

Bilingual Education for Whom? Systemic Asymmetries and Plurilingual Potentials in Poland

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Abstract

This article critically examines current models of bilingual education in Poland, exploring whom they serve and how policy design structures access to such provision. Drawing on empirical research conducted for a recent national report, including systematic analysis of education law, core curricula and examination regulations, the study scrutinizes the present configuration of bilingual education. The article conceptualizes bilingual education as an umbrella category encompassing foreign language bilingual tracks, minority and regional language programmes, Sign Language based Deaf education, and support schemes for learners with migration and refugee backgrounds, situating these within international debates on bilingual education. Two research questions guide the analysis: (1) How do current policy and regulatory frameworks define, classify and organize these models of bilingual education? (2) Who benefits from sustained bilingual learning opportunities, and where do tensions arise between the goal of "bilingual education for all learners" and practices of access, selection, tracking and high stakes assessment? The findings reveal that bilingual education in Poland operates through several parallel legal regimes grounded in distinct logics of excellence, heritage protection and remediation. These regimes function without an overarching legal definition of bilingual education, a cross cutting category of bilingual learner or clearly articulated curricular aims for bilingual competence. While foreign language bilingual tracks are the most codified and resource rich, they remain highly selective. In contrast, minority language, signed language and

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migrant oriented forms of bilingual or plurilingual education are more fragmented, locally contingent and weakly integrated into assessment frameworks. The article argues that this fragmented design produces a stratified bilingual landscape and proposes principles for a more equitable, plurilingually oriented policy that integrates existing multilingual resources and repositions bilingualism as an integral element of learners' educational biographies.

Keywords

bilingual education, systemic asymmetries, educational policy, plurilingual potentials

Introduction

Bilingual education has increasingly been framed as both a vehicle for social equity and a potential source of new stratifications, as prestige forms of CLIL and immersion coexist with residual provision for minoritized and migrant learners (García, 2009; Hornberger & Link, 2012). International debates contrast selective, highstatus bilingual tracks with more inclusive plurilingual approaches that recognize learners' full linguistic repertoires and draw on translanguaging and pluriliteracies as core pedagogical resources (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015; García & Wei, 2014; Meyer et al., 2015). Within this literature, questions of who gains access to bilingual programmes, which languages are legitimized, and how assessment regimes shape classroom practice remain central (de Mejía, 2006; Heller, 2011; Baker & Wright, 2021).

Poland offers a particularly instructive context for these debates, marked by a decade of intense legal and curricular reforms, the expansion of bilingual and CLIL type provision, and rapidly diversifying student populations (Muszyńska, in press). Between 2014 and 2024, reforms to the structure of schooling, successive revisions of language education curricula, and shifting external examination requirements reconfigured pathways for learning and certifying additional languages (Minister Edukacji Narodowej, 2012, 2017, 2024). A national report prepared for the Polish Centre for Education Development provides a comprehensive empirical account of these developments (Muszyńska, in press). It deliberately encompasses the full kaleidoscope of language in education pathways in Poland, modern foreign languages, national, ethnic and regional minority languages, Polish as a second language and Polish Sign Language, because only such a broad lens reveals how legal, examination and textbook decisions shape the everyday experiences of all learners and teachers, rather than selected groups. Taking this full picture into account exposes

not only the diversity of practices but also the inequalities affecting both majority students and those belonging to linguistic, cultural or sensory minorities, and shows how a focus on isolated fragments of the system reinforces a monolingual vision of schooling that renders invisible those whose language, social status or sensory profile do not fit the “default” majority learner model.

Building on this dataset, the present article critically examines current Polish models of bilingual education, investigating for whom they provide bilingual learning opportunities and how their policy design and implementation organize access to such provision. “Bilingual education for all learners” is understood here to include majority, minority, migrant, and Deaf or hard of hearing students, whose linguistic repertoires are differently positioned and valued in schools (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Muszyńska, in press). The article’s contribution is twofold: it connects system-level policy analysis with the design principles for a more inclusive, plurilingually oriented bilingual education (García & Lin, 2016). Guided by this aim, the article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do current policy and regulatory frameworks in Poland define, categorize and organize models of bilingual education, including foreign-language bilingual tracks, minority and regional language provision, Sign Language-based Deaf education, and support arrangements for learners with migration experience?
2. For whom do these models effectively provide sustained bilingual learning opportunities, and where do tensions emerge between the goal of “bilingual education for all learners” and existing practices of access, selection, tracking and highstakes assessment?

The next section outlines the conceptual and international background that frames this analysis.

Conceptual and international background

Bilingual education is conventionally defined as the structured use of two or more languages for instructional purposes, aiming to develop communicative and academic competence in each language rather than employing one merely as an auxiliary to the other (Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009). This expansive field encompasses diverse models, including immersion (full or partial instruction through a second/foreign language) (Romanowski, 2022); one-way and two-way dual language programmes fostering balanced bilingualism and biliteracy (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Muszyńska

& Stewart, 2025); Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English Medium Instruction (EMI) where curricular subjects are taught through an additional language (Coyle, et al, 2010; Macaro, 2018); heritage and minority language schooling dedicated to maintaining and developing minoritised languages as media of instruction (Fishman, 1991; Valdes, 2005); and bilingual Deaf education utilizing a signed language such as PJM (Polish Sign Language) as a primary instructional language alongside the spoken/written majority language (Marschark, et al., 2014). While these models vary in their target populations, linguistic objectives (additive versus transitional), and curricular integration of languages, they share a foundational principle of systematic content delivery through more than one linguistic medium (Baker & Wright, 2021). Building on this broad field, García has argued for a reconceptualisation of bilingual education as “bilingual education for all learners,” a universal, heteroglossic project rather than a targeted intervention for specific groups (García, 2009).

Recent scholarship has advanced plurilingualism and translanguaging as alternative paradigms that transcend rigid “two language” frameworks by acknowledging learners’ holistic linguistic repertoires and dynamic language practices (García & Wei, 2014; Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). Plurilingual approaches underscore the integrated development of multiple languages and literacies, whereas translanguaging highlights the flexible mobilization of all semiotic resources in meaning making, challenging the notion of discrete linguistic codes (García, 2009; Canagarajah, 2013). Empirical research on CLIL and bilingual tracks consistently demonstrates benefits in additional language proficiency, metalinguistic awareness and academic success, while, complementary studies show strong home-language proficiency similarly supports cognitive development, literacy transfer, and school success, especially for minorised and migrant students (Cenoz, et al, 2014; Cummins, 2000). These strands of research also reveal significant risks of elitism where such programmes are selective, concentrated in highstatus institutions, or restricted to prestigious languages and privileged student demographics (Bruton, 2011; Mahboob, 2018). These tensions become particularly acute when bilingual or CLIL strands operate as de facto honours tracks, relegating minoritised, migrant or Deaf learners to resourced or remedial educational settings (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Cummins, 2000).

Situated within international debates, this article employs the Polish context as a case study to analyze systemic policy and practice. Drawing on a secondary analysis of national policy documents, the article investigates the *current architecture*

of bilingual education in Poland. The analysis traces how different systemic strands conceptualize “bilingual education”, identifies the learners are positioned as its primary beneficiaries, and examines the intersection of exam-driven accountability with practices of admission, grouping and tracking. By juxtaposing with international research on immersion, dual language, plurilingual and translanguaging models, this study illuminates both convergences with global trends of stratified bilingualism and the emergence of context specific opportunities for more inclusive, plurilingual approaches.

The Polish policy and system context

The Polish framework for bilingual education was substantially reshaped by the 2017 restructuring of the school system, when statutory provisions and a new core curriculum enabled the establishment of bilingual classes from grade seven of primary school and ensured the formal continuity of the selected foreign language across all educational stages. Under Polish law, the possibility of creating bilingual schools and classes extends not only to modern foreign languages but also to national and ethnic minority languages and the regional language, with regulations permitting instruction in both Polish and the minority language or, where justified and desired by the community, exclusively in the minority language at all levels of education, including upper secondary.

A pivotal development was the adoption of the Education Law Act of 14 December 2016, in force from 2017, which for the first time introduced clear legal definitions of a “bilingual class” and a “bilingual school”. A bilingual class is defined as one in which at least two subjects are taught in two languages, Polish and a selected modern foreign language, with at least one of these subjects drawn from the group comprising biology, chemistry, physics, general geography, world history or mathematics, while other subjects may also be taught bilingually at the school’s discretion, subject to the statutory restrictions on Polish language and on selected content of Polish history and geography. Bilingual classes may be established in both public and non public primary schools (from grade seven) and a bilingual school is an upper-secondary institution in which all classes have bilingual status (general secondary schools and technical schools from grade one) with the option for an upper secondary school either to operate entirely as a bilingual school or to offer only selected bilingual classes, including sports profile classes. The same legislation provides for the creation of preparatory (introductory) classes in which students

receive intensive instruction in the chosen foreign language before beginning bilingual subject learning. The framework allocates an extended number of hours to the foreign language (18 per week), complemented by Polish, mathematics, physical education and tutoring time, and exempts learners from standard regulations on assessment, classification and promotion.

Parallel to mainstream foreign language instruction, other strands of the system are governed by distinct legal instruments that regulate language in education provision for specific groups. The Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language¹, together with implementing regulations, organizes schooling for minority and regional language communities by defining modes of provision (such as separate classes or schools and supplementary lessons), target populations and enrolment thresholds. Separate legal provisions recognize Polish Sign Language (PJM) as a language of instruction in Deaf education² and specify its organizational frameworks, while further regulations, including emergency legislation adopted in response to the influx of Ukrainian learners³, establish support mechanisms such as preparatory classes, additional instruction of Polish as a second language, and the deployment of intercultural assistants for students with migration backgrounds.

For the analytical purposes of this study, “bilingual education” is therefore conceptualized as an umbrella category that integrates these formally distinct strands of the Polish education system. This category encompasses: (a) foreign language bilingual and CLIL type tracks, where selected subjects are taught through a foreign language and which culminate in the bilingual *matura*; (b) minority and regional language education, where a minoritized language serves as a medium of instruction and/or a subject with its own curriculum and, in some cases, a dedicated school leaving examination; (c) bilingual Deaf education employing PJM alongside spoken and written Polish; and (d) support models for migrant learners, notably preparatory classes and intensive Polish as a second language instruction. Together, these strands enable a systemic analysis of how policies, curricula, and examinations

1 Ustawa z dnia 6 stycznia 2005 r. o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym. Dz.U. 2005 nr 17 poz. 141, art. 19 ust. 2.

2 Ustawa z dnia 19 sierpnia 2011 r. o języku migowym i innych środkach komunikowania się. Dz.U. 2011 nr 209 poz. 1243.

3 Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 21 marca 2022 r. w sprawie organizacji kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dzieci i młodzieży będących obywatelami Ukrainy. Dz.U. 2022 poz. 645.

collectively structure opportunities for diverse learner populations to engage in bilingual education.

Data and methods

This study is a secondary analysis and does not report new empirical data collection. Instead, it draws on the findings and documentary analysis presented in a comprehensive national report on language and bilingual education in Poland (Muszyńska, *in press*), which systematically documents policy and practice from 2014 to 2024. The empirical foundation of this report is a largescale, mixed-methods design combining a teacher survey with a documentary analysis of education law, curricula and policy. The survey integrated quantitative descriptive statistics with qualitative thematic analysis of responses from 5,024 educators across diverse educational settings. These included mainstream foreignlanguage instruction, foreign-language bilingual classes, minority and regional language programmes, PJMbased Deaf education, and programmes for learners with migration backgrounds. The original analysis identified key cross-cutting themes, including access, selection, tracking, resource allocation, assessment, and perceived equity. The present article re-examines these publicly available data through García's (2009) heteroglossic translanguaging-based conception of "bilingual education for all learners" rather than a compensatory intervention for specific groups, in order to address the two central research questions: first, how policy frameworks define and structure different models of bilingual provision, and second, for whom these models create sustainable opportunities for bilingual development.

Findings: Current models of bilingual education in policy

For analytical purposes, the landscape of bilingual and plurilingual provision in Poland can be classified into four policy defined categories: **foreignl anguage bilingual education**, **minority language bilingual education**, **signed language and other non Polish L1 constellations**, and **bilingual education for migrant refugee learners**. This typology, derived from existing legal and curricular distinctions foregrounds the distinct positioning of each learner group within the educational system.

(1) Foreign language bilingual education (code: FLBE)

Following the 2016 Education Law, bilingual classes and schools are legally defined as settings in which at least two subjects are taught in both Polish and a selected modern foreign language, with at least one subject drawn from biology, chemistry,

physics, general geography, world history, or mathematics. There are no officially approved national teaching materials or coursebooks specifically designed for bilingual education in Poland, leaving schools and teachers to adapt or assemble resources on their own.

In the case of students enrolled in bilingual classes in grades 7–8 of primary school, education regulations do not introduce a separate foreign language examination or a distinct proficiency threshold. These learners are subject to the same curriculum requirements and the same grade 8 examination in the modern foreign language, which presuppose attainment of approximately A2/A2+ level according to the CEFR. The increased number of hours and the use of the foreign language as a medium of instruction for selected subject content in bilingual classes function as an intensification measure that typically supports higher language attainment, but this is not accompanied by any formal certification of a higher proficiency level before the end of primary school.

In bilingual upper secondary schools and technical schools, preparatory “wstępne” classes may be established to provide intensive foreign language instruction prior to dual language subject teaching. This one-year programme functions as a ‘zero year’ that prepares students for subsequent bilingual education. Access to these tracks, however, is tightly regulated. The elite character of bilingual streams is reinforced by language aptitude tests used as a precondition for admission to such classes and schools. These tests typically assess reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and general predispositions for learning in a foreign language, closely resembling standard school or examination tests and serving to select candidates with the highest levels of language proficiency. In practice, schools employ diverse test formats: some use a specific foreign language (often English) as the instrument of selection, while others use tasks in a socalled “invented language” designed to tap general language aptitude, logical reasoning and learning potential rather than proficiency in a particular modern language. Both approaches tend to advantage students with high cultural capital.

Within this framework, teachers of the foreign language must hold subject specific qualifications, while content teachers in bilingual streams are required to demonstrate minimum B2 proficiency in the medium language⁴. Students in bilingual

⁴ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 14 września 2023 r. w sprawie szczegółowych kwalifikacji wymaganych od nauczycieli. Dz.U. 2023 poz. 2102.

streams in upper-secondary schools are expected to achieve proficiency approaching B2+ with elements of C1, as reflected in the mandatory bilingual version of the foreign language *matura*, which prioritizes advanced academic language use over subject knowledge and differs substantially from standard and extended *matura* papers in its use of specialized, often disciplinary texts. From the perspective of learner decision making, the perceived value of this examination is closely tied to university admission criteria, the bilingual foreign language *matura* typically enhances applicants' standing for programmes where foreign language results are weighted comparably to the extended level *matura* in a foreign language (such as philology, applied linguistics, international relations or selected economics degrees), yet in many STEM and technical fields admission hinges primarily on results in mathematics, physics, chemistry or biology (all taken in Polish), so that even a high bilingual *matura* score often remains secondary, which in turn weakens students' motivation to choose bilingual tracks. In selected subjects taught bilingually (e.g. mathematics, biology, chemistry) in upper-secondary school, students may opt for a bilingual *matura* paper in a content subject. However, this option is tied to the extended level content subject exam taken in Polish, effectively excluding students following only the basic level content subject curriculum from certifying subject knowledge through the foreign language, with the partial exception of mathematics.

It is important to note that there are no nationwide, officially mandated guidelines on how results from subject examinations taken in a foreign language should be weighted in university admissions. Decisions in this area are left to individual higher education institutions. Moreover, publicly available examination statistics do not disaggregate outcomes for these bilingual subject exams, limiting transparency regarding participation and success rates in this strand of bilingual education. In line with the 2023 OECD report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023), this lack of transparency must be understood against a broader backdrop in which the system provides relatively strong foundations for foreign language learning, yet economic inequalities and uneven access to advanced pathways, including bilingual programmes, continue to pose significant challenges.

(2) Minority language bilingual education (code: MLBE)

Organised under the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language, this model provides for schooling in languages of nine recognized national minorities in Poland: Belarusian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Armenian,

Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Jewish (Yiddish/Hebrew). It also covers the languages of four recognized ethnic minorities: Karaim, Lemko, Romani and Tatar, as well as the single officially recognized regional language, Kashubian. In recent years, initiatives have sought to grant Silesian the status of a regional language, but these efforts have not yet resulted in legislative change, as the act adopted by parliament has not been signed by President Andrzej Duda.

The provisions specify various forms of instruction (for example, separate classes, additional lessons) and enable teaching both of and through the minority or regional language, including, where locally desired, education conducted exclusively in the minority language at all stages up to and including upper secondary schooling. Under Polish law, the possibility of establishing bilingual schools and classes thus applies not only to modern foreign languages but also to national and ethnic minority languages and the regional language. Empirical data indicate that this strand is highly differentiated in scale and geography: Kashubian functions as a regional language with substantial, systemwide educational reach, German has sizeable but regionally concentrated enrolments, Lithuanian and Belarusian support smaller yet coherent pathways, while many other minority and ethnic languages operate in niche, community based settings with small and locally contingent cohorts. Weekly allocations for language and for the teaching of “own” history and culture create conditions for longterm competence development and cultural maintenance, yet, unlike in the case of foreign-language bilingual tracks, the current examination model does not provide a bilingual *matura* pathway in minority languages, either for content subjects in minority languages, producing a clear misalignment between the legally sanctioned possibilities for bilingual minority language education and the available certification routes.

The *matura* examination in a national, ethnic or regional minority language may be taken by students who have studied that language at upper secondary level, either as a compulsory subject or as an elective, as confirmed by the school in the examination documentation. Despite the relatively small numbers involved, these examinations are strategically important for safeguarding linguistic and cultural diversity and for supporting minority communities in Poland. In practice, choosing a minority language as a *matura* subject is largely driven by identity related rather than pragmatic considerations, as the exam serves primarily as a symbolic declaration of belonging and as the culmination of schooling in the language and traditions of a given community, while most higher education institutions do not treat it as a key criterion in admissions.

(3) Signed language and other non Polish L1 constellations (code: SLPLUR)

This strand groups learners who are Polish citizens but whose primary language of everyday communication is not Polish, and whose L1s are only partially or not at all recognized as languages of schooling. It includes, in particular, Deaf learners using Polish Sign Language (PJM) and Roma learners whose home language is Romani, who receive compensatory or auxiliary support rather than a formally organized bilingual track, yet whose trajectories are fundamentally bilingual and bicultural.

Deaf education involving Polish Sign Language (PJM) is governed by distinct legal acts that recognize PJM as a language of instruction for Deaf and hard of hearing learners and provide for the parallel development of PJM and Polish. However, the framework does not explicitly position Deaf learners as “bilingual” in the same way as their peers in foreign language or minority language programmes. Recent position statements by Deaf rights organisations and expert bodies call for granting PJM the status of a minority language and recognising Deaf people as a linguistic cultural minority, noting that current approaches primarily construct them as persons with disabilities and sideline their culturallinguistic distinctiveness (Polski Związek Głuchych, n.d.). These documents argue for the explicit introduction of “bilingual education with a sign language,” the development of PJM and Polish as a second language for Deaf learners, and state certification of PJM proficiency, with dedicated teaching materials and teacher training.

A similar pattern of insufficient linguistic recognition emerges for Roma students. Their educational needs are addressed primarily through support measures, such as Roma education assistants, rather than through formal acknowledgement of Romani as a language of schooling. At present, however, the number of Roma education assistants is markedly insufficient, and Romani is not envisaged as a language of schooling, in line with the current preferences of Roma communities. Roma cultural assistants should nevertheless be able to use Romani with children during lessons, yet, as the national report findings indicate, such use is mostly restricted to instances where behavioural issues arise or where pupils fail to understand instructions in Polish. The Romani language remains largely invisible in curricular and assessment frameworks.

Critically, the legal framework fails to articulate the possibility that a Polish citizen’s first language could be other than Polish. This omission restricts policy recognition for non Polish L1s, including signed languages such as PJM and

Romani, and hinders the development of a coherent support system for these “bilingual learners”. As a result, learners who are Polish, but whose first language is not Polish fall outside the targeted support architectures available to other groups, such as refugees or returning Polish citizens, and are typically not eligible for additional hours of Polish as a second language or for a transitional year in preparatory classes that could scaffold their bilingual development on comparable terms (Caban, 2023). Consequently, Roma learners in particular are at heightened risk of falling behind and disengaging from schooling, with early difficulties often translating into later dropout. The available data indicate an urgent need for the systematic deployment of cultural and educational assistants⁵ working with Roma children already at the kindergarten level, as many families remain wary of early institutional enrolment and children frequently enter primary school with substantial adaptation and language gaps that the current system is ill equipped to address.

The lack of appropriate linguistic and pedagogical support has very concrete consequences: completion rates at upper secondary level remain markedly low for Deaf and Romani learners, signaling a systemic failure to sustain their educational trajectories beyond compulsory schooling, including, paradoxically, into roles such as cultural Roma assistants for which completion of upper secondary education is a formal prerequisite.

(4) Bilingual education for migrant refugee learners (code: MRBE)

For learners with migration and refugee backgrounds, bilingual support is framed by regulations on educating non Polish citizens, recently supplemented by special legislation for Ukrainian learners⁶. These instruments establish preparatory classes, provide additional hours of Polish as a second language, and fund intercultural assistants with the primary goal of facilitating a swift transition into mainstream Polish medium classes. Examination data show that students with migration experience from Ukraine, who most often sit adapted test papers, obtain markedly

⁵ Fundacja na rzecz Różnorodności Społecznej. (n.d). *Koalicja na rzecz wzmacniania roli asystentek i asystentów międzykulturowych w systemie edukacji w Polsce* [Project description, Coalition for strengthening the role of intercultural assistants in the Polish education system]. Retrieved December 14, 2025, from <https://frs.org.pl/projekty/koalicja-wzmacnianie-roli-asystentek-i-asystentow-miedzykulturowych-w-systemie-edukacji-w-polsce/>

⁶ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 21 marca 2022 r. w sprawie organizacji kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dzieci i młodzieży będących obywatelami Ukrainy. Dz.U. 2022 poz. 645.

lower results than the general student population. In combination with reduced requirements and exemptions from parts of the exams, this creates a serious risk of lasting gaps in preparation for subsequent stages of education. These learners have experienced a “double hit” to their educational trajectories: first through prolonged COVID19 disruptions in the Ukrainian system, and then through war, forced migration and adaptation to a new school system. Their current difficulties stem not only from limited proficiency in Polish but from accumulated interruptions, shifting curricula, functioning across dual systems and frequent relocations, so they cannot be treated as “typical” foreign students but as learners with cumulative educational loss who need longer, more stable and better coordinated support pathways. Without such provision, the risk of permanent dropout from upper secondary education, *matura* and higher education remains very high.

Consequently, the measures introduced for migrant refugee learners tend to create *de facto* bilingual learning environments in which students’ home languages continue to shape their learning trajectories and classroom participation, even though these languages are not used as media of instruction and have no formal status in teaching or assessment. At the same time, the crisis driven nature and narrow targeting of these measures, combined with the cumulative educational disruption many refugee learners have experienced, point to the need for more sustained, systemwide support trajectories for multilingual students, rather than short term arrangements tied to a single nationality or episode of forced migration.

Across these four models, a clear hierarchy is evident. English and other high-status languages dominate the formally recognized FLBE tracks while minority and regional languages, alongside PJM, occupy more specialized and numerically smaller segments. The languages of migrant and refugee learners, including Ukrainian, function primarily as a background justifying intensified Polish as L2 instruction, rather than as assets with an explicit instructional role.

As the national study reveals, patterns of access, selection and geographical distribution indicate that these models serve learners inequitably. FLBE tracks are concentrated in major cities and academically selective schools, often employing entrance exams that restrict access to high achieving students. MLBE strands are contingent on the settlement patterns of specific communities and require parental and local authority support, rendering them inaccessible for many. For learners in the SLPLUR constellation, access to bilingual education is constrained by a scarcity of specialist provision and the marginalization of their home language. As a result, Polish citizens

whose primary language is not Polish, yet whose trajectories are profoundly bilingual and bicultural, fall largely outside the main architectures of bilingual provision.

Discussion

Read through the lens of the ‘bilingual education for all learners’ framework, the analysis reveals that Poland’s approach to bilingual education is not a unified system but a fragmented policy architecture built on disparate and often conflicting logics. Rather than a coherent construct, the framework consists of parallel regulatory strands, each driven by a distinct rationale: **an excellent oriented** model for foreign-language tracks (FLBE), a **heritage-maintenance** model for minority languages (MLBE), and a **remedial or compensatory** model for signed language and other non Polish L1 constellations (SLPLUR) and **migrant refugee** (MRBE) contexts. As Cazden and Snow (1990) remind us, “bilingual education” is a simple label for a complex phenomenon, and Baker (1993) has shown that it is used at times for the education of students who are already speakers of two languages, and at other times for those who are learning an additional language, whether they are majority language speakers or members of immigrant, Indigenous or other minoritised groups. Against this backdrop, Poland’s regulatory strands illuminate not only different programme types but also competing, and often incompatible, understandings of who bilingual education is for. This foundational fragmentation precludes the emergence of an overarching definition of bilingual education or a cross-cutting legal category of the “bilingual learner.”

This policy architecture directly sustains an implicit hierarchy of languages and learners, addressing the first research question. Foreign-language bilingual tracks (FLBE) are codified as symbols of academic prestige, linked to selective pathways and high-stakes bilingual examinations. In contrast, minority and regional language programmes (MLBE) are framed through the lens of cultural preservation. At the lower end of hierarchy, provisions for Deaf, Roma, and immigrant learners are designed not to foster bilingualism as an educational asset but as transitional or compensatory support aimed at integration into the Polish-monolingual mainstream. Because each strand operates under separate legal and funding mechanisms, the system lacks any incentive to conceptualize “bilingual learners” as a unified group, whose trajectories and rights warrant consistent monitoring. Consequently, bilingualism remains an attribute of specific institutional programs rather than recognized feature of individual learners’ educational biographies.

In response to the second research question, for whom these models provide sustained bilingual opportunities, the evidence points to deeply inequitable outcomes. The FLBE tracks, while the most stable and resource rich, function as elite pathways. Their reliance on entrance exams/tests and proficiency thresholds effectively restricts access to students who already possess significant linguistic and cultural capital. For learners in other strands, opportunities are far more precarious. Access to MLBE is contingent on demographic concentration and local political will, while the educational paths for Deaf and Roma students are constrained by a lack of systemic recognition and resources. Similarly, migrant and refugee learners are placed in *de facto* bilingual environments, yet their home languages are rendered invisible, with policy focused exclusively on assimilation into Polish.

A critical crosscutting finding is the systemic “legal silence” regarding the explicit goals of bilingual education in Poland. While regulations define organizational forms (e.g. bilingual classes, preparatory units), they fail to specify target competence profiles for any category for bilingual learner. Curricula do not articulate distinct bilingual learning outcomes. Instead, such aims are merely referred from general language or content subject syllabi. This void is most glaring in external examination, where different bilingual trajectories are aligned with inconsistent or absent assessment logics. This asymmetry is starkly illustrated in the examination system. For instance, at the end of primary school, minority-language learners (MLBE) can take their mathematics exam in their minority language, yet their peers in foreign-language bilingual education (FLBE) have no equivalent option to be assessed in a content subject through the foreign subject. Paradoxically, this situation reverses at the *matura* exam. Here, FLBE students can take various extended-level content-subject *matura* exams in the foreign language, whereas MLBE students are denied this possibility and can only take their minority language as a standalone language exam, not as a medium for assessing other content subjects. This lack of a coherent vision for what a bilingual competence entails is a root cause of the system’s fragmentation and inequality.

In sum, these patterns confirm that Poland operates a stratified bilingual landscape. A privileged minority benefits from well-resourced, continuous bilingual pathways, while the majority of linguistically diverse learners encounter temporary, transitional, or marginalized forms of plurilingual education. Yet, this stratified reality coexists with significant plurilingual potential. The legal recognition of multiple languages of schooling, existence of PJM based curricula, and the growing

presence of intercultural assistants all represent valuable resources. Harnessing this potential would require a fundamental policy reframing, one that moves beyond fragmented logics to establish bilingualism as a normative and valuable component of all learners' educational trajectories.

The broader national report from which this legal policy analysis is drawn seeks to make visible the richness and complexity of the Polish language education landscape and to inform policymaking across the full kaleidoscope of language in education pathways in Poland. It shows that focusing on only one segment of the system at a time inevitably obscures the structural inequalities faced by students whose linguistic repertoires fall outside the "default" monolingual model. Challenges linked to teaching in bilingual and multilingual classes affect teachers of foreign languages, minority and regional languages, Polish as a second language and Polish Sign Language in equal measure, underscoring the need for horizontal, systemwide solutions rather than siloed, sector specific interventions.

Conclusions and policy implications

This analysis concludes that the primary obstacle to equitable bilingual education in Poland is not a lack of provision but structural shortcomings in policy design. The current landscape is a **fragmented patchwork** governed by conflicting logics of prestige, heritage, and remediation, resulting in a stratified system where access to high quality bilingualism is a privilege, not a right. The absence of an overarching legal definition of bilingual education, coupled with a "legal silence" on clear competence goals, perpetuates these deep-seated inequalities, which are then magnified by a misalignment high-stakes assessment regime.

Moving towards a genuinely equitable model of "bilingual education for all" requires a fundamental policy overhaul. The following three interconnected reform are proposed as essential steps:

- **Systemic coherence:** Introduce a crosscutting legal and policy category of "bilingual learner" to unify standards and entitlements for majority, minority, migrant and Deaf students under a single, coherent framework, and to recognize bilingualism as a core educational identity rather than a label reserved for "foreign" students or prestige programmes.
- **Assessment for equity:** Redesign examination and admission protocols to align with explicitly articulated bilingual goals across educational strands, dismantling the current hierarchy that privileges elite tracks and ensuring

that diverse forms of bilingualism are assessed and rewarded in consistent, transparent ways.

- **Mainstreaming plurilingualism:** Leverage existing plurilingual resources, including minority languages, PJM, and migrant languages, as foundational assets for mainstream pedagogy, rather than relegating them to marginal or compensatory programmes, and invest in teacher development and educational materials that normalize plurilingual practices in everyday classrooms.

Implementing these principles would constitute a critical reframing of bilingualism in Polish education. Such a shift would enable systematic monitoring of equity, provide educators with a clear mandate for inclusive programme design, and ultimately reposition bilingualism from a marker of elite status to a normalized and valued dimension of every student's educational journey. Achieving this, however, requires not only new instruments but also a change in how language and learners are conceptualised: language should be understood as a primary tool for cognition, with learners' first languages functioning as key resources for thinking and understanding across the curriculum. In every classroom, all of students' languages are present and shape learning, whether or not they are explicitly acknowledged in teaching or education materials. Without a systemic shift from a monolingual to a plurilingual paradigm, even the best grassroots practices will remain marginal, and many learners whose home languages are currently invisible in the system will continue to navigate schooling without the comprehensive support that their bilingual and bicultural realities require.

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