

Plurilingual Language Learning: European and U.S. Perspectives

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Abstract

This article attempts to bridge language education fields from Europe and the United States by sharing language learning terms, concepts, and teaching and learning theories and practices across the Atlantic in response to the call for papers for the 2026 Dimensions special issue on Plurilingual Education. In order to situate the ways in which the instructional materials, resources, and practices for plurilingual language learning that are described by European contributing authors to the special issue might look across contexts, this article addresses both European and U.S. unique linguistic landscapes and social contexts, societal norms and expectations toward speaking more than one language, socio-historical language use policies, and differing course offerings and requirements for the study of world/foreign languages in relation to U.S. and European perspectives on plurilingual language learning. Common points and differences are then identified and insights from European contributing authors of the Dimensions special issue are extended to the U.S. context to bridge language education fields. The article concludes by underlining how the work on Plurilingual Education provides inspiration for a view of a world that respects cultural and linguistic diversity and supports a positive, respectful and open way of life.

Keywords: *Plurilingual education, U.S. and European language education, intercultural competence, language use*

Background and Introduction to Plurilingual Language Learning

Western civilization comprises nations with shared cultural, political, and historical roots (primarily in Europe and North America) that emphasize individualism, democracy, capitalism and technological advancement (Niall, 2011). Despite shared Western cultures, the United States (U.S.) and Europe have very different approaches to speaking and learning more than one language. One notable difference is in the use of terms, such as *plurilingual* (individual) and *multilingual* (societal) widely used in Europe and internationally as they relate to the terms *bilingual* and *multilingual* (individual and societal) and *translanguaging* (action) that are more commonly used in the Anglophone world.

Plurilingualism refers to an individual's ability to use, switch between, and combine multiple languages and cultural experiences to communicate effectively, rather than requiring perfect proficiency in each. Unlike multilingualism, which often refers to multiple languages coexisting within a society, plurilingualism focuses on an individual's dynamic, integrated linguistic repertoire. Plurilingualism views languages as interconnected in the mind, allowing for fluid switching (code-switching) and blending (translanguaging) to suit the situation. It emphasizes that one person can draw upon diverse linguistic resources, regardless of proficiency levels. Education for plurilingualism leverages a student's home language(s) to facilitate learning, rather than requiring exclusive use of the school language. The 2020 Companion Volume to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020) highlights plurilingualism as a key approach to fostering communicative and intercultural awareness.

The *Dimensions* special issue on plurilingual language learning aims at bridging language education fields from Europe and the United States. The call for papers invited diverse researchers to share their understanding of theories, policies, practices, and what plurilingual language education might look like in different contexts (educational, geographical, political, etc.) comparatively or uniquely in their own state (U.S.) or country (Europe). Select contributing authors from the international *Handbook of Plurilingual and Intercultural Language Learning* (Fäcke, Gao, & Garrett-Rucks, 2025) were invited to share their expertise in *Dimensions'* special issue. The majority of the U.S. submissions in response to the call were off topic, unsurprisingly given the newness of the term *plurilingualism* in the U.S. Consequently, the editors shifted focus of the special issue to the expert voices on plurilingualism, mostly from Europe, to share their insight and to subsequently enact the bridging of European and U.S. practices in the present article.

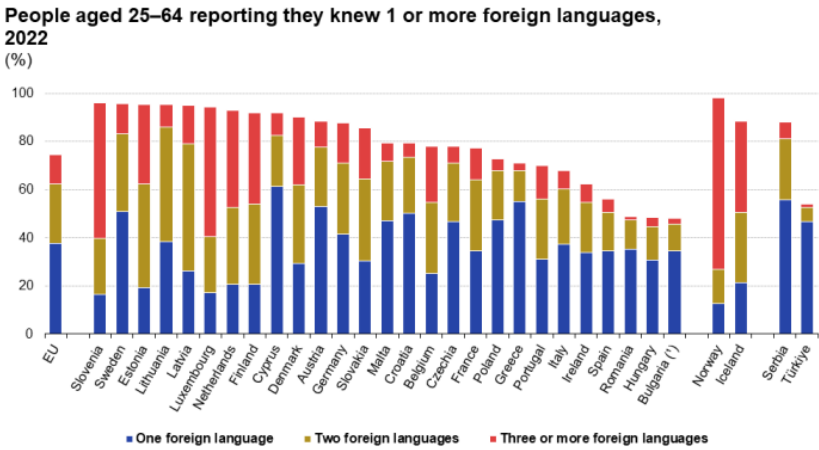
The aim of this paper is to respond to the initial questions put forth in 2026 *Dimensions'* call for papers. The call centered on the following issues in Europe and the U.S. for comparison of: (1) the most pressing issues in language education fields; (2) the ways in which social contexts, language policies, and language prestige influence language education; (3) educational requirements for the study of world/foreign languages (e.g., Arabic, French, Japanese, or Spanish); (4) the recommended language teaching practices and how plurilingual aspects are respected and practiced; and (5) the instructional and multilingual/plurilingual practices considered to be most beneficial for successful communication and relationship building (Garrett-Rucks & Fäcke, 2026). The five papers to have successfully moved through the double-blinded, peer reviewed process provide a rich overview of European practices and instructional resources for plurilingual education. Accordingly, the final section of this article draws attention to key insights from contributing authors in the 2026 *Dimensions* special issue, speculating the applicability of these insights to the U.S. context. European and U.S. perspectives and practices in language education are bridged here by contextualizing the linguistic landscape, socio-historical language use policies, world/foreign language study offerings and requirements, societal norms and expectations toward plurilingualism and otherness, starting first with the European context below.

Plurilingual Language Learning in Europe

The European continent exhibits remarkable linguistic diversity, encompassing more than 250 indigenous languages. The vast majority of these languages belong to the Indo-European language family, which has historically dominated the continent’s linguistic landscape. Of Europe’s approximately 744 million inhabitants, an estimated 94% are native speakers of an Indo-European language. Among the Indo-European branches, the three largest language families—Germanic, Romance, and Slavic—each comprise more than 200 million speakers. Collectively, they account for around 90% of the European population. This linguistic distribution not only reflects deep historical and cultural connections across the continent but also underscores the enduring influence of shared linguistic roots within Europe’s complex cultural mosaic (European Commission, 2024).

This complex and heterogenic linguistic landscape, characterized by linguistic diversity and multilingualism (Kraus, 2018), finds its reflection in a high level of plurilingualism, as approximately 75% of European citizens between the ages of 25 and 64 report having language proficiency in one or more foreign languages (Eurostat, 2024); specifically 38% report knowledge of one additional language, 25% speak two foreign languages, and 12% are proficient in three (see Figure 1 below).

Fig. 1 Percent of Europeans speaking one or more foreign languages per nation



(*) Three or more foreign languages: low reliability
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_aes_I21)



(Eurostat, 2024)

The highest levels of plurilingualism are observed in the Scandinavian and Baltic states, as well as in Slovenia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Cyprus. In contrast, countries such as Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria display comparatively low levels of plurilingualism (Eurostat, 2024). English-speaking countries, such as Ireland, exhibit relatively low levels of plurilingualism. This can be attributed both to the global status of English as a lingua franca, reducing the necessity for

language learning, and to limited national efforts to promote plurilingualism. Yet across Europe, individual plurilingualism is most common among younger, highly educated, and employed populations (Eurostat, 2022/23; 2024).

European language policy has aimed at plurilingualism for a long time. The 2006 report of the Committee on Culture and Education reaffirmed the EU's commitment to multilingualism and to "unity in diversity" as a source of solidarity and mutual understanding (Committee on Culture and Education, 2006, p. 8). Language policy in Europe has been shaped primarily by two highly influential documents: the *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001) and its *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020). These frameworks outline key principles that underpin European language policy.

Central to the documents is the clear conceptual distinction between *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism*, as well as between *multiculturalism* and *pluriculturalism*. The prefix *multi-* refers to societal contexts, describing the coexistence of multiple languages or cultures within a community. By contrast, the prefix *pluri-* pertains to the individual level, emphasizing the dynamic and interrelated nature of a person's linguistic and cultural repertoire (Fäcke, Gao, & Garrett-Rucks, 2025). Accordingly, a society may be described as *multilingual* or *multicultural* even though its individual members may not themselves speak several languages or belong to multiple cultures. Conversely, a *plurilingual* and *pluricultural* individual possesses interrelated linguistic and cultural competences that enable effective communication across languages and cultural boundaries (Council of Europe, 2020).

Plurilingualism is thus seen as a form of specific competence [...]. Plurilingual competence is the ability to use several languages (to differing degrees) and permits contact with other cultures, which means that relations between citizens of the member states do not have to be conducted only in an international *lingua franca*, but via all possible linguistic resources. If there is one language which Europe needs, that is plurilingualism. (Language Policy Unit, Council of Europe 2014, p. 14)

At the core of the *Companion Volume* lies the concept of *mediation*, understood as the *co-construction of meaning* that serves as the central axis of interaction, reception, and production between interlocutors. Within the process of mediation, a range of competences is activated, including sociolinguistic, pragmatic, linguistic, and digital competence, as well as plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Council of Europe, 2020).

European language policy has pursued the goal of promoting plurilingualism for several decades (Byram, 2018). A central milestone in this endeavor was established with the *Barcelona European Council* in 2002 (European Commission, 2002), which articulated what has since become known as the *Barcelona Objective* or *L+2 formula*. This objective calls upon all European citizens to achieve communicative competence in at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue. The underlying rationale is to foster linguistic diversity, enhance intercultural understanding, and strengthen social and economic cohesion across the European Union.

In practice, the Barcelona Objective reflects the EU's commitment to ensuring

that plurilingualism becomes both a right and a practical reality for all Europeans, supporting mobility, employability, and mutual comprehension in an interconnected Europe. The implementation of this language policy objective is shaped by a variety of interrelated factors. These include social mobility—manifested, for instance, through migration and tourism, the increasing influence of digitalization, which facilitates global communication via the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence, as well as the active language policies of individual nations. The latter interpret and apply the directives of European language policy to differing degrees and with varying emphases. Plurilingualism in practice becomes visible through the inclusion of one or more languages in public life, the media and press, administrative forms, driving license examinations and the systematic promotion of language learning in schools and other educational institutions (Fäcke, in preparation).

In the context of school language education, the distinction between *foreign languages*, *second languages*, and *heritage languages* is of central importance (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). Taking the example of language instruction in Germany—a federal republic characterized by notable differences between its individual federal states—these categories acquire specific meanings. Despite regional variations, the term *foreign languages* generally refers to languages that are taught as foreign to all learners within the school system, namely English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Russian. The concept of a *second language* typically designates *German as a second language* (Deutsch als Zweitsprache, DaZ) for learners with a migration background whose family language is not German, but who grow up in Germany and acquire German within this linguistic environment. The term *heritage language* encompasses *allochthonous* languages spoken by communities whose members migrated to Germany several years or decades ago (Fäcke, 2021). The largest of these migration groups speak

- Turkish (following the recruitment of Turkish guest workers invited to the Federal Republic of Germany beginning in the 1950s);
- Russian (due to the immigration of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, particularly during the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War);
- Arabic (as a result of immigration from Iran, Iraq, and other Arab countries, as well as from Syria in 2015 in the wake of the Syrian civil war);
- Polish (through labor migration within the European Union);
- Ukrainian (as a consequence of displacement caused by the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine) (Statista, 2025).

In addition, there is a wide range of other heritage languages spoken in Germany, including Albanian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, Greek, Italian, Kurdish, Pashto, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, and Spanish, among many others.

Overall, foreign language instruction is regarded as a core subject within the German school system and is mandatory for all students. In primary education, English is compulsory for all pupils starting from the third grade. In secondary education, English typically remains the first foreign language for the majority of

learners. However, in certain federal states bordering France, such as Saarland and Baden-Württemberg, French is offered as the first foreign language. French and Spanish are generally provided as the second foreign language at the *Gymnasium* (academic-track secondary school), while French, Spanish, Italian, and Russian may be chosen as a third foreign language (Fäcke, 2021).

The diversity of school types and regional curricula allows additional languages—such as Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, and Polish—to be offered in some schools. Consequently, Germany provides a relatively broad spectrum of foreign language education, although its availability is not uniform nationwide. English instruction, however, is universally implemented across all school types and throughout the entire duration of schooling, ensuring that every student attains foundational proficiency in this global *lingua franca*. This approach reflects both Germany's longstanding commitment to plurilingualism and the practical necessity of equipping students with linguistic competencies for academic, social, and professional mobility.

Although Germany is presented as an exemplary model for implementing European language policy with respect to plurilingualism, there remains substantial criticism, particularly regarding the heterogeneous nature of language learning opportunities. While a wide range of foreign languages is offered at the *Gymnasium* (academic-track secondary school), the *Realschule* (intermediate-track school) typically provides English and, to a limited extent, French, and the *Hauptschule* (basic-track school) generally offers only English. In comparison with other European countries (see the statistics above), Germany ranks in the upper middle tier, whereas some other states have made considerably more progress in the systematic promotion of plurilingual competence (Fäcke, 2021).

Finally, it is important to highlight the different conceptualizations of the terms *multi-* and *plurilingualism* in European language policy compared to the Anglo-American discourse. In Europe, the term *plurilingualism* predominates, emphasizing the ability of individuals to draw upon multiple linguistic resources in a flexible and context-sensitive manner. One might interpret this as a deliberate counter-narrative to the global dominance of English, highlighting the value of linguistic diversity and pluricultural competence. In contrast, in the English-speaking world, *multilingualism* is the more common term, which may reflect an implicit assumption of linguistic self-sufficiency and the centrality of English as a global *lingua franca*. This perspective could contribute to a relatively limited recognition of the skills associated with plurilingual competence and interactive language use. Observations from the United States may provide further insights into how these attitudes shape language education and societal expectations regarding the acquisition and use of multiple languages.

Plurilingual Language Learning in the U.S.

Attitudes toward language education and societal expectations regarding the learning and use of multiple languages in the U.S. differ considerably from Europe's, despite some shared contexts. Like Europe, there are many languages spoken in the United States, including a variety of indigenous languages spoken by Native Americans and the many diverse languages immigrants have brought, yet English remains the

dominant language among the nearly 350 million U.S. inhabitants. According to the recent U.S. Census Bureau (2023) report, nearly 80% of the population (over the age of five) speaks English at home. Among people who spoke a language other than English at home (over 20% of the U.S. population), approximately 78% spoke an Indo-European language (e.g. Spanish, German, French, Italian) with Spanish being the most prevalent. Spanish (61.1%), Chinese (which includes all dialects) (5.1%), and Tagalog (including Filipino) (2.5%) were reported as the three most spoken languages at home, other than English. The majority of these speakers of other languages also reported speaking English “very well” (70% of Tagalog speakers; 61% of Spanish speakers, and 48% of Chinese speakers). Despite nearly one in five people in the U.S. using a language other than English at home, the U.S. population is largely considered monolingual.

Prior to 2025, there had never been an official national language in the U.S. (due to states’ rights to choose) and only 30 of the 50 states had declared an official language (Byrne, 2025). All 30 states declared English as an official language and three states have additional official native languages to English: Alaska (20 languages of native inhabitants), Hawaii (Hawaiian), and South Dakota (Sioux) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). However, in early 2025 the newly elected president declared English as the official language of the U.S. in an executive order (Trump, 2025). Among the resistance to this order, the Linguistic Society of America (2025) outlined social and economic reasons against declaring English as the official language of the U.S. The states that had previously designated indigenous languages as official in addition to English remain seemingly unchanged. For example, the Alaskan Office of the Governor still posts that 20 languages of native inhabitants are included as official languages of Alaska from Administrative Order 300 (Walker, 2018).

Historically, English has been centered in bilingual movements in the U.S., where the goal was to teach immigrants English to assimilate into the *Great Melting Pot* myth in which Anglo language and culture dominated. Nationally, there was little concern for home-language maintenance until the passing of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act. This Act assured federal funding for schools to offer bilingual instruction, particularly for Spanish-speaking students, while also aiming to address students’ broader language needs. Efirid (2023) describes this Act as “a critical measure of the Civil Rights movement” in which “the legislation recognized the necessity for educational institutions to adapt to a diverse student body rather than forcing conformity to English” (para. 2). However, over 20 years later, a political *English Only* movement emerged, falsely criticizing bilingual education for holding children back from learning English, among other attacks. At this same time, the rebranding of bilingual education as Dual Language Immersion (DLI) started to appear, seemingly shifting the emphasis from *language maintenance* for non-English speakers to fostering *foreign (world) language* skills for native English speakers (Delavan, Freire, & Menken, 2021).

Concerning world language education in public schools, there are no national requirements for language study in the U.S. and only seven states mandate one to two years of the study of a world language other than English demonstrating that “world language education is not prioritized in state-level policies” (O’Rourke, Zhou, & Rottman, 2016, p. 789). Most public schools offer world language study in

secondary schools, as universities often require two years of world language study for admission. When world languages are offered in primary schools, it is often considered *a special*, meaning it is not funded by the state, rather by local property taxes funded at the district level. Consequently, early language learning can be considered elitist, primarily offered in areas with expensive homes generating higher property taxes. DLI, however, is becoming increasingly popular as bilingual teachers are funded by the state as content teachers (often math, science, and social studies in the target language) rather than *specials* (target language) teachers. However, despite increased interest and enrollments in DLI models over the past few decades, there is some concern among bilingual educators that we risk reproducing social inequity by celebrating enrichment bilingualism for majority-group children while discriminating against minority students (Delavan, Freire, & Menken, 2021).

For most of U.S. history, the term *foreign language* was dominant in education and policy where English was assumed to be the norm, despite the country's multilingual beginnings. Civil rights and bilingual education movements began to question the term *foreign* as Spanish, Indigenous, Asian, and other community languages were clearly not foreign to millions of citizens, and many felt the term was dismissive or inaccurate for heritage speakers. In the 1990s, the term *world languages* gained traction and became institutionalized in the early 2000s as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) increasingly used the term *world languages* to emphasize communicative competence and intercultural understanding. By the 2010s, many states had officially renamed departments and standards from *foreign* to *world languages*. In 2015, ACTFL officially changed the name of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning to the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). The shift from *foreign* to *world language* was intended to recognize multilingualism as normal, local, and globally connected, not distant or *other*.

Meanwhile, unlike countries with national curricula that mandate foreign or additional language study for all students, the U.S. federal government does not require world language education for primary, middle, or secondary students. Educational authority is largely decentralized in the U.S. with states and local districts setting graduation requirements and world languages course offerings. However, federal policy and funding do influence world language education in several ways. For several decades, the U.S. Department of Education's International and Foreign Language Education Office administered Title VI federal programs with grants for strengthening world language instruction, teacher preparation, international studies, and curriculum development. Language Resource Centers (LRCs) were established in 1990 to address the national need for foreign language expertise. The LRCs started as three centers and have grown to sixteen, focusing on developing learning materials, professional development, and research. However, to date, there is a message on the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) website (n.d.) stating:

Federal funding for the Title VI Language Resource Center (LRC) Program has been abruptly discontinued after 35 years of work in world language education. As a result, many LRCs will be unable to

carry out most of their activities planned for the fourth year of the current funding cycle (2025-2026). (NFLRC, n.d.)

Among the many federal funding cuts made by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) in 2025, the Title VI Language Resource Centers lost their congressionally appointed funds.

Other language education related departments were cut by DOGE. The Department of Education (DOE) cut funding to research on grants associated with the terms diversity, equity, or inclusion (DEI), despite these funds having been previously appropriated by Congress. The current leadership at the U.S. DOE continues to dismantle national programs that have fostered DEI programs and equity oversight since the Civil Rights movement claiming to return power to states and local communities (U.S. DOE, 2025). Similarly, funding for the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 that funded language and cultural exchange programs for over 50 years was also cut in 2025, despite expert arguments against the closure (Ruffner, 2025). Additional funding freezes of language and culture programs, many of which have led to closure included

...international education and exchange programs (Fulbright, Gilman, and IDEAS; professional exchanges like International Visitor Leadership Program and young leaders' initiatives; youth exchanges like YES, FLEX, and CBYX; virtual exchanges like Stevens Initiative; and more. (Ruffner, 2025, para. 5)

Despite the closure of many national language and culture programs, there is a 2025-2026 bill under review in Congress to provide grants for establishing or improving world language and DLI programs in the World LEAP Act (World Language Education Assistance Program) put forth by the House Committee on Education and Workforce to award grants to “establish and carry out new, or improve existing, world language or dual language programs” (Congress, 2025, summary para.).

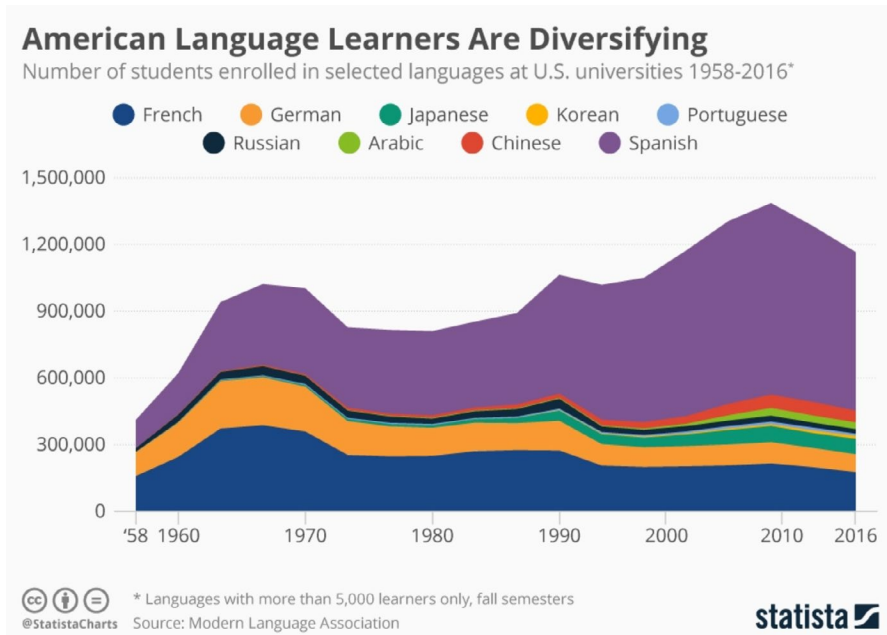
In the absence of national policy on world language instruction, ACTFL partnered with national and international language organizations to create the language proficiency guidelines (ACTFL, 1986, 1999, 2012, 2024), performance guidelines and descriptors (1998, 2015, 2024), and content standards (ACTFL, 1996, 1999, 2006). The most recent revision of the content standards, rebranded as the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (National Standards Board, 2015), continues to guide world language instruction at the national level. Centered around five goal areas—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—the standards emphasize communicative competence and cultural understanding. These standards are adopted and/or adapted by many states for their world language frameworks for developing curricula and assessments.

Working with ACTFL, the National Council of State Supervisors for Foreign Languages (NCSSFL) is another professional network that advances policies and research-based practices. Together, the NCSSFL-ACTFL (n.d.) Can-Do Statements provide a framework of learning goals and targets for each proficiency levels outlined in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2024). First originating in 1986, the Proficiency Guidelines have long provided a framework to assess a learner's proficiency by providing proficiency benchmarks, performance indicators, examples, and an

intercultural reflection tool. Today, the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (n.d.) describe what learners can do consistently in each of the communication modes—interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational—in numerous situations throughout the learning process. The Can-Do Statements help learners set goals and self-assess as they progress along the proficiency continuum.

Despite federal funding cuts and university falling enrollments in language learning, there are some noteworthy advances in the U.S. According to the American Councils Research Center (ARC) there is a growing number of DLI programs in the U.S., with over 3,600 programs reported in 2021 (American Councils, 2021). In addition, the Seal of Biliteracy (a nationally recognized language proficiency stamp on H.S. diplomas) is now offered to graduating students in all fifty states. Started in California in 2008, the Seal of Biliteracy is now awarded by a school, a district, or the state to recognize a student’s demonstration of Intermediate-Mid or higher proficiency in two or more languages (often considered English plus another language). Lastly, there is an increase in the diversity of languages taught in U.S. universities, although Spanish remains the most prevalent world language studied. According to a Statista Report (Buchholz, 2019), there has been an increasing number of students studying Chinese, Korean, and Japanese from 1960 to 2016 (see Figure 2).

Fig. 2 American languages learners are diversifying



The recent Modern Language Association (MLA) Enrollment Report from 2021 indicates that Spanish and French remain the most common languages studied in U.S. institutions of higher education (Lusin et al., 2023). American Sign Language (ASL) still ranks in third, having displaced German’s rank in 2013. Japanese ranks

fourth, German is fifth, and Chinese/Mandarin is now sixth (replacing Italian's former role). Overall, enrollments in languages other than English fell 16.6% in colleges and universities between the fall of 2016 and 2021. Of the fifteen most taught languages in the MLA Report, the only three to show enrollment gains were ASL (0.8%), Biblical Hebrew (9.1%), and Korean (38.3%).

Given the falling enrollment in U.S. post-secondary language study combined with the current Administration's funding attacks on DEI and Title VI funding ruptures, it seems world language study is under threat in the U.S. Furthermore, in September 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court of the United States issued an order (No. 25A169) that permits immigration agents to use language, specifically *the speaking of Spanish or English with an accent*, as a factor for reasonable suspicion, allowing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to stop and detain individuals in *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* (Supreme Court of the United States, 2025). This is an unprecedented interpretation of the Constitutional protections against racial profiling in the 14th Amendment, also known as the Equal Protection Clause, which prohibits the government from treating people differently based solely on race, religion, or ethnicity (U.S. Const. amend. 14, sec. 2). In an opposing statement to this order, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote,

We should not have to live in a country where the Government can seize anyone who looks Latino, speaks Spanish, and appears to work a low wage job. Rather than stand idly by while our constitutional freedoms are lost, I dissent. (Sotomayor, 2025, p. 12)

Despite current times in which speaking another language puts one's freedom in danger of detention, separation from one's family and disappearance in a mass deportation system that spares no mercy for children and pregnant women (Human Rights First, n.d.), world language education practices in Europe have some shared points of commonality and many differences from which the U.S. might seek inspiration, especially from the work on plurilingualism.

Common Points and Differences

The term plurilingual is not common in U.S. World Languages Education where the terms *bilingual* or *multilingual* are still favored. *Translanguaging* appears as a similar concept when defined as, "the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential" (García, 2009, p. 140). As demonstrated here, the term *bilingual* is commonly used in the field of ESOL to indicate an individual speaking more than one language. U.S. world language educators commonly use the term *multilingualism* or other wording to recognize and encourage speaking multiple languages. Garrett-Rucks (2016) used the common U.S. term *multilingual* in her work, sharing Byram's (1997, 2021) understanding of intercultural competence to address real interactions and mixings of people across cultures. Overall, in the U.S. language education literature, the terms *bilingual* and *multilingual* remain more prevalent than the term *plurilingual*.

Like in Europe, the U.S. field of World Language Education has increased emphasis on fostering learners' intercultural competence, and both have long shifted

toward proficiency. The proficiency turn in world languages refers to a shift from grammar-based instruction *about* the language to focusing on what learners can do *with* the language in real-world situations. Proficiency-based instruction prioritizes communicative competence—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—over rote memorization. Language experts on both sides of the Atlantic emphasize fostering the learner’s ability to effectively and respectfully communicate and interact with others from diverse backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 1997).

Both Europe and the U.S. have expert entities providing similar guidelines with standardized, action-oriented frameworks for learning, teaching, and assessing language proficiency. Yet Pew reports that on average 92% of children in Europe study a foreign language in their education, compared to only 20% in the U.S. (Civinini, 2018). Clearly, historical, geographical, and societal contexts differ in the U.S. and Europe. Yet during this complex period in which U.S. plurilingual speakers need to be prepared to show evidence of U.S. citizenship to avoid detainment, it is pressing to investigate practices intended to foster acceptance of speakers of other languages. Educational practices intended to foster plurilingualism provide hope for preparing a more peaceful, multilingual world (Candelier & de Pietro, 2026).

Both the United States and the European Union are composed of diverse people, languages, and cultures representing differently across semi-autonomous regions (states or nations), each sharing a political partnership (country or supranational organization). Differing, the U.S. has a history of forced assimilation enshrined in the myth of the *melting pot*, in which people of different cultures were believed to come together and blend into one cohesive whole (Hurd, 2024). Yet this monocultural metaphor for a heterogenous society is problematic, especially given the structural power imbalances that centered Anglo cultural norms and English as the language of cohesion, empowering restrictive immigration practices and *English Only* movements.

Contrary to the use of monolingual, linguistic-restraining policy tactics, European nations have been negotiating language policy across nations and their speakers of diverse languages since the end of World War Two. Further evidence of European encouragement of plurilingualism is found in the *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020) which introduced new descriptors for *plurilingual and pluricultural competence*, thereby advancing a rather integrative perspective on language learning and use. While commending the presence of plurilingualism in the 2020 *CEFR Companion Volume*, Rückl (2026) highlights the evolution beyond the former *CEFR* which “ultimately provided instruments for a ‘measurement’ of competences in single languages, it remained in an additive view of language learning and use” (p. 31).

Polzin-Haumann and Reissner (2026) note that language diversity and multilingual communication are not new, but increased human mobility and worldwide information exchanges have put plurilingualism and multilingualism at the center of European language and education policy since the 1990s. Rather than expanding linguistic diversity around this same time, the U.S. faced a growing *English Only* movement which may have planted seeds for intolerance in current anti-immigrant rhetoric. Yet today, many individuals communicate beyond national borders in digital spaces. This is precisely the type of space for which Polzin-

Haumann and Reissner (2026) describe meaningful uses of an *intercomprehension approach* and further claim the teaching and learning of plurilingual competence has become “a central research field, especially in recent decades” (p. 31).

The notion of teaching understanding across similar language families such as the Romance, Germanic, or Slavic languages through *intercomprehension* is quite foreign in the U.S. However, given Polzin-Haumann and Reissner’s (2026) detailed descriptions of the EuroCom concept, projects, and links to instructional materials and practices in digital learning environments, intercomprehension practices are possible in the U.S. For example, the authors describe the digital EuroComCenter, where learners experience the intercomprehension approach and learn *optimized deduction* in practice. This type of real-world digital learning might be appealing to U.S. learners who are familiar with an appreciation of the *two for the price of one* mentality.

Candelier and de Pietro (2026) describe *Awakening to Languages* (AtL) as an asset-based approach early in plurilingual education that fosters students’ metalinguistic awareness of languages in addition to recognizing and legitimizing languages and varieties of languages that some students may know to varying degrees. Perhaps the AtL gentle, identity-affirming introduction to language learning might provide a more positive learning environment than the U.S. *sink or swim* practice that encourages over 90% of target language use from the first day of class as suggested in the ACTFL position statement on target language use (ACTFL, 2010). AtL, also called *awareness of linguistic diversity* in some contexts, provides an inclusive approach to support the linguistic and cultural identity of speakers of other languages, such as the 20% of U.S. citizens who speak another language at home. Candelier and de Pietro (2026) provide convincing findings from the success of AtL classroom research projects and links to free online resources that draw from students’ intercomprehension strategies and open students minds to linguistic diversity. As noted by the authors,

Awakening to Languages is therefore less a question of arguing about languages (their beauty, their usefulness, etc.) than of getting students to work with several languages, exploring their diversity and their potential in terms of human creativity. (Candelier & de Pietro, 2026, p. 58)

Beyond language teaching, AtL helps foster students’ willingness to share insights through activities that help them discover and better understand language, “including their relation to their own idiom(s) and those of their classmates” (p. 58) fostering linguistic empathy and encouraging acceptance of otherness.

Due to sociocultural and psychological factors, there are many reluctant language learners. Given the social acceptance of monolingualism in the U.S., combined with learner reluctance, the gentler European practices to beginning language learning might appeal to U.S. learners. Rückl (2026) provides insight into an innovative language learning curriculum designed for Austrian vocational students that might appeal to reluctant learners in the U.S. Rückl (2026) reports findings from a study on this new subject, *International Communication with Focus Language* (*InCo*), which is a year-and-half long curriculum that emphasizes activating learners’

linguistic resources, incorporating real-life tasks, and using AI tools to enhance foreign language enjoyment and learner engagement. The emphasis in the InCo curriculum is on “cognitive activation and foreign language enjoyment with tasks that encourage learner reflection, knowledge transfer, and a sense of achievement” (p. 74). Rückl further describes the specific soft skills, or transversal competences, the InCo curriculum cultivates as “empathy, flexibility, resilience, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-management, teamwork, negotiation, openness to diverse perspectives, and foreign language specific digital literacy” (p. 72).

Given the short time frame that U.S. learners typically study foreign languages, averaging around two years if at all, the InCo-subject curriculum seems an approach worth exploring in the U.S. Garrett-Rucks (2016) has long argued for the need to foster learners’ intercultural competence at beginning levels of world language instruction due to lack of continuation to advanced levels by the vast majority of U.S. learners. The positive student response to the year-and-half InCo curriculum reported by Rückl (2026), combined with evidence of the students’ development of soft skills, particularly openness to diverse perspectives, warrants reason to explore the InCo curriculum in the U.S. context. Preparing learners to “interact with cultural competence and understanding” (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, para 2) is precisely the goal expressed in the U.S. Cultures Standards.

Similarly, Ollivier and Souprayen Cavery (2026) describe the great value in practices that help students develop a strong socio-interactional competence to prepare them “to make informed decisions about how to use their repertoire in specific communicative situations and interpersonal interactions” (p. 95). The authors propose a *Constrained Freelanguing* approach that encourages the use of all language practices with an awareness of “the macrosocial and interpersonal communication constraints” and “the possibility to conform or to deviate from social rules, as well as the impact of these decisions” (Ollivier & Souprayen Cavery, 2026, p. 96). Given that 20% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home, it is increasingly important to empower plurilingual speakers with a more peaceful language education. Candelier and de Pietro (2026) identify additional reasons to support plurilingual practices as follows.

We are living in a time in history when some people tend to deny diversity in all its forms and impose a single way of describing the world (their way) and one single language (their own). This is precisely what makes [plurilingual practices] increasingly crucial. (p. 58)

Language teachers become the primary facilitators in this process of linguistic, cultural, and self-reflection in meaningful intercultural language learning.

As momentum builds toward bringing education for plurilingualism practices to the U.S., the Canadian Plurilingual Lab, a research laboratory based in the multilingual city of Montreal at McGill University, provides a road map to understanding plurilingual education. Galante and Xie (2026) report efforts to democratize knowledge about Plurilingual Education through the Plurilingual Lab and its website. The authors describe the Lab as “[g]rounded in principals of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decoloniality” with initiatives that “seek to advance and inform both plurilingual research and pedagogical practices” (p. 100). The

authors claim their motives for making resources openly accessible, as the Lab “helps democratize knowledge production and dissemination, extending its reach to communities that might otherwise lack access to such scholarship” and to advance efforts “positively impact social change and promote greater equity for linguistically marginalized communities” (p. 100).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the 2026 special issue of *Dimensions* on plurilingual language learning seeks to build a meaningful bridge between European and U.S. language education contexts. Its goal is to introduce and further disseminate European perspectives on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism within the United States. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence, as conceptualized in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and its *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2001; 2020), represents an essential capacity in today’s global, interconnected, and digitalized world. Such competence fosters constructive coexistence among people of diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds—because those who are able to communicate with one another are better equipped to live together.

Plurilingual Education contributes to the development of a diverse, democratic, and peaceful society and therefore deserves sustained attention across the Anglophone world, particularly in the United States. The *Dimensions 2026* special issue offers both a conceptual framework and practical guidance, outlining instructional materials and pedagogical approaches that support plurilingual education. At the same time, further research is needed to examine how these practices and resources can be effectively adapted and implemented within U.S. educational settings.

At its core, Plurilingual Education promotes multifaceted communication and interaction among individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It encourages a positive, respectful, and open orientation toward others and toward the world. In doing so, it holds the potential to strengthen peaceful and constructive coexistence both within and across national and regional contexts.

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