

Turkish alphabetisation for German integration



Contemporary Germany is the 3rd largest immigrant-receiving country internationally. In 2008, 15.6mio inhabitants (19% out of a total of 82.1mio) were post-1950 immigrants or their descendants ([German Bureau of Statistics](#)). With 2.9mio, Turks constitute the largest group of these. Unfortunately, [a study released in 2009](#) indicates that people with a Turkish background are the least integrated immigrant group in Germany. Many of them have low or no educational qualifications, are unemployed, on welfare, etc. In fact, they are often referred to as “Sorgenkind der Nation” (*the nation’s problem child*). The reasons for this dismal state of affairs are complex, of course, with language proficiency (or rather lack thereof) often leading the list of reasons (see also [here](#) and [here](#) for recent discussions on *Language-on-the-Move*)!

When commentators bring up language proficiency, they usually refer to **German** language proficiency, of course. Consequently, German states and schools develop German as a second language courses from early childhood on, mostly throughout the years of primary school.^[1] Additionally a few of them adopt first language promotion. Where such programs are incorporated, they are justified with reference to Cummin’s theory that first language promotion supports second language acquisition. However, the research findings regarding the effects of institutional bilingual instruction are actually inconsistent. One reason for the results’ divergence is that most researchers focus on the effect on the second language only.

With the aim to meet the third or fourth generation’s language learning needs a bit more and with the educational philosophy that any knowledge and skills in the first language are beneficial, I modified an existing biliteracy project for primary schools in Germany, with the aim to make it accessible to a wide range of schools and teachers.

The project is a contrastive bilingual reading and writing program for Year 1 students with a Turkish background. The students attended an urban mainstream school with an “average complex” ethnic make-up. As the school’s curriculum is based on the compulsory state curriculum, they were taught all regular subjects

along with everybody else, including German reading and writing. All children with “deficiencies” in German also attended daily German as a second language classes. The submersion method with sheltered majority language promotion is the international norm in most immigration countries. It must also be considered a major reason for migrant educational disadvantage as it almost seems designed to hide their academic skills.

For this project, all Year 1 students with a Turkish background were invited to join the “coordinated alphabetisation in elementary instruction” (a little catchier name for the course is “KOALA”, derived from its German initials). Twice a week, these children attended the KOALA class, where the letters, which were introduced in the mainstream German lessons, were taken up to introduce the Turkish alphabet^[2]. The contrastive method uses the German alphabet as a starting point, comparing Turkish letters and their phonetic realisation to the German letters. This way, children do not only learn the Turkish alphabet but also keep revising the German alphabet they learn in their mainstream classes.

The major difference to other concepts is that both classes were taught by one and the same teacher. As the focus is on biliteracy, which doesn't require high levels of grammar and vocabulary knowledge, this person does not even have to be a native Turkish speaker. It can all be done by a native in the majority language with some knowledge and skills in the children's first language. This has the big advantage that teaching is consistent and that it has relatively limited administrative, financial and staffing implications. Above all it valorises German **and** Turkish as languages of identity in Germany.

After one year of biliteral instruction, the children's writing competencies in both languages were assessed. They were compared to children in classes with a similar composition and from similar social backgrounds. One control group was not being institutionally instructed in their first language and the other group was being instructed in both languages, but by two different teachers. The results showed the unequivocal success of the one-teacher-two-languages model! The students from the one-teacher-two-languages model correctly realised 85% of Turkish and German letters (two-teacher-model and no-L1-model 71% and 65%, respectively). Interestingly, students from the one-teacher-two-languages model (which could also negatively be considered the “non-native-speaker-model”) especially excelled in realising shared graphemes with a different phonetic realisation. They used 62% of these interference letters correctly, whereas the other groups only achieved 25% and 15%. Other tests, which did not focus on the use of single letters, showed that they were also the most advanced in their overall writing development.

These results demonstrated that the model is realistic and provides a good possibility for enhancing a student's overall academic success. In the long run, this is an important contribution to social justice in an “integrated” society. If implemented on a larger scale, it thus holds promises for individuals, schools and society as a whole.

For a long time now, we have been aware of the key role played by language in achieving academic and social success. For too long, the implementation of that knowledge has been haphazard and half-hearted and we need more programs such as the one I have described here if we don't want to consign 2.5 million people with a Turkish background to be the perpetual national “Sorgenkind.”

^[1] Primary schooling in most German states is only four years long and by the age of 10 a child's parents and teacher decide which school the child will attend. The different options lead to different graduation – from the lowest possible up to a high school certificate, which is only achievable at two school types.

[2] The Turkish and the German alphabet share some letters, some with the same and others with a different pronunciation. Both alphabets also have letters, which are not present in the other.



Benz, Victoria (2011). Koordinierter Lese-Schreib-Lehrgang Türkisch-Deutsch im ersten Schuljahr. Durchführung und Evaluation eines Unterrichtskonzeptes Deutsch als Zweitsprache (2), 29-40