires of their students. Underlying principles and practical strategies, supported by sources from our literature review, are suggested for the following:

(1) Fostering a translingual mindset
(2) Encouraging crosslinguistic comparison as a pedagogic strategy
(3) Capitalising on the informal use of languages for students
(4) Incorporating multilingual awareness into the curriculum and assessment design
(5) Encouraging community engagement and employability

Although a wide range of practical strategies are suggested, staff are encouraged to engage with them in a critical and self-reflective manner, as our purpose in devising the Toolkit is to go beyond the potentially instrumentalist approach of a best practice guide. We aimed for it to be informed by empirical research and to open up a space for ongoing conversations that explore the complexity of multilingual ways of being in a constantly changing and relational world. The Toolkit aims to raise more informed awareness so that educators, educational managers and others supporting students can find appropriate and innovative ways to enable their students' multilingualism to become an even greater asset in their studies.

Conclusion

Our research project aimed to investigate multilingualism at our university in an attempt to develop a Toolkit for staff which was based on empirical evidence and was also informed by a literature review. Producing a staff Toolkit is one way of extending the reach of academic development work across a university, whether this focuses on embedding academic skills (Thomas et al., 2022) or improving student attainment (University of Derby, 2021). As mentioned earlier in the article, our university (and the sector in general) does not collect data about students'

multilingualism which means that it remains a hidden aspect of diversity and therefore its value as an asset remains limited. The student survey we devised enabled us to gather data regarding the nature and extent of multilingualism among students at our university, data which had not previously been available. Our workshops enabled us to begin to explore the complexities of multilingualism and its implications for learning and teaching through the perspectives of university staff.

Our Toolkit has now been disseminated through the staff intranet and at conferences both within our university and externally, as well as to academics on the Post-graduate Certificate in Higher Education. However, further research needs to be done into how academics might be applying it in a variety of contexts. This could take the form of case studies of the lived experience of academics in implementing some of the principles and strategies from the Toolkit on particular courses and the impact that these have on students' learning.

An additional line of enquiry would involve collecting qualitative data from a larger cohort of academics in order to identify what strategies and approaches they may have implemented, the barriers encountered and the impact of these on student learning.

As practitioners, we engaged with the research for our project with the practical aim of creating a Toolkit, which we hope will *enable*, rather than simply *allow* or *encourage* (Smith et al., 2017), the use of different languages for knowledge construction in our setting and thus challenge the deficit view of multilingualism in HE. To build on this, we would advocate that this hidden aspect of diversity becomes an established part of the general EDI discourse in HE and that further research is done to identify how such hidden repertoires can meaningfully contribute to learning and teaching in higher education. Research could also focus on what impact a Toolkit might have in informing and developing the pedagogic practices of academic staff.

Note

1. The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society, along 9 protected characteristics (age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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