

Chapter 9. Multilingual assessment of geography: beliefs of secondary school teachers

Fauve De Backer, Eva De Cooman, Stef Slembrouck and Piet Van Avermaet

Fauve DE BACKER is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Diversity and Learning, Linguistics Department, Ghent University, Belgium. Her research interests include multilingualism and assessment in primary and secondary education.

Eva DE COOMAN is a social worker at a Pupil Guidance Centre (CLB). She has a bachelor degree in Social Work and a Master degree in Gender and Diversity.

Stef SLEMBROUCK is a Senior Professor in English Linguistics at Ghent University and Director of the University Language Centre. Among his key interests are the implications of globalization-related and migration-affected multilingualism for the functioning of institutions and the construction of social categories and realities.

Piet VAN AVERMAET is Professor in 'Language and Diversity' in the Linguistics Department of Ghent University, Belgium and Director of the Centre for Diversity & Learning. His expertise and research interests cover topics related to multilingualism, social inequality, language policy and practice, language assessment, diversity and inclusion, integration and participation, discrimination in education, migration.

Abstract

It is imperative that a model of multilingual education addresses the issue of how to assess multilingual learners. Assessment is an inherent part of the educational process and a powerful tool for both teachers and students to get more insight into the competences of the students. At the moment, multilingual learners are being assessed with tests on content (e.g. mathematics, science) that have been designed for monolinguals. Too often, this causes them to underperform because they fail to demonstrate their content knowledge. Multilingual assessment, where the students can use their multilingual repertoires to express their ideas, can address this problem. For example, the provision of accommodations such as a dictionary or a bilingual test for can decrease the linguistic difficulties multilingual students face. In this paper we analyse the beliefs of Flemish geography teachers in the third grade of technical secondary education about their assessment of multilingual learners. The results of 10 semi-structured interviews indicate that teachers do recognize the language barrier that multilingual students face and that this insight seems to be a prerequisite for openness towards assessment accommodations. However, the teachers express concerns in terms of feasibility, fairness, comparability of test results and the importance of not lowering the educational level.

1. Introduction

Diversity in society and in education is increasing. Teachers often feel insufficiently prepared to meet the needs of multilingual students and address the challenges that the increased diversity in their classroom poses (Vantieghem, Van Avermaet, Groenez, & Lambert, 2018). This is also the case when it comes to the assessment of multilingual students. Multilingual learners are often not assessed in their most proficient language (De Backer, Van Avermaet, & Slembrouck, 2017) and, therefore, may not be able to demonstrate their full potential owing to their limited language abilities in the language of schooling. They need to develop both general academic vocabulary in the language of schooling and academic vocabulary needed in specific disciplines such as mathematics, geography ('jargon') in order to develop understanding of the concepts and understand as well as answer test questions in a language other than their home language (Lo & Lin, 2014). The number of students speaking home languages that differ from the language of schooling is increasing, which adds challenges to the daily classroom practices of teachers who are often insufficiently prepared to assess these learners in a valid and fair way (De Backer, forthcoming). International scholars emphasize the need for accommodations to assessment procedures to promote greater equity in the assessment of multilingual learners (Wolf et al., 2008).

Given the novelty of this research field, many issues remain unexplored, including classroom assessment practices and beliefs, perspectives as well as attitudes that teachers hold towards possible accommodations. If we want to help multilingual students demonstrate their skills and knowledge, we should assist teachers in improving the assessment procedures for these multilingual students. In other words, we should assist the teachers to support the students. This should not be done lightly since teachers have many concerns which we should take seriously. A first step, therefore, is to gain insight in what their main concerns are and reflect on how we can address these issues. In what follows, we will discuss teachers' beliefs about assessment and give a brief overview of the literature on assessment accommodations for multilingual learners before we present the methodology and the results. Given the widespread use of traditional tests, we focus this study on summative assessment. The research objective of this study is to (a) investigate teachers' beliefs about assessment and accommodations for multilingual learners and to (b) explore teachers' practices of assessment and accommodations for multilingual learners.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Teachers' beliefs about assessment for multilingual learners

The most widely used definition of beliefs is the one from Pajares (2016): “Beliefs are dispositions to action and major determinants of behaviour, although the dispositions are time and context specific – qualities that have important implications for research and measurement” (Pajares, 2016, p. 313). Research on teachers' beliefs is crucial to get a picture of teachers' behaviour (Lucero, Valcke, & Schellens, 2013) because beliefs and behaviour impact each other although the relationship between practices and beliefs is a complex one (Bonner, 2016; Pajares, 2016; Roose, Vantieghem, Vanderlinde, & Van Avermaet, 2019). This is also the case in assessment actions (Bonner, 2016). Bonner (2016) therefore suggests investigating beliefs and practices as a whole.

Studying teachers' beliefs about multilingual learners in the Flemish context, Pulinx, Agirdag and Van Avermaet (2014) show that teachers generally adhere to monolingual policies which are translated into a widely supported ‘Dutch-only’ approach. The vast majority of teachers, policy makers as well as parents are convinced that maximal and exclusive exposure to the dominant language in school is the best option to help students learn the language of schooling and raise academic achievement (Blommaert & Van Avermaet, 2008). They are convinced that forbidding other languages than the majority language will benefit the students' achievement. As Agirdag, Van Avermaet, and Van Houtte (2013) state, these students “are expected to have a language deficiency at the baseline before they enter the school.” (p. 26).

Although scholars have extensively investigated teachers' beliefs and their impact, less attention has been directed towards teachers' beliefs about assessment of multilingual students. Some research has pointed out the importance of language and perceptions of language abilities on assessment. For example, Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Agirdag (2015) found that teachers gave lower grades to oral work presented in a vernacular dialect, even when the work presented was of the same quality as work presented in the standard language variety. In a recent study in Flanders, 30 primary and secondary teachers were interviewed and talk about the kind of support they spontaneously provide to students with difficulties in the language of schooling. It appeared that there was a big variety in assessment practices for students who are still in the process of acquiring the language of schooling. While some teachers provide linguistic modifications (e.g. splitting up double questions), others focus on read-alouds in the language of schooling and some teachers do not provide any accommodations at all (De Backer et al.,

2017). In what follows, we will give an overview of the research on assessment accommodations for multilingual learners.

2.2. Assessment accommodations

Assessment is not just a buzzword for ‘evaluation’, but a very specific and comprehensive ‘broad’ form of evaluation. Brookhart (2004) understands ‘assessment’ as the gathering of information about a student’s advancement. Assessments can take shape in many formats (Escamilla, 2006). In classroom-based assessment the focus shifts towards Assessment For Learning (Black & William, 1998; Wiliam, 2011), Formative Assessment (Assessment Reform Group et al., 2002; Black & William, 1998; Jones & Saville, 2016), Learner Oriented Assessment (Jones & Saville, 2016) or Dynamic Assessment (Lidz & Gindis, 2003). What many of these concepts have in common is their focus on the learning process rather than the product and the interactivity with the learner, as inspired by Vygotsky (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development. At the other end of the spectrum is summative assessment or Assessment Of Learning, where the focus is on the outcomes. The most widely used method is that of a traditional tests (Escamilla, 2006). One problem associated with traditional content-based tests is that they are designed for monolinguals and fail to present a valid picture of the actual levels of academic achievement of multilingual learners (Levin & Shohamy, 2008; Shohamy, 2011). According to Vandeputte (2014), one challenge in education consists of adapting the evaluation according to the needs and individual profiles of the students and avoiding the same evaluation for everyone. These adaptations of traditional tests are labelled *accommodations*. Assessment accommodations are defined as: “changes to test administration, responses, or the test itself that are offered to emergent bilingual students for standardized tests and for classroom assessments” (Schissel, 2014, p. 282). Accommodations are intended to help students take a test and in contrast to test modifications, students can meet the same expectations as their peers, for instance cover the same material. For multilingual students, the goal of these adjustments is to reduce uncertainties resulting from a potential lack of knowledge of the language of schooling and to ensure that all students can show their knowledge in every subject (Schissel, 2014).

Two kinds of accommodations can be distinguished (Educational Testing Service, 2009). Direct linguistic support includes adaptations to the language of the test, whilst indirect linguistic support improves the test conditions. An example of the former is giving the pupil a test in their home language (orally or written) and an example of the latter giving the students more time.

Studies have shown that direct linguistic support is most effective in helping multilingual students (Pitoniak et al., 2009). Abedi, Hofstetter, and Lord (2004) point out that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to adaptations: the efficacy and validity of accommodations depends on the characteristics of the students. This corresponds to the findings of De Backer, Baele, Slembrouck, and Van Avermaet (2019), who indicate that the accommodations students receive depend on personal preferences (e.g. some student prefer to read, others prefer to listen), language competence in both the language of schooling and in the home language (e.g. a bilingual test will not be helpful if the student is not able to read in his/her L1), the content and the difficulty of the test.

There are different possible accommodations that can be given to students whose home language is different from the language of schooling. One of the most commonly used indirect linguistic accommodations is providing extra time. The traditional logic holds that language learners would be more capable of demonstrating their content knowledge and skills if they got extra time to work through the language demands of the test (Kieffer et. al., 2009). Clark-Gareca (2016) agrees with this by mentioning that giving extra time for language learners is a shared accommodation used by all teachers in his research.

Simplifying/modifying the academic language is one possible direct linguistic accommodation relating to vocabulary and grammar, meaning that unnecessary linguistic complexity is avoided. Examples include eliminating vocabulary unrelated to the content, shortening sentences, changing passive voices into active voices, and replacing complex verb forms with present tense verbs (Kieffer, Lesaux, Rivera, & Francis, 2009). According to Abedi et. al. (2004), the effects of simplifying the language may rely in part on the nature and the extent of the modifications made. Another option is providing bilingual tests. Abedi et. al. (2004) mention that it may seem quite easy to translate all content knowledge tests into the students' home languages. However, there are several issues, for example, the risk that the two versions of the test still differ in content and form. Students who have learned subject-specific academic vocabulary in classes conducted in the language of schooling may not be familiar with the corresponding academic vocabulary items in their home language. In addition, Clark-Gareca (2016) points out that translations ask for more financial and practical resources and this is why the use of bilingual tests was not supported by the majority of the teachers in his study. Other possible accommodations are mono- or bilingual dictionaries and glossaries. These can be used with the intention to give definitions about concepts that are essential to comprehend the questions

(Kieffer et. al., 2009). Abedi et. al. (2004) noticed that commercially available dictionaries vary broadly in the level of complexity of the vocabulary used in the definitions. They also acknowledge that commercial dictionaries can give information that is actually being tested. In other words, if tests ask for academic knowledge, dictionaries that explain academic concepts, cannot be used in tests. Students could simply copy the information. Clark-Gareca (2016) found that more than half of the teachers in his study reported they never allowed students to use dictionaries. Additionally, bilingual dictionaries in a range of language are not always available in schools. Glossaries are more limited than dictionaries in that they provide definitions or simple paraphrases of potentially unfamiliar or difficult words (Wolf, Kao, Rivera, & Chang, 2012) but often, students are not familiar with the glossary (Wolf, Kim, & Kao, 2012). Providing pictures is another possible accommodation (De Backer, Baele, et al., 2019). Lin (2012) advises teachers to use multimodal resources like images and graphic organizers to facilitate access to academic science texts in the language of schooling. We suggest the same resources may be helpful in the exams.

In the research of De Backer et al. (2017), 15 primary and 15 secondary teachers were interviewed about their school policy and their teaching practices in a school where a majority of the students is multilingual . While the focus of this study was not specifically on assessment, the interviews pointed out that 13% of the teachers said that before a test, they read the questions out loud, asking students if they understood the question or asking them to repeat the question in their own words, to ensure that they had understood the question. In addition, more than 50% of the teachers mentioned that they do not subtract points for grammatical or spelling errors for multilingual students. Clark-Gareca's investigation (2016) also shows that 30% of the teachers mentioned they give one-on-one help for language learner students and a little bit less frequently for students who already have a better knowledge of the language of schooling; as pupils' language abilities increase they get fewer accommodations for mathematics and science tests. Half of the teachers said that there was a second adult to assist them in providing support for students during the test. To date, little is known about the beliefs and practices of secondary school teachers in Flanders in terms of accommodations for and assessment of multilingual students. Some teachers already make a few adaptations for multilingual students, but more research is necessary (De Backer, et. al., 2017). This investigation seeks to contribute to our understanding on this complex matter. More specifically, it seeks to investigate the beliefs of Flemish secondary teachers regarding the achievement and assessment of multilingual learners, specifically focusing on secondary technical school teachers of geography. In technical

education, attention goes in particular to general and technical-theoretical subjects. After completing this track, students may practice a profession or transfer to higher education. In the specific context of Flanders, where teachers often hold negative perceptions and attitudes towards multilingualism (Pulinx et al., 2015), we hypothesise that teachers will be rather hesitant towards assessment accommodations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

The research presented here is part of the MulAE project (Multilingual Assessment in Education) which investigates how multilingual students can be assessed to get an accurate view on their competences. This research project was conducted in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. Flemish education has a tradition of ‘freedom of education’ where teachers have the authority in many of the educational decisions, including their assessment practices and, thus, accommodations. There is no tradition of nationwide standardized testing (Ysenbaert, Van Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2017). Our research takes place in vocational secondary education where more ‘alternative’ methods of assessment such as peer assessment and observations are used, than in technical secondary education where more traditional assessment practices are dominant (Verhoeven, Devos, Bruylant, & V., 2002).

3.2 Participants

In this study, ten secondary school teachers were interviewed who teach geography to students aged 16-18 in third grade in technical education. These students, who come from many different backgrounds, enter directly into the labour market or continue studying in higher education. The schools were selected through the government body AgODi (Agentschap voor onderwijsdiensten) which collects and provides statistical information about students in Flanders, among others their home languages. Schools located in Ghent and Antwerp with 40% or more students speaking a language other than Dutch at home were contacted by e-mail and then by telephone. Schools self-selected a third-grade geography teacher for an interview. From the twenty-four schools that met the selection criteria, ten schools gave a positive response, six schools in Antwerp and four in Ghent. Teachers (6 males, 4 females) were aged between 25 and 50 years old, with teaching experience between 4 and more than 20 years.

3.3 Methods for data collection and analysis

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews in Dutch, lasting between 21 and 53 minutes. The interviews started with broad, open questions where the teachers could talk about a wide range of issues (e.g. “What kinds of evaluation do you use to test your pupils’ knowledge?”), followed by more structured questions. For example, teachers were shown cards with pictograms (see Appendix) that presented test accommodations. The interviewers would first explain the cards to the teacher and then ask them to sort them in three columns: accommodations they already use, those they do not but would like to do use, and those they would most certainly not want to try. Open, selective and axial coding (Mortelmans, 2013) were used both to get some structure in the interviews and preserve the unique stories of the teachers. Examples of broad identified themes were: accommodations with the subthemes (a) fairness (b) impact of language simplification and (c) comparing scores, and assessment with the subthemes (a) assessing multilingual learners (b) concerns (c) achievement of multilingual learners). The software programme Nvivo11 supported the analysis.

The aim of these methods is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are teachers’ beliefs about assessment for multilingual learners and accommodations for multilingual learners?
- 2) Which assessment and accommodation practices for multilingual learners do teachers report on.

4. Results

The aim of this study is to investigate teachers’ beliefs about assessment of multilingual learners. Since beliefs and behaviour impact each other, we analyse the self-reported behaviour of teachers and their beliefs in combination in the following section. The findings presented are structured according to two central themes: teachers’ beliefs about the (under-) achievement of multilingual children and their assessment accommodations.

4.1 Teachers’ beliefs about multilingual students’ achievement

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) compares the achievement between students who speak the language of schooling at home and students from language-minority backgrounds. Some of these studies find that the latter students underperform on these science, mathematics and reading tests (OECD, 2016). During the interviews, we asked the

teachers' whether they notice any underachievement of students who speak a home language other than the language of schooling and what they believe could possibly explain this underachievement. During the interviews, four different explanatory factors are suggested: student motivation, parent involvement, social and cultural backgrounds as well as home language. Some teachers believe that the parents' insufficient support of their children impacts the general achievement of the students. Others believe that some children are less privileged and live in deprived neighbourhoods. They believe this impacts the students' achievement. For example, Kris thinks that cultural capital in general is very important for school success. He believes that parents should read to their kids, go to the library, the movies "even in the home language, because then they have a basis to fall back on". Finally, most of the teachers believe that students who do not speak the language of schooling at home, tend to obtain lower scores. Apart from Kobe and Marie, all teachers mention that the problem arises from 'the language barrier'. They refer to the students' limited knowledge in the language of schooling that causes problems in understanding the content taught which is subsequently being assessed. For example, in geography, some students do not understand the general academic vocabulary (e.g. 'head of state') that is taken for granted by many native speakers. Additionally, teachers believe that some students are unable to express their ideas, especially in written language, and that they struggle to understand the test questions. This can lead to students underperforming as explained by Joren:

"On tests, I get a lot of questions from students like: 'what exactly are you asking?', 'I don't understand the question.' It is not only literally understanding of the words, but not being able to get the essence out of the question and that makes it harder for them. The language costs them points, not understanding a question, not answering correctly."

By contrast, two teachers, Kobe and Marie, explicitly mention that language is not the problem. According to Marie, "the school already takes the language barriers into account; they accommodate where possible, they have module systems, extra lessons...". Kobe explains that – what he calls - 'foreign students' "use their language as a curtain [to cover something, note from the editors], they abuse it". In his eyes, they "take a victim role" and are "rather lazy", which relates back to the teachers' explanations regarding students' motivation as an explanatory variable for their underachievement. Kobe explains that he gives them the opportunity to write in English if it is too hard for them, but even then, they do not write anything:

"I don't think it has really to do with the language, I often feel that it is being misused, the language argument. I have someone in the sixth year who needs to study in advance because he has bad results, but he always mentions that he does not understand. But he

does understand, it is a backdoor, like ‘oh I haven’t studied, I will say that I didn’t understand.’ Because he may also hand in his preparations in English if it is too difficult for him but he does not do that, so that says something... I feel often that foreign students take the victim position... Just because they are lazy, some people are lazy... there are also native Dutch speaking students who are lazy, but I notice that non-native Dutch speaking students say more easily ‘I am not doing that or I don’t want to’.

4.2 Teachers’ beliefs about assessment accommodations for multilingual learners

During the interview, teachers were shown cards with pictograms that presented several types of test accommodations: linguistic simplification, extra time, dictionaries (both monolingual and bilingual), glossaries, pictures, and bilingual tests. In what follows, we will discuss which of these accommodations teachers already report they use, which ones they consider using and which accommodations they oppose to.

4.2.1 Monolingual accommodations

All teachers say they use difficult jargon in a test because they believe in geography difficult vocabulary is used which they cannot leave out. While six teachers avoid difficult academic language in test, four use it for different reasons. Manon believes that students will need to know this vocabulary if they go to higher education and Mike reports that he only uses difficult words the students have previously been taught. Kobe and Kris use difficult general academic vocabulary but they believe that they compensate for this difficulty either by allowing the use of dictionaries or by reading out the questions and reformulating them.

The teachers distinguish between subject-specific language and academic language they have simplified. Some teachers believe that they do not lower the level of education because they do not avoid subject-specific language, rather, they simplify the language because it helps explain the difficult subject-specific language which students should know. By contrast, other teachers like Kobe and Manon, explain that the use of simplified academic language, lowers the level of education. For Manon, it is important that the students’ proficiency in Dutch improves and that they learn new words as this improves their chances to access higher education.

All teachers support – in principle - the idea to give students as much time as they need. However, in practice, teachers question the feasibility of giving extra time for the test, since they only have one hour a week to teach their content. Manon believes that giving extra time is unnecessary, especially when subject knowledge such as the location of countries is tested. She believes that students who have studied will either be able to provide the correct answer.

Seven of ten teachers report that they give students the opportunity to use Dutch dictionaries in the classroom but that the students do not often use them, both during instruction and assessment. Tine believes that students do not use dictionaries because she only uses vocabulary during the test that was also taught in class. Contrary to her colleagues, Manon does not let students use a dictionary in the language of schooling, because they need to explain words in the test. Only two teachers allow students to use a glossary in class and only one would allow its use during a test. Most of the teachers feel that the students should make their own glossaries as they are already in the third grade. Kobe and Mike do not find a glossary useful as the students could use a dictionary which is more comprehensive.

The teachers were unanimously positive about the use of pictures. They use them a lot and feel this is really helpful during a test. Teachers use it to ‘break-up’ a text or to visualise concepts. Not all available accommodations were shown as pictograms during the interviews, but teachers spontaneously mentioned other support measures, for example, accepting answers in incorrect Dutch and not subtracting points for spelling and grammar mistakes. They “read between the lines” and do not mind if students write grammatically incorrect sentences or write only single words to answer a test question. Only Marie does the opposite since the policy school requires every teacher to give a mark for correct language such as capital letters, correct punctuation, complete sentences. Finally, Manon would use yet a different type of accommodation: let students write a summary. However, she felt that some students might have an unfair advantage because they are more proficient in making useful summaries than others.

4.2.2 Multilingual accommodations

Bilingual dictionaries, bilingual tests and use of the home language, were options discussed by teachers. Some teachers mention that their schools do not have bilingual dictionaries in all home languages, and therefore, perceived this accommodation as not being inclusive. Bilingual tests are clearly a bridge too far for many of the teachers who saw considerable practical problems: they do not have the time nor the resources to translate the tests. Only Jelle and Mike would consider bilingual tests if they had the financial and practical resources to make them. Joren believes that bilingual tests are unnecessary as the language used at school ought to be Dutch. He believes that the exclusive focus on the language of schooling is a key to a successful integration. In his eyes, respect for home languages has boundaries and providing too much support for students in their home language would be counterproductive:

“The language of schooling is Dutch, with all due respect for their own language and situation but they need to integrate here. I don’t think we help them by providing too many facilities in their own language. It is necessary only to a certain level.”

Finally, Mike’s students are given the opportunity to write a summary in their home language and use it during the assessment:

“The first thing I ask a student when something is difficult is ‘translate it in your mother tongue’ (...) and then they write it in their mother tongue. I don’t understand any of it but I tell them ‘oooo [enthusiastic] well done!’ and I see the results when they present their work in a PowerPoint I can see what they made of it and I can indicate – regardless of their language competence – I can say ‘check, achieved’ [about learning objectives]”

Kobe lets students answer in English if they find it too difficult in the language of schooling. Marie also lets them use their home language “to a certain degree”. For example, a Spanish girl made her presentation partly in Spanish and was assessed by the Spanish teacher.

4.3 Teachers’ concerns about assessment accommodations for multilingual students

During the interviews, teachers bring up some of their concerns. A first one relates to issues of fairness, in terms of giving advantages to either native speakers or multilingual students. Most of the interviewed teachers say they would give everyone the opportunity to use accommodations because most of their students have language problems. Jelle believes that one needs to take the students with the weakest language as the norm and in that way avoid exclusion. While one teacher considers it fair that multilingual students can use dictionaries, others consider the use of a Dutch dictionary problematic as they could give native Dutch-speaking students an unfair advantage. For Jelle and Tine, only ex-NAM (Newly Arrived Migrant) students can ask for what they refer to as ‘special measures’. They compare these students to students with disabilities. Only students with a ‘special certificate’ or ‘status’ can use accommodations. They argue that all students born in Belgium should be able to understand everything and, in this way, disregard the difference between everyday language and academic language. An emergent question is which accommodations should be given to which students and why. Most teachers believe that in theory, everyone should be allowed to use accommodations, so they do not see it as a problem. More than half of the teachers believe that ex-NAM students also achieve better results than multilingual students that are second or third generation. Some report to be more flexible for ex-NAM students: some teachers believe that ex-NAM students do not always understand everything, and they therefore try to explain it in

other languages. It is their belief that “other multilingual students should understand it as they were born in Belgium” while the latter need to make more effort.

Tine turns the fairness-issue the other way around, saying that multilingual students would not understand as well as the Dutch-speaking students if they could not use accommodations. She believes this would be unfair. Other teachers also believe that it is positive that multilingual students are provided with accommodations and think it is fair because native Dutch-speaking students do not need those accommodations as they are ‘lucky’ to understand everything immediately. Lore argues that multilingual students deserve accommodations because the aim is to test their knowledge of geography and not their knowledge of the language of schooling.

A second concern is the comparability of the results of accommodated and non-accommodated tests. Some teachers mention that everyone can use accommodations, hence, this is not an issue for them. However, Manon believes that you probably cannot even compare results within the group of students who can use accommodations as it really depends on their individual abilities. An accommodation that helps one student does not automatically help another. When discussing comparability of accommodated and non-accommodated tests, Mike wonders why students should be compared in the first place. He adds that assessments are highly dependent on schools and individual teachers, which makes it complex to compare results. He believes that since all these students will probably work in different jobs, they do not need to be the same and thus do not need to be compared. About half of the teachers believe test results can be compared. They explain that students still need to study even when they receive accommodations: “The accommodations would not make the student ‘smarter’”. Other advantages of accommodations than increasing fairness are given by Lore who believes that students would be more motivated to study if they can take exams with the accommodations, which, in turn, could prevent them from dropping out.

5. Summary and discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the beliefs and practices of third-grade secondary geography teachers related to their multilingual students and their assessment accommodations. The majority of the interviewed teachers believes that multilingual students have a language barrier which explains their lower results in comparison to native Dutch-speaking students. Although they recognise the linguistic challenges that hinder multilingual students from demonstrating their subject knowledge, they oppose the idea of bilingual tests.

The reasoning is that students are supposed to learn Dutch, the language of schooling. This is in line with the monolingual ideologies generally prevalent in the Flemish education system (Van Avermaet et al., 2016). One teacher believes that multilingual students abuse the “language argument” as an excuse for bad results. This illustrates how beliefs can become prejudices. However, the majority of the interviewed geography teachers were in theory rather positive about the use of – monolingual - assessment accommodations for multilingual students and would consider extra time, linguistic simplification and dictionaries. However, they raise concerns and often hide behind practical objections. For example, although providing extra time was the most popular accommodation, some teachers mention that this is not always feasible since they only teach a one-hour course where the test needs to fit in. While the idea of extra time is compelling, international research studies have already shown that extra time, although commonly permitted, does not have a significant effect (Kieffer et al., 2009).

Linguistic simplification is another popular accommodation amongst both teachers and pupils (De Backer, forthcoming), especially helpful for lower-performing students (Abedi & Lord, 2010). Concerning simplification of language use, teachers point out the importance of using specific jargon. They often try to avoid difficult general academic language. Providing a mono- or bilingual dictionary is something the teachers are generally in favour of, although they do not always have bilingual dictionaries or believe that students would not use them. This assumption could possibly be an excuse.

Teachers raise some concerns in relation to assessment accommodations, for instance, who should be given accommodations and who should not. Most of the teachers felt that everyone should get this opportunity but two foresaw them only for ex-NAM students who were less proficient in the language of schooling. This is in line with Clark-Gareca (2016), who investigated whether and which accommodations teachers give to language learners when assessing their competencies in math and science. It appeared that teachers give more accommodations to students with lower proficiency in the language of schooling than to students who with advanced competences. Interviews with students similarly show that students use language proficiency as the main criterion when reflecting on assessment accommodations (De Backer, Slembrouck, & Van Avermaet, 2019). They are able to make non-selfish choices in deciding who should be allowed accommodations and understand if other students rather than themselves received an accommodation. However, in discussing the fairness of assessment accommodations for multilingual students, the question was raised by De Backer, Slembrouck,

et al. (2019) where the cut-off should be and when a student can be considered proficient enough to be tested in the language of schooling? We believe fairness should be seen as a continuum, from not fair at all to a utopian situation of complete fairness. Maybe assessment accommodations will not solve the inequitable assessment of multilingual students completely, but it is “a possible step towards greater equity within the constraints of the system” (Heugh, Prinsloo, Makgamatha, Diedericks, & Winnaar, 2017, p. 16).

Another concern of teachers is whether the results of tests with and without accommodations can be compared. Research shows that this depends on the validity of the test (Kieffer et al., 2009). An accommodation is valid if it advances the achievements of the students who need it, but does not affect the achievements of the students who do not need it. Thus, if an accommodation is valid for a specific group, then students who do not really need the accommodation, will be neither disadvantaged nor advantaged. If the accommodation is valid, the results can be compared (Kieffer, Lesaux, Rivera, and Francis, 2009).

6. Conclusion

Given the gap in current research, this study gives an important insight into reported assessment practices and teacher’ beliefs about assessment accommodations for multilingual students. However, given the small sample size, this study must be seen as explorative. Future research could further investigate whether teachers of other school subjects share the same beliefs as the geography teachers interviewed in this study. Moreover, since we only interviewed teachers about their practices and beliefs, we have little evidence of what they actually do in classrooms and how this contrasts with what they say they do. It would be interesting to observe classrooms practices, analyse tests designed by teachers and challenge teachers to dig further into their beliefs. Another limitation of this study is that the focus was mainly on accommodations in standardised testing procedures and summative assessment rather than practices of formative assessment. Given the widespread use of traditional tests in Flemish education, this was an intended choice. However, we believe other assessment methods such as oral testing, peer assessment or portfolio’s, hold more promise to get a fair and valid picture of the competences of multilingual learners who are still in the process of acquiring the language of schooling (De Backer et al., 2017). This was illustrated by one specific teacher we interviewed, who allowed students to make a summary in their home language and use this in preparing for a PowerPoint Presentation about the subject matter.

Our interviews showed that teachers struggle with assessing multilingual students. It is necessary to help them develop more knowledge about accommodations and valid assessment practices. In the context of Flanders, teachers are free to design their own tests. They are worried about the comparability of test results when multilingual students are accommodated for. However, validity is also about the extent to which the assessment procedure succeeds in measuring the construct as intended. Questions of validity are also raised when a teacher like Manon decides that 10% of the mark of a geography test is down to language competence. Teachers need to reflect on which accommodations to provide to which pupils and find practical solutions adopted by the whole school. How can be made sure the school library includes bilingual dictionaries as well? Can teachers check each other tests and exams for difficult general academic vocabulary? This calls for an effective assessment policy at the school level.

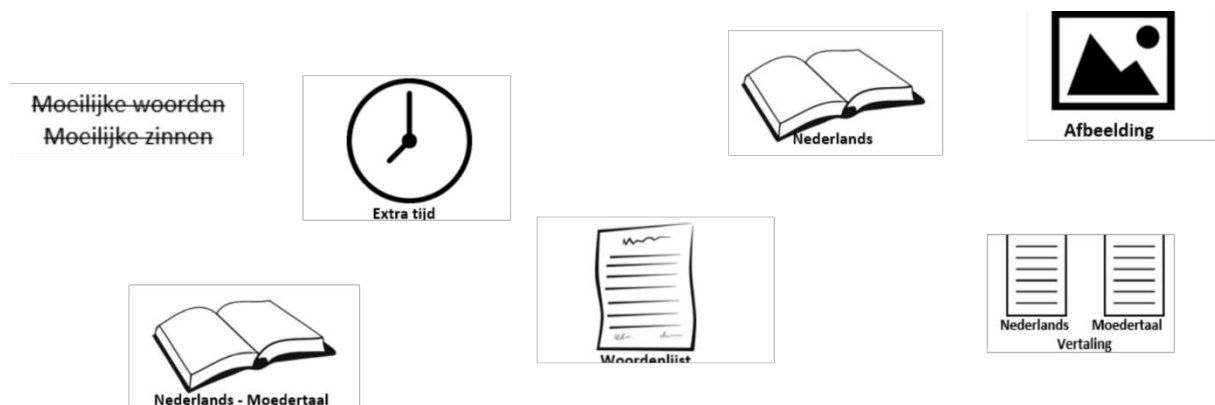
The majority of the geography teachers we interviewed acknowledged that the achievement of multilingual learners on monolingual tests is negatively influenced by their limited proficiency in the language of schooling. This acknowledgment seems to be a prerequisite towards opening the debate on assessment accommodations for these learners. Although the teachers were aware of the linguistic challenges that multilingual students face, the majority of them are opposed to bilingual tests. An important goal of education is learning the language of schooling and this should remain the case. Competence in the societal language is necessary to ensure equal opportunities in life. It is of vital importance that students are challenged in all subjects and stimulated to learn both content and the language of schooling. If the goal is to assess what a student has learned, what is the best way to get a clear picture? Multilingual assessment is not opposed to this idea, on the contrary, it is (part of) the solution. Sierens and Van Avermaet (2014) introduced the concept of ‘Functional Multilingual Learning’ to describe a pedagogical strategy in which the multilingual repertoires of students can be used to help them learn, which can also be very fruitful in terms of assessment practices (De Backer et al., 2017). Students’ home languages can be used as a scaffold for learning, also in assessment. Of course, the best way to support multilingual learners also depends on their proficiency level in the L1. In this rather young research field, it is therefore crucial to further our understanding on what works for which pupils under which conditions.

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Appendix

Pictograms used during the interviews



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