

# Sprachgebrauch in zweisprachigen Kitas

## Language use in bilingual kindergartens

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- A couple of years ago I discovered an interesting video blog hosted by a young Irish woman. This Irish woman is married to a German, they live in Germany, and they have one child who they are raising bilingually. The couple have decided to use OPOL with the Irish mother speaking English and the German father speaking German. But now there is a problem – which the English speaking mother addresses in one of the videos. Here is what she says:

“Eine andere Sache ist:  
Es gibt eine Menge  
wirklich schöner Bücher  
hier in den Buchläden  
auf Deutsch. Ich möchte  
wirklich gern meinem  
Sohn vorlesen, aber die  
Bücher sind auf  
Deutsch.  
Die Regel sagt, dass ich  
das nicht darf. Das  
beschäftigt mich schon  
ein wenig. Es ist  
manchmal etwas  
frustrierend.“



- So should the English speaking mother read to her son in German? She would love to do it so much but it goes against OPOL. I will argue later on that she should read to her son in German – and I'm going to explain why I think she should.

# One Parent / Person – One Language (OPOL)

- The principle of *one person / one language* (OPOL) is based on the principle *one parent / one language* which was first introduced by Ronjat's (1913) case study of a child who was being raised bilingual with the mother speaking German and the father speaking French in a French-speaking environment. In that study it was argued that when each parent is assigned one language and there is a clear language separation, sufficient exposure to two languages is assured.

- At this point it is important to state that I am not going to talk about the dimension of language prestige here as it is not relevant for this level of the discussion. My reflections are largely based on linguistic input irrespective of the status of the language. Language prestige is of course a major topic and it obviously plays an important role in a real life society with regard to the language or languages that are promoted in a particular programme. Just witness the most recent claims with respect to Turkish language instruction in primary schools in North-Rhine-Westphalia.

# Implementation of OPOL in bilingual kindergarten programmes

- OPOL has been adopted for various bilingual programmes in immersive creches and kindergartens. In our own research it has always been promoted as the most successful principle in order to ensure that the children receive maximum input in the second language. However, it is associated with a number of problems, in particular in view of recent discussions of multilingualism. In my talk I am going to argue that OPOL strictly speaking adopts a monolingual ideology and is in conflict with more recent ideas of translanguaging and multilingual practices. This dilemma can only be solved if we have a clear understanding of the outcome that we expect a particular programme to yield.



- Theoretically, it is quite simple to implement OPOL in a programme. If it is an English programme in Germany, the native speaker of English speaks English to the children and even responds in English when addressed in German, which is a very common phenomenon. The German team members use German with the children and, preferably, speak English with the native English team members. The idea in this constellation is that the children do not hear the English speaking staff use German as it would encourage the children to use German with the English speakers.

- In a German-English kindergarten in Kiel that started a bilingual programme in the mid 1990s, there were two English speaking kindergarten teachers who initially hardly understood or spoke any German. The situation was perfect because it was natural: These two young people had to interact in English at all times as they were not able to do otherwise even if they had wanted. Obviously, however, these two teachers acquired German over time and even became very proficient German speakers. Still the idea of the programme managers was that they were not supposed to reveal this.

- However, nobody addressed the question of whether the children would find it rather odd that the two teachers had lived in Germany for so long and still didn't understand German. In their pretence of not speaking or understanding German after all those years, the teachers certainly did not represent the ideal role models for bilingual education. Also a significant problem which is not inherent in OPOL but which was a major issue in Kiel was: Some of the German team members felt particularly uneasy about speaking English to the two teachers, which resulted in serious communication issues.

- There are other issues that are perhaps less dramatic but which could add to the uneasiness of the individuals involved. I am quoting a passage from an interview with an English kindergarten teacher in France from a paper by Caporal-Ebersold & Young from 2016.

- “It is almost a game that we play because, for instance, we have a delivery at the door, and then I say, hello, how are you? And then, they’ll say *une livraison* [...] And then, I’ll say thank you, thank you very much. They look at me and sometimes I say, yeah. We are an English-speaking crèche. Most of the people, even the deliverer has a little bit of English. They might find it odd. Otherwise, I go outside of the door. Otherwise, I invite them in the kitchen, and then I shut the door. So this kitchen space, when there are no children in it, is the space where the professional or the team members can speak French.”

- So isn't it strange? People are bilingual or multilingual but they are condemned to conceal it.

- There are certainly advantages to OPOL. One advantage is: when each parent or each person speaks only one language to the child, the exposure to two languages is guaranteed. Some people argue, and the Irish lady mentioned above is one of them, that OPOL helps a child develop both languages independently without much interference from each other, which is supposed to prevent the child from mixing the languages. While the former argument is intuitively valid, the latter is again very odd as code switching is in fact one of the inherent characteristics of bilingualism and multilingualism.

- I would like to propose a weaker version of OPOL that allows for the use of two or more languages. According to this weaker version, in a kindergarten context, teachers should stick to their assigned language when talking to the children. This is important to ensure an L2 input which is both rich in quality and high in quantity for the children. The teachers should be allowed, however, to speak German or any other language to the parents of the children or to other team members if the situation calls for this language shift – even if they can be overheard by the children. I believe that no speaker should hide his or her bilingual or multilingual language proficiencies and pretend to be monolingual.



- I think it's wrong to have secrets in front of the children which are extremely difficult to keep and which easily result in a serious mistrust on the side of the children. We should have clear agreements or rules, however. And everybody has to stick to these rules. In many of the kindergarten programmes that I have visited in the past twenty years, a strict version of OPOL simply did not work, especially in situations in which team members and parents felt awkward about using a language with which they did not feel comfortable.

- There are also critical situations reported on in the case of the bilingual families using OPOL, in particular, if the children have comprehension issues in communication with their parents or if they use the “wrong” language: Ronjat (1913), for example, refused to give the German equivalent of French words, sending Louis off to his mother for help. Saunders (1982) insisted on using German – which was not even his native language – in public even when his children felt uncomfortable, and Taeschner (1983) applied the severe *Wie Bitte?* strategy whenever her two German-Italian daughters spoke Italian and were expected to use German with their mother.

- In the case of the above mentioned Irish mother, my suggestion is: Read to your child in German. You would love to do it, your enthusiasm would be very beneficial to your son – there certainly could not be any harm. Your son knows that you speak German anyway as you speak German with your husband and to other Germans. If you can make sure that the English language input is not seriously affected by that decision, I do not see any problem.

- Your husband could, in turn, choose a particular context or situation, in which he speaks English to his son, the easiest choice would be storytelling whenever it is his turn. If the parents stick to such a schedule, there should not be any problem. Note, however, that I am making a difference here between *one parent – one language* and *one person – one language*. In a bilingual kindergarten context I would not advise English native speakers to do their storytelling in German as that would seriously diminish the input quantity of the second language.

- Are there any alternatives to OPOL? Suzanne Romaine introduced a typology of six different scenarios that are conceivable in bilingual contexts. These scenarios are based on bilingual and multilingual families and are not options for bilingual kindergarten programmes. One of these alternatives is the situation-based approach in which languages are associated with certain situations. Storytelling would be one such situation, meeting friends would be another.

- Imagine a situation in which a bilingual child has friends visiting who do not speak the language that she or he uses with his mother who is also present. The friends would feel excluded and the bilingual child may feel embarrassed.

# Translanguaging

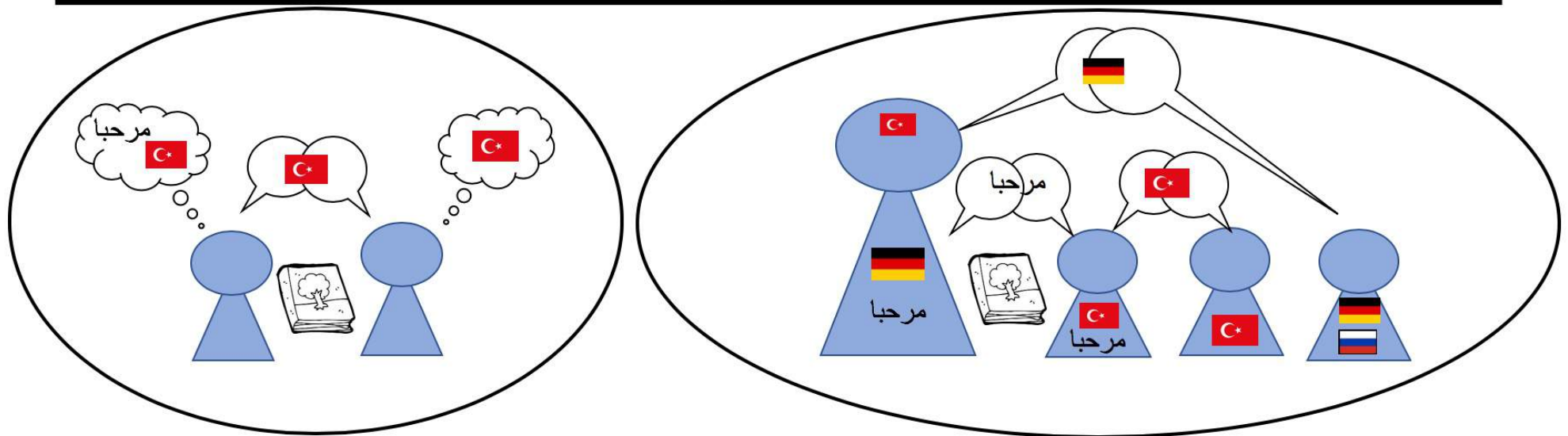
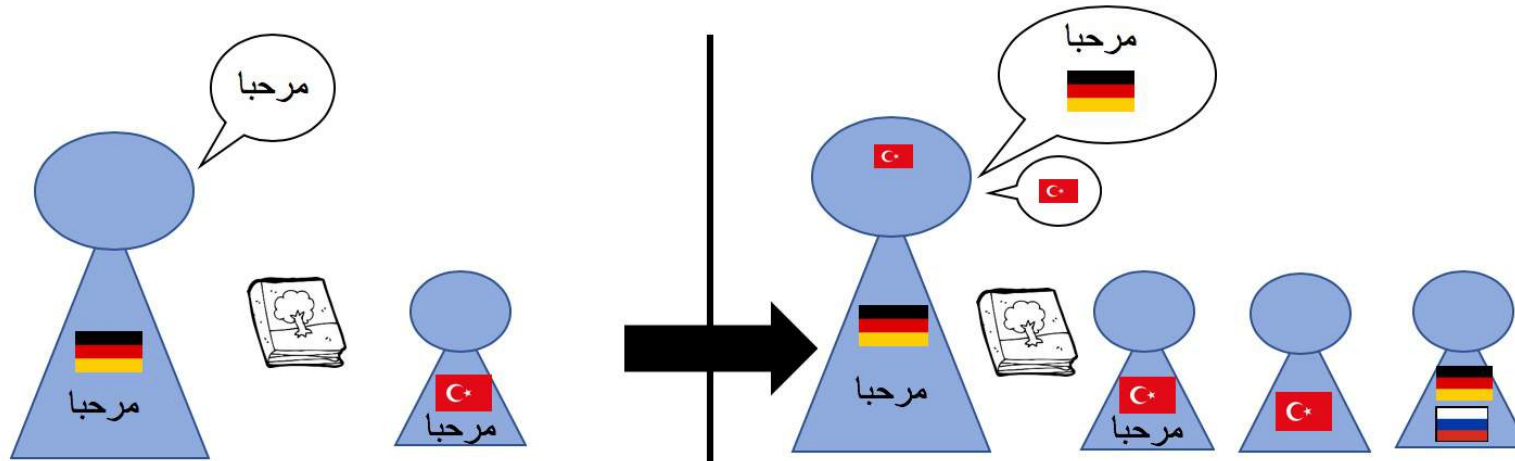
- One more recent alternative is referred to as “Translanguaging”. It is a type of multilingual language practice that understands language use as a “fluid practice” that is used for meaning making and optimizing communication (Garcia 2008). It comprises the complete linguistic repertoire of an individual speaker and encourages the speaker to use different languages to solve a particular task. Translanguaging is based on the idea that it may be helpful for bilingual or multilingual students to use their languages alternately, based on, e.g., the assumption that they may want to read a text in one language but talk about the content in another (cf. Williams 1996).

- In translanguaging the different languages that a multilingual speaker knows are not regarded as clear-cut and self-contained systems. They are part of a continuum of linguistic competence which ignores the borderlines of traditional language boundaries. Today, translanguaging refers to both the language practice of bilinguals or multilinguals and a pedagogical concept that is used in the multilingual classroom or the multilingual kindergarten.



- Recently, a number of bilingual or multilingual kindergarten programmes in Germany have adopted the concept of translanguaging for their projects in order to do justice to the multilingual backgrounds of the children involved (see e.g. Halser & Filiz 2019). This approach fosters more than one language. It also has to be seen as “part of a larger political struggle of linguistic self-determination for language-minoritized populations” (Flores 2014).

- Example: An Arabic-German speaking kindergarten teacher looks at a picture book with an Arabic-Turkish speaking child. The teacher speaks Arabic. A Russian-German and a Turkish child join the two. The teacher now uses Arabic as well as German. She also knows some Turkish vocabulary and makes use of it. Thus at the same time she creates a space in which the Arabic-Turkish and the Turkish child are able to talk about the content of the book. In addition, the Arabic-Turkish child mediates across the Turkish child, the teacher and the Russian-German child.



(Designed by Pia Holtappels and Kerstin Keul)

- At first sight, translanguaging is not compatible with bilingual programmes that promote two languages through OPOL. Both practices have clearly distinctive objectives. In a way, OPOL represents the traditional, monolingual mindset. It reveals an underlying persistent monolingual ideology (quoting Caporal-Ebersold & Young)

- At the same time, however, it is arguably the best principle to ensure a certain linguistic competence which enables children to attend immersion programmes at primary school level. Translanguaging, on the other hand, may be seen as the pathway to a linguistic identity in a modern multilingual environment which enables the individual child to later decide which language he or she would like to learn. From that perspective the two principles could effectively complement each other.

# Conclusion

- What are the aims of the kindergarten programme?
- There is a clash between a “monolingual habitus” in German society and the simultaneous urge to foster multilingualism.
- "I do wonder sometimes if it [OPOL] is the best method. Perhaps being able to switch effectively and know when to use each language in context is really the best tool we can give our children in the long term."

(Barron-Hauwaert 2004)

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