

A multilingual student as an equal at school



In this animation, we'll be building aids for you to support a multilingual student in the mainstream classroom, in co-operation with other teachers. Here's the deal: Hardi, a twelve-year-old multilingual student, is coming to your class.

Most times, several students will of course be entering your class at the same time and different individuals might need different kinds of assistance in their learning. It may feel like there is no time, nor resources, for individual instruction, but if a teacher has tools – and lenses, so to speak, that they can use to track the different individuals in their class, their stages of learning will become more evident. Thus, support will be easier to focus on those most in need. The students can also be observed as a group: in a group their communicative skills are the most visible.

We will now be creating a still-image of Hardi for you as he is now. As a teacher, you would do best to think of Hardi in a grander scheme of things: think of his background and experiences in school and in life in general. This way you'll be able to coach him towards future education, working life and active participation in the community he's in.

Three key points for supporting multilingual students:

- 1) Get to know your student!
- 2) Identify your student's skills!
- 3) Support participation

Work with your colleagues – don't try to make it on your own!

The most prominent partners are especially the teachers who specialize in teaching the majority language, the teachers who teach the student's first language, special education teachers and other professionals of the school system.

We'll now be diving into the situation with Hardi, following these three key points.



Key point 1: Get to know your student

It's most fruitful to build a picture of Hardi's background in co-operation with your colleagues. Meeting his family and talking with Hardi himself is, of course, crucial.

As a student joins the mainstream education, there should always be an information sharing meeting. Such a meeting, with the students' guardians present, is a functioning method of starting the school path and establishing contact between the school and the home: swapping contact info and the like. The students' health information is under medical confidentiality, but the caretaker can bring up personal details that might affect learning.

Hardi

Hardi speaks mainly Kurdish but also some Turkish and English as his home languages; with his friends he communicates fluently in Persian and in growing amounts – especially on the football field – in Finnish. He has learnt to read and write in his own language, Soranî Kurdish with an Arabic writing system, but the choice of texts in that language has been limited. Hardi has only recently come across the Latin alphabet.

Before arriving in Finland, he has been going to school for a couple of years, but in the last few years the school path has been quite fragmented due to the restless circumstances of his former home country. The refugee camp did organize some clubs for children to upkeep their daily routines and educational skills. The parents speak Kurdish, Turkish and Arabic and read and write Kurdish, and in religious contexts also Arabic.

Hardi is open and active, he uses all his linguistic resources boldly. If he can't find a Finnish word in a certain situation, he expresses things through other languages or makes up his own expressions. He grasps mathematical concepts and calculations rather well, even though comprehending verbal tasks has its difficulties. His most prominent strengths in school lie in sports education, but he also likes home economy and math.



Key point 2. Observe the student's actions and identify relational skills, study skills and skills in everyday interactions

Teachers are experts on the school's culture, ways of using language and instances, in which language is used and which a student should be able to function in. What kind of language skills does Hardi need, in order **to participate as an equal**

- in free-time activities, games and friendships
- learning different subjects
- managing everyday life?

Regarding friendships, as a teacher you can **observe and follow** if, for example the student gravitates towards the company of others, if they can independently join others, how feelings, needs and hopes are expressed and how the student holds up for themselves.

In classroom situations, it is good to follow, how the student understands instruction and how they express problems in their comprehension, how they take part and express their thoughts, how self-driven they work and co-operate with others. How does the student learn and work to learn?

The students' management of things is worthwhile to assess by observing how they manage school routines from homework to timetables, from where and how they seek answers to unclear questions.

How to get a hold of Hardi's language skills, in this context particularly Finnish language skills?

Language skills are a whole, where everything is linked to everything else. Speaking cannot be detached from listening comprehension just as reading cannot be detached from writing. However, the skills may develop at entirely different paces and that's why it's best to assess them separately, so that the development can be supported. In this assessment, the help of the second language teacher should be made use of.



Oral skills:

How proactive and independent is Hardi in social interactions? How does he react?

- Hardi doesn't dodge social interactions in small groups or in private; he most often is expressive, asks if he doesn't understand and picks expressions from others to his own use quite skillfully.
- Hardi expresses opinions. However, between friends there might be misunderstandings, and someone occasionally gets upset too, because there aren't always all the means to soften what is being said or to listen carefully what has been said. For example, interpreting attitudes and tones might be challenging and Hardi doesn't necessarily understand what kinds of things are polite to be said aloud, even though he is mostly more open in expressing feelings and encountering people than his local peers.

How broad and well-rounded is Hardi's self-expression? How does he make use of his multilingual resources, gestures, pictures etc. (et cetera)? How precisely is he able to express himself? Does he get understood?

- Hardi is skilled in using various resources when expressing himself. He doesn't give up if there's something important to be said, but tries to word it otherwise, searches expressions from the languages he knows, acts things out or even draws them.
- Hardi narrates and describes things still on a general level. He needs quite a lot of support, if he has to narrate a complex event or something more abstract.
- Hardi manages many kinds of everyday encounters. Fast-paced and joke-ridden speech in, for instance, animations or vlogs is still too hard for him. Educational speech is clearly hard to follow too and Hardi might cover this up by hassling all over the classroom when he's lost comprehension. Receiving complex instructions is difficult as well.

Skills in reading and studying:

How does Hardi comprehend what he's read?

- Hardi can read short texts, such as, simple instructions, messages and short narratives, independently, although some details and connections between things might remain unclear.
- In order to read textbook texts, he'll need reading strategies: How does one skim a text? How to figure out the key elements? With what kind of train of thought can one deduct meanings? Hardi gets frustrated if he doesn't understand every word. Pictures are helpful, but in their interpretation, guidance and support are required. It is important that the learning materials are not made too easy, but that Hardi would be guided to search for the key elements and to focus on them. To get



through authentic texts in the future, he'll need strategic skills above all, to know what's relevant.

- For example, the amount of homework should be such that Hardi is committed into doing it. The instructions could be looked through in school or a familiar type of activity could be used to make sure he knows what to do at home. This way Hardi will be able to complete the homework independently and feels he's succeeding in his studies. If there was a homework club at the school, Hardi would benefit greatly.
- Hardi needs support in learning vocabulary as well. It would be best to teach what kind of words are the most relevant for him to study and what kinds of techniques he could use to make it meaningful to himself. Learning words in lists isn't necessarily the sanest choice of methods. All vocabulary should be attached to and used in meaningful expressions, texts and contexts. Hardi should be supported in picking up entire expressions and phrases from others and starting to utilize them in new situations. This way he would figure out the language structures efficiently.

Writing:

An email to a teacher written by Hardi – what can you make out of it?

- Hardi understands emails as a text type although he's not showing all the characteristics in his writing. He starts the message with a greeting and explains the reason behind his absence quite understandably. He does, however, start in the middle of a thought and the reader won't, therefore, see the context without seeing the original instructions. Two of the original questions are also left unanswered.
- There are various shortcomings of spelling in the text. They don't massively hinder the readability of the text, though. It's written in spoken language, which is OK in this text type and in Hardi's language skill level. He will have all the time in the world to learn the standard language over his schooling path. The use of spoken language can be seen as an example of him having real interaction as a resource – he uses Finnish in his free time to a great extent.
- The text is rich with different kinds of structures (an explanatory subclause, a necessity structure: "I had to go", a past tense -> it's typical for a youth to learn whole, idiomatic and even quite complex phrases very early and to begin using them as models for new phrases and variation. Hardi also exceeds the boundaries of his own proficiency, which is visible in the, at times random-looking, mistakes: "I fell out bike" -> he's not afraid to try.
- From the reader's perspective, the biggest challenges of this text lie in that 1) Hardi doesn't lead the reader into why he's writing such a message and what he wants and 2) his thoughts are a continuum without pause and the relations between the incidents (the breaking of the leg, karate, football tournament, running competition and crashing with the bike) are not at display.



You have been absent from school for a week. A Finnish language test is upcoming soon. Send an email to:

- Explain why you've been absent.
- Ask about two things concerning the test.
- Ask about two other things from the course of the week.

Write with a clear handwriting in Finnish. Remember to greet and end the message fittingly.

Sender:
Recipient: Kalle Serränen
Subject:
<p>Hello!</p> <p>because my leg broke and I had to go to karate and I had a football tournament and I had to go Y4h race and I fell off the bike</p>

How is Hardi doing with school?

Hardi has been absent from school a lot and it's difficult to communicate with the parents as to where the absence and Hardi's occasional restlessness are coming from.

- In Finland, many multilingual students in basic education are from crisis regions. It has to be brought up openly with the student and with the parents, if the student is apathetic or aggressive, has trouble concentrating, is absent a lot or has lots of unfinished homework. The reasons have to be asked about directly: Do you worry about your parents/siblings? Do you sleep okay? Are you afraid of something at the moment? It's also important to get all the collaborative parties from the school's student welfare and local social work involved as soon as possible. The teacher should have the courage and work stamina to seek help for issues in students' mental health, coping and concentration. The reason behind absence from school may also be different family duties/challenges that the child takes care of. The school then becomes a soothing place of rest and the student might not be absent that gladly.

At the center of all these challenges, it will take balancing and sensitivity to recognize when it's time to be demanding to show belief in the students' efforts and when it's time to say "hey, this subject matter isn't as important as your well-being, so let's take it easy for a bit". When the support is of the right kind, there is more space for them to develop their skills in learning. That way, studying becomes easier. These processes are naturally long: it takes time to build the trust.



Key point 3. Support participation

By observing the students' actions and skills through **the principles of formative assessment** in different situations, you will be able to decide, what kinds of resources and challenges the student has, what kinds of things they should be taught and what actions need to be **supported**. Teaching is a process of reacting to students' needs. That way, giving linguistic support in concrete situations with the right timing is language teaching at its best. The student should also be enabled to use all their linguistic resources.

How to support Hardi's co-operation and participation with other students?

Hardi's language development is best enhanced by engaging him in shared activities and providing him timely support in carrying them out.

- Encourage active team building by playing, with games and group activities so, that students function in changing groups, get to know each other and get used to working with all the others.
- Create a shared understanding of how important it is that everyone is included with their existing language resources.
- Show appreciation towards interaction skills: make single students' skills visible to the entire group, thank and reward success and support in challenging situations.
- Thank and reward a group that makes all its members participate.
- Help group work by giving phrases that enhance participation: phrases to convey opinion, phrases of agreement and disagreement etc.
- Handle possible conflicts with regard to how understanding language and its nuances play a major part in those situations or what matters are/aren't polite to be talked about in different cultures and in different situations.
- Create group tasks where every group member is needed. Build the task, for example, so that every group member has background information that the others don't have.
- Make sure that you take such an attitude towards your students that you aim to see behind even the most challenging behavior. The student is always giving out a message with their behavior and is working with the understanding they happen to have in those situations. Your interpretation of those situations affects, how you yourself will be able to change your behavior and actions – and how to build better pedagogy that supports the students' participation and agency even better.



Supporting participation/agency during the lesson

- Make lessons dynamic
 - o Alternate between speech and action so that a student doesn't have to concentrate on listening for too long
 - o Make sure that students can listen and make notes at different times
- Visualize with all possible methods:
 - o Drawing, pictures, movements, gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice
 - o Make keywords visible, use mind maps to clear things up
- Use clear speech:
 - o Orient your students to the lesson structure and its phases: for example, mark the main points of the lesson on the board
 - o Be clear about moving to a different phase
 - o Emphasize the most important points with your voice and visually too. Make sure these points are repeated enough.
 - o Be clear about how things are related to one another: main/secondary matters, facts and opinions, reasons and consequences, generalizations and examples, rules and exceptions
- Check comprehension often and with many different methods:
 - o Follow the students' actions (also looking over their tasks and notes)
 - o Ask additional questions and applied follow-up questions
 - o Ask the student to repeat what they've heard/read in their own words
- Give your students time to process
- Guide the students to teach one another and make it possible for them to use their own native language

It is often hard to distinguish between disabilities in learning and the stages of a developing language. Diagnosing learning disabilities is a long process and it often remains unclear, whether the problems in, for instance, concentration and reading are caused by learning disabilities, neurological reasons or even traumatic experiences and a broken schooling path. In any case, following this development and supporting learning, the expertise of special education teachers and language teachers are vital resources to other teachers.

To sum up: the three key points of helping students participate and supporting their learning

1) know your student 2) identify your student's skills, 3) support participation!

Work with your colleagues – don't think you'll make it all on your own!

