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Dimensions of Language Awareness of Multilingual Migrant Adolescents – A Means to Enhance Epistemic Diversity in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism is very prevalent in German schools. However, the German school system does little justice to this fact and persists in a monolingual habitus. This appears problematic not only in respect to educational equity, but it also undermines holistic approaches to learning. In this paper, we link the concept of epistemic diversity and Language Awareness. In our interview study with multilingual adolescents, we present their view on languages in class as well as the meta- and cross-linguistic strategies they use. We analyze the interviews based on the dimensions of Language Awareness of James and Garrett (1991), a well-established scheme in which we included a biographical dimension. The results show how students receive little encouragement from teachers, but develop metalinguistic strategies on their own. We discuss the connection to epistemic diversity and justice.

Mehrsprachigkeit ist Normalität an deutschen Schulen. Das deutsche Schulsystem wird dieser Tatsache jedoch kaum gerecht und verharrt in einem einsprachigen Habitus. Dies erscheint nicht nur im Hinblick auf die Bildungsgerechtigkeit problematisch, sondern untergräbt auch ganzheitliche Lernansätze. In diesem Beitrag verknüpfen wir das Konzept der epistemischen Diversität mit *Language Awareness*. Wir rekonstruieren die Sicht von mehrsprachigen Jugendlichen auf Sprachen im Unterricht sowie die von ihnen verwendeten meta- und sprachenübergreifenden Strategien. Grundlage hierfür ist eine Interviewstudie mit mehrsprachigen Schüler:innen der Oberstufe. Die Interviews analysieren wir entlang der Dimensionen von Language Awareness nach James und Garrett (1991), die wir um eine biografische Dimension erweitern. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Schüler:innen von den Lehrkräften kaum ermutigt werden, ihre Sprachen einzubringen, sondern dass sie selbständig metasprachliche Strategien entwickeln. Wir diskutieren den Zusammenhang mit epistemischer Vielfalt.

1 | Introduction

Multilingualism is very prevalent in German schools. However, the German school system does little justice to this fact and persists in its monolingual habitus. This appears problematic

not only in respect of educational equity, but it also undermines holistic approaches to learning in heterogeneous contexts. In this paper, we establish the connection between the concept of epistemic diversity as “the ability or possibility of producing diverse and rich epistemic apparatus to make sense of the world

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around us” (Gobbo and Russo 2020, 185) and linguistic diversity in class. We argue that the inclusion of students’ multilingualism positively enriches the learning processes of both the individual and the learning group. One approach that takes this into account is Language Awareness. It can be understood not only as a multilingual didactic concept but also as a resource of (multilingual) students, including linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects, which in turn can all be facets of epistemic diversity. The aim of this article is to examine how Language Awareness can contribute to epistemic diversity and inclusion in the multilingual classroom.

After a short introduction of the German school system, we will focus on the central concepts of our argumentation: We will explain our understanding of “epistemic diversity” and why the factor of language plays a key role in it. We will take a closer look at the functions of educational language. Finally, we will point out how these functions are reflected in different dimensions of Language Awareness and why Language Awareness itself can be a means of epistemic diversity. We will point out that raising “Language Awareness in the classroom” (James and Garrett 1991) is not only an idealistic idea regarding multilingual pedagogies, but that the construction of knowledge, particularly in multilingual environments, is in itself a genuinely diverse epistemic process that also contributes to educational equity. In the following step, we will present our empirical interview study on Language Awareness of multilingual students. We will explain the research before presenting the results concerning the various dimensions of Language Awareness. These results will be discussed and discursively embedded in the discourse, followed by a brief conclusion.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Multilingualism in German Secondary Schools

German schools are multilingual in many respects: they teach foreign languages, but also their students speak a wide variety of languages at home. However, structural conditions of the German school system do not reflect this linguistic diversity. Despite a small number of bilingual schools¹, education is a mostly German-speaking space (Wamhoff et al. 2022; Gogolin 2008).

For students who start school with little proficiency in German at the age of six, starting school will be postponed for another year, or they must speed up at learning German with or without additional lessons in school. Their multilingual resources will usually be ignored as the teachers’ focus is on their German proficiency only. An exception is heritage language classes, although the number of classes and languages taught differ widely (Mediendienst Integration 2022).

Migrant students who move to Germany at an older age will often be separated into classes for newcomers for a limited time period. The aim is to teach them German, usually within a year or two, in order to include them in mainstream lessons (Massumi et al. 2015). In mainstream classes, however, we hardly find settings that create opportunities to include multilingual resources for

learning (Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018). This “monolingual habitus” (Gogolin 2008) of the German educational system has been described widely.

There are multiple possible reasons for this situation: The attitude of seeing monolingualism as the norm has historical roots and can be traced back to the emergence of nation-states at the beginning of the 19th century (Natarajan 2016). The idea of “one language—one nation” has a continuous impact. Consideration of such structural conditions seems necessary to establish more inclusive circumstances. Further reasons may include lack of resources, for example, in teacher training, or lack of suitable learning materials, although various approaches to multilingual didactics have been discussed since the 1990s.² Here too, reflection and awareness seem to be crucial first steps to create a setting for epistemic diversity. This also includes awareness of potentials with regard to classroom communication and subject-specific cognition and knowledge construction.

2.2 | Epistemic Diversity in Academic and Educational Contexts

Epistemic diversity refers to the inclusion of diverse holistic approaches to produce knowledge under cognitively or socially diverse conditions (Page 2007). Depending on the definition, it can be understood as an initiative to enable a variety of cognitive approaches to expand the understanding of a subject and protect it against bias. In academic contexts, this means that a group can be regarded as diverse “when its members have, for example, different research styles and skills, different perspectives on the subject matter of inquiry, or access to different bodies of empirical evidence” (Rolin 2019, 158). Epistemic diversity as a way towards social diversity and inclusion also applies to groups whose “members have different non-epistemic values, such as moral and political values, or different social locations, such as gender, ethnic identity, nationality, and race” (ibid., 158). Even if both aspects are separated from each other by definition, they are mutually dependent. For example, social epistemic diversity can be a way of enabling cognitive diversity in the first place (ibid.).

The debate has originally centered around academic discourse and publication culture. Gobbo and Russo (2020) lead the discussion with a focus on the role of language(s). They claim that a monolingual environment is not only “detrimental to knowledge production itself [...], but is also not in line with most present and past realities in philosophy and in science, which are instead multilingual” (ibid., 186). They emphasize the role of a multilingual discourse culture concerning scientific justice and participation by questioning the prominent position of English as a *lingua franca* (ibid., 191ff.). We would like to transfer this discussion to the context of school. Therefore, we first have to make clear what we understand by knowledge in this specific context.

For our purpose it will suffice to deal with the concept of knowledge and both its emergence and its relation to language(s), since developing, communicating, and discussing knowledge is an integral part of education. We do not pursue a strict, declarative concept of knowledge but instead favor a holistic understanding that might include a variety of approaches to knowledge

construction. Therefore, with Gobbo and Russo (2020), we shift our focus to the “link between *what* knowledge is and *how* to build it” (Gobbo and Russo 2020, 187). We follow an approach of constructionism that stresses the individual’s role in the process of understanding the world: In this sense, “an epistemic agent knows something when that agent is able to build (reproduce, simulate, model, construct, etc.) that something and plug the obtained information into the correct network of relations that account for it” (Floridi 2011, 2). This definition emphasizes the individual active and creative process of knowledge building that is “poetic, interactive, and practical” (ibid., 2). Knowledge is understood as a “distributed and embodied phenomenon” (Gobbo and Russo 2020, 189). That means that knowledge and its construction is spread among individual epistemic agents and groups and connected to the environmental world in multiple, reciprocal ways within complex socio-technical systems. Participants collaboratively contribute to knowledge building, whereby the interplay between all entities involved also influences the process. Such an idea of knowledge requires an epistemic diverse approach to knowledge building that reflects further relevant features such as language.³

However, this approach to knowledge production does not only apply to scientific discourses but also seems genuinely appropriate to the circumstances in an educational system such as the German, in which linguistic heterogeneity is the normal case. Language(s) can be assumed to have an enormous influence on epistemic diversity (Gobbo and Russo 2020, 192ff.). Liddicoat (2018) describes such a connection in more detail with a focus on language teaching in research and educational contexts: He states that the entire setting is “fundamentally multilingual,” and therefore he argues for a transdisciplinary idea of language education that broadens the view for diverse epistemic schemes that are also shaped and expressed in language (Liddicoat 2018, 17). However, a crucial point in this endeavor is to first generate awareness, e.g., for such language-dependent schemes.

An approach to promoting these concerns may be to foster Language Awareness in its differentiated dimensions, including reflections on language-dependent and cross-lingual ways of formulating and thinking about knowledge, as these operations are considered to be central functions of language(s) in educational contexts (see below). Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that language (choice) carries social markers that go beyond purely cognitive facets. Socio-political and highly power-related constellations are implicitly passed on in the form of language ideologies that may open up or block linguistic and thus also epistemic spaces.

Our concern in this context is to explore how and to what extent the framework described above also applies to language constellations in educational systems in which we typically find one dominant language of schooling in contrast to a multitude of other, often marginalized languages.

We want to elaborate on why the close connection between language and the acquisition of knowledge is constitutive in schools and also has serious consequences for educational justice.

2.3 | Language(s) and Knowledge in Educational Contexts

Epistemic diversity as a holistic concept necessarily includes not only language per se but must take into consideration the languages in use as well as the individual language repertoires and different levels of proficiency. The close connection between language(s), language proficiency, and school success has often been described in research (Gogolin 2019). Therefore, the ignorance towards the linguistic repertoire of learners is a mistake, both regarding questions of educational equity and also concerning the genuine nature of knowledge and knowledge building in itself. Influential discussions concerning the functions of language in educational systems have been conducted by, e.g., Ehlich (2007), who points out that language functions not only as a means of communication but also forms knowledge and its transfer in school or elsewhere. It allows us to make sense of the world. Based on this, Morek and Heller (2012) outline the functions of academic language⁴ that are *communicative*, *epistemic*, and *social* (ibid., 70). These functions can also be applied to the features of knowledge building with regard to epistemic diversity. In reality, they are not always clearly distinguishable from one another but are often interwoven and mutually dependent. Nevertheless, they will be presented separately in the following and related both to epistemic diversity and Language Awareness.

2.3.1 | Communicative Function

The communicative function refers to language being a “medium of knowledge transfer” (Morek and Heller 2012, 70, translated by authors). It describes how linguistic means are used in educational contexts to fulfill a communicative purpose. Morek and Heller describe academic language as social practice while using Halliday’s (1978) register concept as a basis, according to which registers are to be understood as functional language varieties that are linked to specific situations. When it comes to educational institutions, Schleppegrell (2001, 454) points out that “[t]he register features of school-based texts are not just devices used to exclude the uninitiated but are functional for the purposes for which these genres have evolved and which they serve.” Although there is no idealized one-to-one relationship between an object and a corresponding linguistic structure, academic language has certain characteristics that distinguish it in form and function from non-academic language (Efing 2023).

The analysis of academic language in its communicative function is often oriented towards the language-structural surface (Morek and Heller 2012, 73), e.g., complex sentence structures, noun phrases, passive sentences, or an academic vocabulary. These structures of academic language are significant across different languages in terms of a register distinction but can differ in their structural concretization depending on each language. In this ambivalence, however, lies great potential for a holistic approach to knowledge construction and communication. In this sense, differences between languages can provide occasions to analyze and compare linguistic features and habits to support cross-linguistic literacy skills and to raise awareness for different approaches to understanding and describing the world.

2.3.2 | Epistemic Function

The second aspect of Morek and Heller's (2012) characterization of academic language is the epistemic function, or 'academic language as a tool of thought' (ibid., 74f., translated by authors). It describes how language(s) do(es) fundamentally mediate how we perceive and represent the world. This relationship works in two ways: On the one hand, the way we express our assumed knowledge may tell us something about how we have understood it, since both correct ideas and pre- and misconceptions may reveal themselves through language (Ortner 2009). In this sense, language can mirror our knowledge. At the same time, we need to differentiate between incorrectness or vagueness that comes from a false understanding of the content and the one that is due to lack of language proficiency. It follows that the role of language(s) and the support of language skills cannot be overestimated, as "learning science is the same thing as learning the language of science" (Halliday 2004, 178). On the other hand, the influence of language(s) on thinking has to be taken into account: the idea of language as a lens through which we perceive the world, build our knowledge, and form our categories. Here we find parallels to Gobbo and Russo's (2020) claim for the inclusion of other languages besides English as the lingua franca in scientific communities, as its dominance goes along with specific styles of argumentation that hinder epistemic diversity.

Discussions concerning the connection between language, cognition, and knowledge creation have their roots in research on second language acquisition as well. In particular, Cummins (e.g., 2000) describes the presumably close connection between language development and the growth of complex cognitive abilities (e.g., abstraction). It follows that the inclusion of students' multilingual resources is not only a worthwhile goal in terms of a holistic approach to building knowledge, but that it influences long-term educational biographies, too. Viewed the other way round, it becomes obvious that a monolingual habitus of school (Gogolin 2008) not only hinders epistemic diversity and inclusion with regard to the collective. More than that, it minimizes the epistemic space in which individuals can act, as their "gnoseological tool" (Ehlich 2007) is restricted when languages are excluded.

2.3.3 | Social Function

The social function, or its role as an "entrance ticket" (Morek and Heller 2012, 76, translated by authors), respectively, is the third characteristic of academic language. This metaphor refers to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic habitus, through which we locate ourselves on the linguistic market. Self-positioning in this sense has an influence on both educational and professional success, but on social participation in general as well. This plays a decisive role, especially in school contexts, because academic language proficiency can become an almost insurmountable barrier if the expected capabilities in the majority language cannot be met (Mecheril et al. 2010). A lack of academic language skills applies regardless of individual monolingualism or multilingualism and is primarily linked to a limited access to literacy.

Other crucial aspects are (academic) language skills that might have already been acquired in another language than the dominant language of schooling. In such a case, students own an

"entrance card" that is not valid under conditions of an inflexible monolingual school system, even though it might have been valid in a different place and system (Blommaert 2010). In this case, epistemic diversity and inclusion under conditions of multilingualism can be hindered because of structural issues. One factor that plays a central role here is the attribution of language prestige⁵. Speakers who experience devaluation in everyday life tend to hide or abandon their language. They are less likely to use their whole linguistic repertoire as a resource, as they might fear rejection or worse. In this sense, linguisticism has serious consequences on educational biographies and social justice. This structural form of discrimination, which is inherent in monolingual education systems, is known as neo-linguicism (Dirim 2010).

It is interesting to mention here that in our investigations, a vast majority of students reported on experience with language prestige attributions both in private and school contexts and how these influenced their behavior or even their own attitudes towards multilingualism throughout their school career (Wamhoff et al. 2022). Reflecting on such experiences may help to avoid marginalization by making structural discrimination visible in the first place and then preventing it. In this sense, awareness of language use, language norms, and functions is a precondition as well as a means of creating a more diverse space in school.

2.4 | Raising Language Awareness as a Way of Promoting Epistemic Diversity in German School System

2.4.1 | Dimension of Language Awareness

The term Language Awareness refers to a complex field with a rich tradition of research and classroom practice. There is not one common definition but a myriad of different and overlapping notions in research. Wildemann et al. (2020) broadly distinguish between a narrow, a broad, and a holistic understanding of Language Awareness. In a narrow framework, studies usually focus on metalinguistic awareness in the sense of explicit knowledge of grammar, as in rules or traditional categories (ibid.). Broader concepts of Language Awareness include a more implicit approach to language(s) that implies, e.g., automatized self-correction, judgment on the basis of intuition, or the ability to linguistically adjust to different situations or interaction partners without necessarily being able to explain one's choice. The most suitable concept for our purposes is the holistic one: In addition to the points already mentioned above, further aspects like sociolinguistic issues such as the critical reflection of language usage and its social and political consequences have also been considered part of Language Awareness, e.g., in the concept of critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992).

A well-known holistic approach is the concept of "Five Domains" of Language Awareness, introduced by James and Garrett (1991). Despite the amount of publications in the field, they are still regarded as a core model. They differentiate the idea of "awareness" into five partially overlapping domains as follows: The cognitive domain refers to the reflection of linguistic structures and patterns and therefore has the greatest proximity to the

narrow understanding of Language Awareness. The performance domain is closely linked to the previous but reflects the application of these structures, e.g., in contexts of language learning. The affective domain deals with feelings and emotional attributions towards language(s). The social domain refers to language(s) in social contexts; e.g., it aims to promote tolerance and awareness with regard to the language(s) of social groups. The domain of power focuses on language as an instrument of power and manipulation, e.g., in politics and society or with regard to any hegemonic structures (James and Garrett 1991). Since the “Five Domains” are not only a particularly comprehensive model from a theoretical perspective but also provide a widespread scheme that can relate to a broad range of possible approaches, observations, and experiences in the context of languages, it seems appropriate to adapt them to the functions of academic language or language production, respectively, both under conditions of multilingualism.

The relationship people have to their languages and language varieties changes over the course of their lives, e.g., due to changing circumstances or life-events (Tophinke 2002). This developmental process is described with the term language biography. In didactic settings, a language biographical narration (such as in a narrative interview) or visualization (such as a language portrait) can therefore be used “to promote Language Awareness” (Busch 2011, 5, translated by authors), whereby narration in particular is also tangential to social aspects. Language Awareness and the individual language biography are thus closely related, and we suggest to expand the domains of Language Awareness by a biographic dimension. That way, we add a dynamic and individual component. All dimensions may contribute to a multilingual, epistemic diverse classroom, opening up spaces to pursue cognitive and language learning goals, as well as enhance visibility of diversity.

Even though all domains are interwoven in a complex way and can only be separated theoretically, we want to elaborate on how they are typically related to the functions of academic language: Reflection in the cognitive domain can, for example, refer to linguistic structural aspects of the communicative function of language; at the same time, however, it is also possible to address the linguistic conceptualization of certain objects of knowledge and the extent to which this is reflected in language or influenced by it.

Socio-cultural aspects such as the appropriateness of language use and its social symbolism can also be the subject of cognitive reflection, or the functions of language can be discussed against the background of their socio-political or highly subjective and emotional scope, including social or aesthetic components, but also power-related factors such as language barriers. In this context, one’s own linguistic biography and experiences can open up communicative spaces that may be built up collaboratively. Such spaces raise awareness of the existence of multilingual realities of life and worlds of thought with everyone involved and influence epistemic diverse processes of knowledge building.

3 | Methods

We will present a secondary data analysis from the project *mehr sprachig lernen*, an interview study of adolescents with a

family language other than German. We conducted interviews about their experiences with multilingualism in the German school system. The original aim of the project was to reconstruct the learners’ perspectives on (their) multilingualism in general as well as in a school context and, if applicable, to identify specific learning strategies. The qualitative data analysis revealed a remarkable number of language-related considerations and reflections, pointing towards various dimensions of Language Awareness. For this reason, we conducted a re-analysis of the material with this specific focus. It should be noted, however, that our research method itself, i.e., qualitative interviews, can promote (meta-) linguistic reflections and thus also strengthen certain aspects of Language Awareness in the interviewees. This must be taken into account when classifying the findings.

Our research questions for the secondary analysis are:

- To what extent do migrant multilingual teenage learners reflect on their language use?
- To what extent can these reflections be categorized according to different levels of Language Awareness (cognitive, performative, social-emotional, biographical, and power-related)?

The sample of adolescents consists of a total of 20 students. At the time of the interview, all of them were students in a German school, aiming to graduate within the next year or two. 14 students have grown up in Germany. Independent of the context of acquisition or proficiency level, a total of 16 (mostly family) languages as well as three foreign languages have been named, each by at least one participant.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2018, 97). A deductive-inductive analysis was initially carried out, with deductive categories based on the interview questions; inductive categories were added from the material. We elaborated a category system with a coding scheme, including coding rules and prime examples. For our secondary analysis, results were reanalyzed along the dimensions of Language Awareness, again following a deductive-inductive procedure. In the sense of communicative validation (Kruse 2021), cases of doubt were discussed within the research group. Some interview quotes could be assigned to more than one category (Table 1).

4 | Findings

4.1 | Cognitive and Performative Dimensions of Language Awareness

Our data analysis reveals several findings that refer to the cognitive dimension of Language Awareness. Many students draw cross-linguistic comparisons as a way to facilitate learning in a more or less elaborate way. The emerging potentials depend on the individual constitution of each learner’s linguistic repertoire.

One student (12TNA) explains in a relatively vague manner that “structures are often the same, aren’t they? Not in Latin or something, but the structures are mostly the same. [...] That’s my personal opinion, and that’s why it’s not hard for me to learn

TABLE 1 | Category scheme of secondary analysis on Language Awareness.

| Category | Subcategory 1 | Subcategory 2 |
|------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Emotional dimension | Sense of load | |
| | Connectedness through language | |
| | Positive attitude towards a language | |
| | Negative attitude towards a language | |
| Social dimension | Sense of loss | |
| | Experience of inclusion/exclusion through varieties | |
| | Intentional use of language to exclude others | |
| | Lack of participation due to lack of language competence | |
| | Language as home | |
| | Enhanced teacher-learner relationship through consideration of multilingualism in a school setting | |
| | Intercultural exchange | |
| | Language-based disadvantage | |
| Biographical dimension | Intentional use of language for competence development in the family | |
| | Change in language use through entry into kindergarten | |
| | Change in language use through school attendance | |
| | Decrease in competencies in family language over the course of life | |
| | Improvement of competencies in the family language over the course of life | |
| | Attention to mixing languages | |
| Cognitive dimension | Reflective language learning experiences | |
| | Cross-linguistic derivation of words | |
| | Metalinguistic activities | Identification of language cognates |
| | | Comparison of grammar (in general) |
| | | Comparison of sentence structure |
| | | Comparison of morphology |
| | | Comparison of orthography |
| | | Comparison of expressive language |
| | | Comparison of vocabulary |
| | | Observation of idiomatic language use |
| | Observation concerning pronunciation | |

a new language.”⁶ Interestingly, the student initially mentions a distance between Latin and other languages he knows, even though in terms of typological features his observation may be incorrect. Similarly, another student separates Turkish from Latin and Italian: “If you know Latin, for example. You can actually also learn Italian. Because they are similar. But Turkish is not similar to any other language that I learned at school” (10TNA).

Other students describe cross-linguistic transfer between languages: One person (15TN2) reports that Latin is helpful to understand other languages, “so that you can classify a little bit

where it [a word] comes from. So it actually helps me much more to classify. Not with the direct understanding. [...] I just had an approximate feeling for the language.” Other students compare their own with modern foreign languages: “Um, since grammar is pretty close, and um, I think I got a feeling for it, how it is in Italian, and I can use this feeling for Spanish as well.” (14TN1). 6TNA adds that “in French in the sixth grade, there were also some things that were similar. // Not much, but the things that were similar were also used.” Another student (12TNA) extends her observations to further languages she does not speak but that are meaningful to her in her everyday life: “And because

of that, I think I can also get along well in the Netherlands, for example, when I know that they don't know German, but Dutch and German are almost the same, then I can empathize with the language very well."

Students also tend to notice phonological and phonetic differences, both in relation to themselves and to others. One student (14TNC) describes the Arabic language as "strong" because it is "always with the (.) [q], too, which is quite breathed on. [...] That is also much, much rougher [than other languages]" (14TNC). Another one pays attention to his own accent in Turkish: "So I can't quite pronounce the 'r' (laughs) //in Turkish//. [...] //with me it sounds somehow with a little accent" (10TN1).

Some students compare linguistic subcategories or further epistemic aspects, such as counting (9TN1): "The way you express numbers so that for each country is different." Another person (11TN1) reports that "for example, now in Spanish I just pay attention to how the grammar / how you form a sentence. And I can often compare that with Greek. And then I try to put these //sentences// in the same way." The same person also independently discovered differences between the German and Greek writing systems or the Greek and Latin alphabet, respectively: "And then I always recited the ABC in German and then in Greek. And then I also noticed that there are a lot of differences. [...] I couldn't write my name correctly in German. Because / because something went wrong in the system, and then there was no more 'h' in my name" (11TN1). A few students mention negative transfer, too: "So the disadvantage in school in Spanish, for example, is that you can confuse a lot of things. [...] That they are, of course, very similar. There are advantages and disadvantages." (6TNA). 14TN1 reports that "in Spanish it's helped me a lot in the last two years. [...] Of course, there's also the danger of confusing the words. //That has been my problem in writing. The teacher came to me and said, 'Yes, unfortunately I had to give you a four'. You almost wrote your exam in Italian" (14TN1).

4.2 | Social-Emotional, Biographical and Power Dimension of Language Awareness

The mention of emotions in our data is mostly linked to a sense of belonging to others. Students point out that they enjoy speaking their home language: "Uhm, yes, well, I like our language, and I think it's very beautiful, and that's why I like to speak it. And I just feel at home with it" (2TNA). They cultivate their shared language as a link within the family: "Um, at my grandma's house, they all like to talk in Albanian, even though they know German" (10TNA). A rather small community of speakers can mark a particularly strong connection between the respective speakers with the use of varieties: "For example, they have an acquaintance who comes from Turkey. But his grandfather [...] knew this dialect. [...] And that's why they communicate with each other like this (11TN)." They also link it to a more expressive use of language, like curses, insults, or metaphors: 9TN1 describes how "compliments sound very beautiful in Albanian, which you don't understand here, like when you say: 'I eat your heart.' That sounds like a 'cannibal' in German, but in Albanian it's actually a very / a very great compliment." When it comes to the expression of their feelings, some students report to writing poetry or music. In this case, apart from their family languages, English plays a prominent part.

6TNA notices that there are "two distinct directions of languages. I like to call it the exotic language // the direction of// Italian, uh, Spanish, Portuguese and then there are other languages (.) //with also// going in the direction of English, American, and then the other direction, Turkish, Arabic." Two other interviewees reflect on negative experiences of certain groups of speakers: "For example, Turkish or Persian or generally oriental-sounding languages (...) definitely depend on the attitude of the people. People who tend to be racist, for example, find it more difficult when someone speaks another language." (12TN2). In the context of (new) friendships, the students express a quick sense of belonging to a group through the shared linguistic repertoire: "I always found it very nice when I found friends who spoke my language. Then I could speak the language with them [...]. And you immediately felt at home again" (9TN1). Similarly, a student reports that a classmate from Poland was very happy to meet another Polish-speaking student, and likewise, "[...] they talked briefly in Polish, and this boy, who was a bit younger than her, was always very happy to see her and always came up to her and wanted to speak Polish with her" (12TN2).

Sometimes, they express the wish to learn their friends' languages, too: "I'm also learning Turkish from my Turkish friends." (7TNNC), or to learn from each other: "And um, I also sometimes try to exchange words with my friends. For example, I have a friend who comes from Turkey. And with her I sometimes exchange Greek words for Turkish words. [...] We try to bring our own culture closer to each other" (16TN1). In the few cases teachers use common languages to connect to their students, it enhances the student-teacher-relationship: "So they [the teachers] write a German text and then write [...] You've done a good job!' or 'Keep it up!' in Turkish, as a joke. [...] Which I think is really cool of them. [...] And that also gives the [...] student and the teacher a cooler connection" (1TN1).

In conversations with friends or parents, they use their languages deliberately to maintain privacy: "If other people are not supposed to understand us because we have //private conversations//, we just talk in Turkish from time to time. That's quite practical then" (1TN1). However, students reproduce the risk of social exclusion of others through the use of their languages in class. And [the teachers] then just say, "We are at school here. And German is spoken here. But I think they say that for the reason that no person is excluded. //Because they// don't understand the other language" (16TN1). Other students think it is "not fair for the others" (11TNA) or "a little impolite" (11TNA) if they use their home language or mix languages. The other way around, their languages have partly been excluded from early on: "Yes, in primary school it was just that they wanted to push my second language back a bit (.) and they wanted to bring the German language to the fore" (11TNA). One person also mentions the increased linguistic challenges in secondary school. She attributes the linguistic difficulties in German, that is, the language of education, to her own multilingualism: "In the secondary school I first noticed that being multilingual [...] was also a disadvantage for me. [...] Now [...] I just have to write texts, and sometimes I miss the words, or [...] I have difficulties forming the sentences correctly, grammatically" (10TNA).

Some students also describe their changing language proficiency, shaped by biographical circumstances and the respective

surrounding language(s). For example, one person reports that after her stay abroad, her skills in English and Spanish had improved considerably, but her German language skills had to be reactivated, and her competence in home language was no longer available: “They greeted me and [...] asked me something, and then all of a sudden I only had Spanish in my head” (I2TN2). However, changes in language use are also due to family dynamics, such as divorce or grandparents moving away, as those strongly influence the amount of input: “And that means I didn’t hear the language so often anymore” (I5TN2). Sometimes language attrition prompts the interviewees to take countermeasures. This happens primarily in two ways: (i) the conscious choice of language in communication with parents, other family members, or friends, and (ii) through targeted media consumption.

5 | Discussion

We pointed out that epistemic diversity and inclusion are necessary goals to provide holistic approaches to knowledge production, taking various epistemic and non-epistemic factors into account. In this context, a central factor is the role of language(s) and Language Awareness. We argue that its use is closely intertwined with knowledge building in (at least) three ways according to the three functions of academic language (communicative, epistemic, and social) (Morek and Heller 2012). A monolingual habitus not only limits the cognitive and social epistemic potentials for both the individual and the group, but also has negative consequences in terms of educational and professional development

The considerations and strategies mentioned by the students point to an independent development of cross-linguistic strategies and Language Awareness. Even though the students may not even have mentioned all aspects, it is remarkable how many explicit metalinguistic references we find in the interviews, especially as we had not included this topic in our interview guidelines. Our data show different qualities in the complexity of linguistic knowledge and point to different directions regarding their use. These metalinguistic strategies point towards a use of their linguistic resources as a communicative as well as an epistemic tool. They do not only compare languages or linguistic structures; they also make use of their languages to expand their understanding of an (academic) expression, concept, or idea. Some students draw meta-level comparisons in a more elaborated way, mostly referring to linguistic subcategories, but also to further epistemic aspects, such as the representation of numbers. That way, one could argue, they seek out epistemic diversity. In many cases, the students’ awareness proves to be rather implicit, though, and can only be verbalized to a limited extent. Some students also are aware of key differences between languages that can have an impact on their language learning, e.g., in terms of negative transfer.

However, languages might feel more distant for the students than they typologically are, due to their different status in the educational system. Thus, as long as teachers fail to address this in class, opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer may go unnoticed, and the group does not benefit. Students may not have an opportunity to make use of their resources. The quotations show that students tend to develop an awareness of linguistic

features even though unguided. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that languages that are an integral part of the curriculum have a greater share in school learning and thus structurally provide greater potential for Language Awareness formation and use. One concern of epistemic inclusion could be to shift these relations. At the same time, it is also necessary to take into account that typological characteristics play a central role and can provide a suitable starting point for the development of awareness if introduced properly.

Against this background, it makes sense to initiate targeted language comparisons with the family languages of the learners to support subject-specific and linguistic learning. This could be especially relevant for the education of newly arrived immigrant students. At present, this is done in the classroom primarily with reference to foreign languages and ancient languages such as Ancient Greek or Latin (Schastak 2020). The insights we draw from this not only offer us etymological knowledge but might strengthen our understanding of the subjects themselves. All learners can participate by using their multilingual repertoire, making its value for epistemic diversity accessible. English plays a prominent part for students regarding lyrics or poetry, most likely due to its pop-cultural status. The various (linguistic) resources students bring with them could be used, for example, through a pedagogical translanguaging (Wang 2022). The existing attention to linguistic similarities and differences could be taken up by the teacher to enhance the development of communicative, especially written, language skills in all languages. This might also enable cooperation with heritage language teachers.

In addition, the findings clearly show the social-emotional significance family languages have for the students. The interviewees express a feeling of home when using their family language. This occurs on a general level of feeling comfortable when the language is being used; besides, with regard to family and friends, and as a way to connect to other members of the same language community. They fulfill the function of marking belonging, providing a feeling of safety, security, and being at home. Some students (implicitly) refer to sociolinguistic phenomena such as language ideologies. These findings count against language prohibitions or bans in schools (Maleike 2020). Instead, if learners can freely develop this part of their personality and experience an appreciation, it could ultimately have not only an emotionally empowering but also a learning-promoting effect due to a good atmosphere in the classroom, positive self-esteem of the learners, and their motivation to participate (Tankir 2018). A stronger inclusion of migrant family languages in everyday school life could also lead to a shift in the linguistic hierarchy structure, at least to a certain degree (Li 2018; Wang 2022).

The findings demonstrate that language acquisition is dynamic and that language competences are fluid (Busch 2013, 10f.). Some of the learners recognized only as adolescents that the strong focus on German had led to a certain decrease in the use and/or proficiency of their family language. The exclusionary function of language is often mentioned, but it is mostly thought of as a one-way. German appears to be needed as a common language to include all. They are aware of the difference between acknowledged and unacknowledged multilingualism as well as of the option to exclude somebody through language. Many reflect on (i) situations in which they themselves were excluded due to a

lack of language skills, (ii) on their own use of a certain language to exclude other people from certain conversations, and (iii) on situations when they fear that other people will be excluded by a certain language use. One could argue that the other way around, the sole use of German may exclude students who do not yet have a secure command of German in a similar way that the use of academic language may exclude those with little proficiency in it. However, this perspective has not been taken in our data, and there is no critical reflection of the dominant position of German as a central medium of communication and learning (Schastak 2020, 22). On the contrary, students tend to reproduce the position that languages other than German may exclude their classmates and therefore should not be part of the class.

At the same time, some adolescents do use their family language skills very consciously in order to keep other people from understanding certain conversations and thus, in a sense, use language as a means of exerting power. The family language takes on the role of an insider language, perceived as a communicative advantage. In this case, once again knowledge is only made available to a specific target group in the sense of an epistemic exclusion based on the choice of language (Schastak 2020, 142; Li 2011). However, it differs from the way described above, as it is a bottom-up process that can be understood as a self-empowering act on the part of the learners (Li 2018).

6 | Conclusion

The findings show how Language Awareness among multilingual students unfolds in a cognitive, but also emotional-social and biographical dimension. Language Awareness is to be understood as part of an epistemic diversity that can be made fruitful for teaching-learning processes. Therefore, the linguistic diversity and language skills of students should be considered a valuable resource for teaching instead of an obstacle that will be overcome. The promotion of Language Awareness as a didactic concept and the stronger anchoring of multilingual approaches in schools and classes could lead to a reduction in educational inequality and an increase in epistemic justice. An important point in this is also the inclusion of non-epistemic, socially diverse factors that also influence learning situations as they frame them. They can be explicitly subjective, as they are fueled by biographical perspectives, which in turn influence everything else mentioned up to this point. Language Awareness can make a decisive overall contribution to the concerns of universal language education in multilingual contexts. This might be done, for example, through didactic approaches such as pedagogical translanguaging, but also through a greater appreciation and strengthening of heritage language learning. Language learning strategies and cross-linguistic comparisons could be used effectively here to shape the learning process in a needs-oriented and sustainable way, which could lead to epistemic justice (Zheng and Qiu 2023). In order to achieve such goals, various stakeholders from teacher training, educational settings, administration, and academia must start a dialog and collaborate. Research should explore further the connection of epistemic diversity in the classroom to concepts like Language Awareness or other multilingual pedagogies.

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Ethics Statement

All participants as well as in case of minors their parents gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the University of Cologne, and all data has been protected according to European data privacy acts (DGSVO).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Interview data has not been published in order to protect the privacy of all participants. However, all original quotes (in German) of this paper have been listed in the appendix.

Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/ijal.12802>

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We have not included data or material from other sources in our study.

Endnotes

¹For further information: <https://www.fmks.eu/bilinguale-angebote/karte-mehrsprachige-schulen.html> (07/2024).

²For an overview of multilingual pedagogies in Germany, see Bredthauer (2018).

³Gobbo and Russo (2020, 189) mention ‘all sorts of *non-propositional* factors that may play a role at any step of the process of knowledge production: social and cultural relations, interaction with technology, the use of specific conceptual frameworks, and also the use of different vehicular languages.

⁴The concepts of academic language are still controversial. Various parallel concepts such as *language of schooling* (Schlepppegrell 2010) or *cognitive academic language proficiency* (Cummins 2008) form part of the discourse, some of which overlap but have different emphases. In line with Morek and Heller (2012) and Snow and Uccelli (2009), we will keep the term *academic language* here.

⁵For details, see Wamhoff et al. 2022.

⁶Data availability: original quotes (German) are accessible via <https://uni-koeln.sciebo.de/s/dTnuhGp5zRl25sB> (05/2025).

⁷On a scale from 1 (= very good) to 6 (= insufficient). Grade four means “sufficient.”

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