NJCIE Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education

ISSN: 2535-4051 Vol 10, No 5 (2026) https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.6686

Article

“Other languages do not pose a threat” - Finnish and Norwegian teachers’ perspectives on language use in vocational education

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Abstract

There is an increasing linguistically diverse student population in vocational education and training programs in both Finland and Norway. However, how vocational teachers relate to the increasing multilingual student body, and what they know about linguistically responsive teaching is scarce. In this study we analyze answers to the question “Should teachers require that only the language of instruction is spoken in class? Why or why not?” from 614 vocational education and training teachers in Norway and Finland through critical discourse analysis. We identified three discourses; *Some languages are valued*

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higher than others; *A common language as a driver for inclusion, success, employability and protection*; and *Students' primary languages are good for learning, and support human rights*. We also discuss how the teachers construct power in their responses. Teachers both allowed and restricted the use of other languages in the classroom and constructed linguistic hierarchies where the language of instruction was seen as the default and highest valued language. These findings highlight that there is a need for teachers' professional development regarding linguistically responsive teaching as a tool for learning and inclusion in vocational education. Data from the two countries add new insights into the role of language awareness amongst teachers who work in diverse contexts.

Keywords: vocational education and training, linguistically responsive teaching, discourse analysis, multilingual classrooms, power, vocational teachers

Introduction

The Nordic countries are becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, partly as a result of immigration. However, immigration patterns differ between the countries: Immigration to Finland and Norway is more recent than to, i.e., Sweden and Denmark (Statistisk sentralbyrå (SSB), 2024).[1] Additionally, the proportion of migrants under 20 years of age is particularly high in Finland and Norway. Approximately 8 out of 10 immigrants fall into this age group (OECD, 2025; SSB, 2024), which also influences the educational systems: students in basic education and upper secondary education, including vocational education and training (VET), are becoming increasingly diverse. Approximately half of teenagers in Finland (45%) (OECD, 2025) and Norway (55%) (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2026) follow VET programs, which is above the OECD average (37%) (OECD, 2025).

Learning academic content while simultaneously acquiring the language of instruction and vocational skills, requires systematic teacher support. Linguistically responsive teaching (LRT) has been proposed as an approach to better support migrant background students (Lucas et al., 2008). It includes perceiving students' primary languages as resources for learning (Cummins, 2021; Lucas et al., 2008). Using students' primary languages in educational settings can support both the development of the language of instruction and subject content learning (Cummins, 2021; Gibbons, 2015). However, previous studies indicate that teachers in Nordic (basic) education have limited knowledge of such approaches (Alisaari et al., 2019; 2025; Iversen, 2021, Lundberg, 2019), and there is very little research on what teachers in VET know about LRT or how they implement it in their practice in Nordic contexts (see however Kjelaas et al., 2025; Mustonen & Puranen, 2024; Mustonen & Strömmer, 2022). This study therefore investigates vocational teachers' understanding related to the use of primary languages in VET in Norway and Finland.

[1] The Report on immigration to the Nordic countries developed by Statistics Norway on demand by Statistics Nordic, does not include information about immigration to Iceland (SSB, 2024, p. 8).

The aim of the study is to examine whether vocational teachers' acceptance or rejection of the use of other languages besides the language of instruction in the classroom in Finland and Norway reflect general discursive practices of multilingualism. In addition, we aim to take a critical perspective by questioning assumed practices and highlighting alternative ways of engaging with multilingualism in vocational education, and how these reflect power structures within this specific educational context. The study is framed by the following research questions:

1) What kind of discourses can be identified in responses of vocational teachers from Finland and Norway regarding the use of students' primary languages for learning?
2) How is power constructed in the teachers' responses?

Background

Linguistically responsive teaching (LRT) and the significance of primary languages in learning

LRT encompasses teachers' orientations, knowledge, and skills, including sociolinguistic consciousness, and understanding of the relationships among language, culture, identity, and power (Cummins, 2001; Lucas et al., 2008). In this view, linguistic diversity is seen as an asset, and all languages are understood as having intrinsic value (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017). This entails that the use of students' primary languages supports learning and identity development (Cummins, 2021). Research shows that strong primary language skills are positively associated with subject learning and acquisition of the language of instruction (Relyea & Amendum, 2020), and that teachers can pedagogically utilize students' primary languages even without having proficiency in these languages themselves (Krulatz & Christison, 2023). Encouraging students to use their primary languages facilitates deeper understanding of a topic than when students are restricted to using only the language of instruction (Tharp et al., 2000).

Effective LRT involves knowledge about the students' linguistic and cultural background to scaffold learning (Lucas, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2024) while also leveraging social interaction and learner agency (van Lier, 2004) and modelling language, for example, through explicit vocabulary instruction (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Beyond supporting students' academic learning, LRT also requires teachers to critically examine the social and ideological contexts in which language learning takes place. Thus, a central dimension of LRT is teacher advocacy (Lucas et al., 2008), grounded in an understanding of the interrelationships between language, power, culture, and identity. Teacher advocacy entails recognizing that seemingly neutral language practices and norms in education are shaped by broader societal ideologies that privilege certain linguistic forms and speakers over others (Cummins, 2001). Linguistically responsive teachers actively challenge deficit views and affirm students' linguistic repertoires as legitimate resources for learning,

participation, and critical thinking. (Cummins, 2021; Teemant, 2018).

Research shows that many teachers are still developing competencies for supporting multilingual learners and often lack strategies to build on the students' linguistic resources for learning (Alisaari et al., 2019; 2025; Iversen, 2021; Lundberg, 2019; Mustonen & Puranen, 2024; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020). Monolingual beliefs, or the preference to use only the language of instruction is prevalent, and problematic, as stronger monolingual beliefs are associated with lower levels of trust in multilingual students (Pulinx et al., 2017). Studies have found that teachers sometimes exhibit anxieties, or even prejudice, toward students using their primary languages during lessons (Dražnik et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020). For example, some teachers feel uncomfortable when they are not familiar with the languages being used around them, and might restrict such use and consider it impolite, and only allow the use of these languages if it does not bother others (Alisaari et al., 2019; 2025). In addition, teachers might worry about losing control of students' learning if they do not understand the language(s) the students use, or they may think that students are using other languages to discuss off-task topics or even bullying (Alisaari et al., 2019; 2025). Moreover, many teachers fear that students will not learn the language of instruction or the subject content if multiple languages are used in school (Alisaari et al., 2022; 2025; Shestunova, 2019). Language learning does indeed require exposure, but using primary languages does not necessarily hamper learning the language of instruction, but can support it (Cummins, 2021).

Language as a means to uphold social structures

Purely monolingual or fully homogeneous speech communities do not exist but are idealized normative linguistic practices where one common language is perceived as dominant and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 5; pp. 43-44). Consequently, linguistic constructs and discursive practices can shape and uphold power relationships, identities and social structures. The emergence of a dominant language is closely tied to nation-state building, but it can also be extended to classroom contexts where the majority language is seen as the only legitimate language, and minority languages are subordinated to the language of instruction. By allowing only one, or a small set of languages in the classroom, teachers create an environment where some languages and (monolingual) identities are valued, whilst other languages and (multilingual) identities are depreciated (Bourdieu, 1991; Cummins, 2021). This type of elite multilingualism implies that some language combinations have higher status than others and are more important for social mobility and employment opportunities (Barakos & Selleck, 2019). In the Nordic countries, English holds such a position. It is an important additional language in schools and society (Paulsrud & Cunningham, 2023; Peterson et al., 2023). Elite multilingualism will always concern language hierarchies and asymmetric power relations, since it presupposes that some languages and some forms of multilingualism have higher prestige, status and value in given contexts (Barakos & Selleck, 2019). Elite multilingualism contributes to a

devaluation of students' multilingual identities if the language pairs are considered less prestigious or not useful in the school setting and society.

The contexts of the study

In both Finland and Norway, upper secondary education comprises two tracks: general upper secondary education and VET. In Finland, VET typically lasts 3 years, and similarly to the general upper secondary education, it grants eligibility for higher education. VET includes both studies and apprenticeship. Some students may complete both general studies and VET at the same time, which usually takes 3+1 years. In Norway, however, VET follows a 2+2-year structure, with two years in school and two years of apprenticeship in a company. It is also possible to choose a third year in school and obtain a general studies diploma which qualifies for higher education studies.

The language of instruction in VET in Finland is Finnish, Swedish or Sami. In addition, VET can be offered as a bilingual program (Finnish and Swedish), or it can be offered in the other domestic language (Swedish or Finnish, depending on the language of instruction), as well as in Sami, Romani, sign language or foreign language (FINLEX 531/2017, §24). However, policy documents guiding VET in Finland do not mention the use of students' linguistic resources as learning resources.

In Norway, the language of instruction in VET is Norwegian, but students have the right to receive secondary education in Sami (Opplæringslova, 2023, § 1–5; § 6), and there are schools where the entire curriculum is taught in Sami. The national Core Curriculum states that "all students shall experience that being proficient in a number of languages is a resource, both in school and society at large" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), highlighting multilingualism as a resource in education.

Method

Data in this study was collected in a survey concerning LRT previously used in the Finnish context (Alisaari et al., 2019) that has been modified to VET context and translated to Norwegian by the Authors. The survey included background questions regarding teaching experience in general and experience teaching migrant-background students, geographic location, Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. For this study, we analyzed responses to one open-ended question: "Should teachers require that only the language of instruction is spoken in class? Why or why not?". This question was selected for analysis because it elicits teachers' beliefs about the use of students' primary languages in the classroom, a core issue in LRT. By asking respondents to justify their views, the open-ended format provides access to underlying language ideologies, perceptions of multilingualism, and understandings of equity and inclusion in education. The question is particularly relevant in Finland and Norway, where increasing linguistic diversity challenges

traditionally monolingual educational practices.

Data Collection and Participants

The Finnish data was collected in fall 2021. A letter with the link to the online questionnaire was sent to all educational authorities in Finland by the Owal Group and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The educational authorities were asked to forward the survey to teachers in VET. The Norwegian survey was distributed to the administrations of all 259 schools offering VET in Norway in 2023, with a request that they share the survey with teachers at their schools. In addition, the survey link was shared in social media groups for VET teachers and distributed among students enrolled in the Bachelor's and Master's programs in vocational pedagogy at Oslo Metropolitan University.

Participants gave their consent to participate in the study by filling in the questionnaire. The data were collected using online survey tools (Webropol in Finland and Nettskjema in Norway) which store responses on secure servers, and only the authors in each country could access the received responses. The Finnish data consists of 503 responses, and the Norwegian dataset consists of 111 responses. These responses were pooled together, and the final sample consisted of responses by 614 teachers with extensive teaching experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' teaching experience, and experience with teaching minority language students.

	Finland (*n* = 503)	Norway (*n* = 111)
Teaching experience		
Less than one year	6 (1.2%)	7 (6.3 %)
1–2 years	33 (6.6%)	8 (7.2 %)
3–5 years	70 (13.9%)	27 (24.3 %)
6–10 years	77 (15.3%)	20 (18 %)
11–20 years	173 (34.4%)	22 (19.8 %)
More than 20 years	133 (26.4%)	27 (24.3 %)
Years of experience teaching minority language students		
Less than one year	24 (4.8%)	14 (12.6 %)
1–2 years	63 (12.5%)	10 (9 %)

3–5 years	125 (24.9%)	32 (28.8 %)
6–10 years	116 (23.1%)	21 (18,9 %)
11–20 years	120 (23.9%)	20 (18 %)
More than 20 years	43 (8.5%)	14 (12,6 %)

Data Analysis

The responses were analysed through critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2010) and with principles of thematic content analysis (Krippendorf, 2019) to support the identification of discourses. Through critical discourse analysis, it is possible to identify the relationship between language and (situated) power. It studies how language is used to reflect, reinforce or challenge social structures, power relationships and ideologies. In the current study we drew principles from Fairclough (1992; 2010) and Halliday (1985) when we analyzed how the teachers constructed meaning in their responses, and how they upheld power relations when they talked about the students' language use and capabilities.

We focused on the micro-level structures of the teachers' responses by looking at the individual responses and analyzing linguistic choices to see how the teachers positioned themselves and situated power regarding language use in VET. We paid particular attention to the use of modal and mental verbs and pronouns when the teachers described the multilingual practices in their classrooms. Equally important, we also took note of what was not explicitly said, whose voices were marginalized, and who was granted authority to speak in the educational context.

Some words can express factuality while others signal hedging or uncertainty, allowing language to construct not only events, but also the speaker's evaluation, confidence or caution (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). In our analysis, we distinguished between several types of linguistic processes: material (actions), mental (cognition or feelings), relational (states of being or having) and existential (expressions of existence such as "there is"). These processes represent a key mechanism for interpersonal meaning, showing not just the act of saying something, but also the respondents' attitude and engagement with the addressee or the content being conveyed. There are various strategies that can depersonalize the clause or the statement, such as avoiding personal pronouns; i.e., choosing not to use "I" may project an objective and formal tone, mitigate personal commitment and shift focus from the speaker to the content or other participants.

Findings and Discussion

We will first answer and discuss our first research question pertaining to the identified discourses in the

material, before we go on to answer the second research question about how teachers construct power through their responses.

Discourses regarding the use of students' primary languages for learning

We identified three discourses as a response to the research question "What kind of discourses can be identified in responses of vocational teachers from Finland and Norway regarding the use of students' primary languages for learning?":

a) Some languages are valued higher than others

b) A common language as a driver for inclusion, success, employability and protection

c) Students' primary languages are good for learning, and support human rights

Below, we introduce and discuss each discourse and present quotations from the data to support our interpretations. The quotations are marked with Fin for Finnish and Nor for Norwegian respondents and are numbered separately for the two contexts. Shorter, general quotes are presented within quotation marks in the running text.

Some languages are valued higher than others

The discourse regarding the accepted and valued languages reflects teachers' views on language hierarchy (Barakos & Selleck, 2019; Bourdieu, 1991), or how some languages are deemed more important or relevant than others. Like previous studies (Andersen, 2023; Dražnik et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020), we find that some teachers had prejudice against using students' primary languages in class, and attitudes towards migrants and their language repertoire were often negative. This was reflected, for example, in words used when describing their language skills in the instructional language as "unacceptably poor" or that using their "own languages" was "impolite toward others", "problematic", "disturbing" or "unnecessary". Also, in previous studies from Finland, similar considerations of the use of students' primary languages as impolite and disturbing have been found (Alisaari et al., 2025) and perceiving migrant students as causing problems (Juva & Holm, 2017).

> Yes, if the teacher does not understand the language or does not know that the students are discussing academic topics, it is best. I let students answer in English because I understand this language. It is very difficult with Arabic, for example. -Nor1

> You can use a few words and phrases in your native language, for example, when helping someone who speaks the same language. However, it is polite not to use your own language all the time when communicating with students who speak other languages. -Fin1

In some responses, using primary languages was connected to cheating and bullying (Alisaari et al., 2025):

"Yes, because students often make mistakes and cheat in their assignments if they are not supervised and do not understand what they are communicating to each other about the subject being taught" (Fin2). In general, the teachers raise suspicion toward the use of other languages as something used for negative actions (bullying, cheating and chitchatting). Primary languages were only allowed occasionally and only for "using few words" if it was necessary for understanding the topic:

> This should be the goal, but when topics are discussed, students can discuss with others who speak the same language. However, I have seen students argue, bully each other, and so on, without us understanding this. Therefore, it can be challenging to give students "permission" to speak their own language in class. -Nor2

Those who benefitted from using primary languages were in these cases often described as "weak" or as someone "who speaks bad Finnish". Their learning was sometimes described as "copying others" or discussion in primary languages as "chitchatting". Previous studies have found that the stronger the teachers' monolingual beliefs, the less trust they have in their multilingual students (Pulinx et al., 2017). This distrust was also present in our data. Furthermore, sometimes these students were distanced from the examples so that even pronouns or words indicating subjects were omitted. On the contrary, the teachers would state that "everyone" benefitted from using the language of instruction, often indicating the majority language students and teachers.

> No. One can encourage such practice and encourage students to try but not require it. Some students have such weak language skills that they will fall even further behind or drop out completely if they cannot rely on their native language to promote subject comprehension. -Nor3

> [--] Sometimes, however, someone clever copies a sentence from somewhere and then six others in the group copy it exactly the same way. This shows that the assignment has not been understood. So, it's a double-edged sword. I don't encourage L2 students to stay ONLY in their own groups, because then their Finnish language skills won't develop. -Fin3

In many responses, using only the language of instruction was presented as the state of the art, something natural that was not to be questioned given the monolingual ideology in the school context (Andersen, 2023; 2024; Pulinx et al., 2017), for example: "Our language of instruction is Finnish. This language is also used in future working life; other languages are not sufficient" (Fin4). In a similar vein, previous studies have shown that teachers often perceive the representatives of their own culture and language as "normal", and the ideal student as someone with a majority background (Heikkola et al., 2021; Juva & Holm, 2017). Oftentimes the state of the art was presented using modal verbs expressing deontic modality, such as "must" and "should be": "The common language in teaching should be Norwegian" (Nor4).

Teachers often avoided the personal pronoun "I" when they wanted to present ideas as general principles, shared norms or classroom strategies. This depersonalizes the stance and positions of the teacher's opinion as common sense or policy rather than a personal judgment (Fairclough, 2010). Relational processes that are about states, being and having (Halliday, 1985), were often fact-like utterances, used when teachers

were defining or categorizing something, rather than reporting an action or thought: “The main rule should be that no one should feel left out” (Nor5). Further, material processes (Halliday, 1985) were used when expressing pedagogical views and practices: “students learn,” “they practice,” “teachers use Norwegian,” or “students help each other”. Language choice is therefore represented as having consequences for learning. Teachers construct language both as a pedagogical resource and social risk, which explains the tension in responses.

Overall, these responses reveal how monolingual norms continue to shape teachers’ perceptions of legitimate language use in schools. Through deficit-oriented descriptions of multilingual students and the construction of primary languages as sources of risk, disruption, or exclusion, teachers often position the language of instruction as the unquestioned norm and preferred pathway to learning and participation. Adhering to dominant monolingual ideologies ultimately influences whose linguistic resources are valued and whose are marginalized in the classroom.

A common language as a driver for inclusion, success, employability and protection

Very often, strong, normative expressions were used to describe why the only accepted language should be the language of instruction. Strong expressions included words such as “force”, “requirements” and “as a rule”:

> As a rule, yes. From the perspective of learning Finnish, it would be good for students to always try to communicate in Finnish first. This practice would force students to use and ask for help in Finnish, rather than resorting too easily to their native language. In my opinion, it is perfectly acceptable to ask another student for help in your native language if you are unable to understand something, but it is always a good idea to try your best to communicate in Finnish first. -Fin5

> Mastering written and spoken Norwegian is a requirement for obtaining a vocational certificate in my field, so I must help students improve their Norwegian language skills to a level where they can pass. -Nor6

Using only the language of instruction was justified with “learning the language”, “integration” and as a “prerequisite of getting employed” or “avoiding accidents”. Other studies have also shown that language skills can be a barrier for completing school and obtaining apprenticeship positions for refugees, immigrants and minority language students (Jørgensen et al., 2021). When expressions like “everybody understands” were used, they mainly referred to situations where majority language speakers, including the teachers, would understand the discussion.

> Only Finnish (Swedish), because that is the language used to serve people in Finland and the language in which people have the right to receive services. This is particularly important in the security sector, because advice and, at times, orders given to people must be clear and understandable. Secondly, for many immigrants, school is the only place where they speak Finnish. In their free time, they tend to mingle more with their own circles and do not speak Finnish, which means that they have little opportunity to practice the language. -Fin6

> Yes, Norwegian is the official language of Norway and teaching should be conducted in Norwegian, just as in other countries. Both teachers and students feel excluded from the conversation and teaching if it is in a language they do not know. -Nor7

Teachers' own skills or control were also sometimes mentioned as a prerequisite for using the language of instruction: "Yes. So that everyone is included. And as a Norwegian speaker, I have no control over what they talk about if they speak Italian, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, etc." (Nor8). This resonates with previous studies (Alisaari et al., 2025) that have found that teachers felt uncomfortable around languages they did not know.

Using other languages was described as a waste of time, something that made others feel uncomfortable and learning more complicated. Sometimes the teachers positioned themselves as the only experts, as students were viewed as incapable of providing meaningful support and as potentially misleading their peers when they used their own languages.

> Yes, for many reasons. Languages are learned by speaking, among other things. It is not pleasant to speak a language in class that others do not understand. Students may speak their own language in class because students with weaker Finnish language skills ask stronger students questions about things they did not understand. This hinders the progress of both students. The rule should be to always ask the teacher. -Fin7

When there were references to equity, inclusion and belonging, it was mainly the concern that using primary languages would prevent inclusion and cause inequality by excluding those who did not understand those languages, sometimes projecting their own insecurities by pushing the protection of majority language students ahead of themselves. Previous studies have shown that diversity is often perceived as a threat (Gogolin, 2021), and beneficial only when it enriches teaching of majority students (Heikkola et al., 2021).

> Yes, I am concerned that we speak a common language in class. The reason is that I feel it can quickly lead to insecurity among fellow students. What are they talking about, are they talking about me, etc.? I am concerned about how it affects the social atmosphere and community in the class if someone speaks their own native language. This can make fellow students feel excluded. At the moment, I don't have any students with the same mother tongue in my class, so it's not a problem. -Nor9

> Yes. There are students who speak several different languages in the groups. Bullying and other inappropriate behavior may occur if students are allowed to speak their own language in class with those who understand them. Using one's native language in class therefore excludes some students from the "group." Using Finnish in class supports the learning of Finnish when it is necessary and mandatory to use it. [--] In my opinion, it is a disservice to allow students to speak their own languages in class if Finnish has been designated as the language of instruction and a certain level of proficiency is required. -Fin8

There is an interesting use of "no" and "yes" in the beginning of the responses, which can be seen as hedging. Teachers seemed to be rather careful not to appear too rigid or authoritarian when endorsing only Finnish or Norwegian use, but were explicit when preventing practices they considered exclusionary. However, teachers frequently signaled agreement with using majority language as the main language of instruction, even without explicitly saying "yes." Instead, they described classroom practices or emphasized

learning outcomes, reflecting careful negotiation of authority and student needs: “It should not be a rule, but in some subjects, it is good practice for language comprehension” (Nor10).

Sometimes the respondents reported a conditional perspective on using primary languages: other languages were allowed if it supported learning and did not disturb anyone. There was a frequent use of conditional structures among the responses, “when necessary”, “if it supports learning”, which indicates uncertainty and negotiation, and not fixed, universal positions, showing interdiscusivity in the responses. Many statements were also hedged through modal verbs (should, would, can), adverbs (mainly, sometimes), or impersonal constructions (it seems, it is important, one should). Often when the respondents explicitly used expressions such as “I think”, “in my opinion” or “I believe”, the responses also included some conditionality: “Students can use other languages for support if it helps their understanding” (Fin9). Some responses were quite contradictory and included opposite points of view. To a certain extent, primary languages were seen as useful, although often only temporarily:

> I cannot find a clear-cut answer to this question. When the use of one's native language or another language is focused on content that is essential for learning, clarifying concepts, or, for example, forming groups, I think it is appropriate. Speaking in one's own language about topics other than those covered in class is not a practice that should be encouraged. -Fin10

Taken together, these responses reflect the persistence of a monolingual ideology in which use of the language of instruction is closely associated with learning, integration, and legitimate participation. However, the prevalence of qualifications, hedging, and conditional acceptance of students’ primary languages suggests that teachers do not simply reproduce rigid language-of-instruction-only positions. Rather, they appear to navigate competing beliefs about inclusion, language development, classroom control, and linguistic diversity. The resulting tensions highlight the complexity of teachers’ language ideologies and the challenges of reconciling multilingual pedagogies with deeply embedded monolingual norms in educational settings.

Students’ primary languages are good for learning, and support human rights

When teachers strongly opposed using only Finnish or Norwegian, they explicitly stated “no” in the beginning of their responses, asserting disagreement to the statement. Additionally, those who (strongly) advocated for using all linguistic repertoires, justified it with human rights, research, supporting learning and well-being and the students’ cultural identity. In these responses, multilingual students were described with positive expressions, such as “more advanced students”, “friends”, “peers”. It was emphasized that “nobody” benefits from strict restrictions. However, it was often recognized that learning the language of society is also important and supports students. Nevertheless, often the positive responses included notions of prioritizing the content learning: “No. In vocational classes, understanding and learning the

subject matter is more important. Learning Finnish supports vocational studies; it is not a priority" (Fin11).

In some responses, the teachers acknowledged their students' expertise (Cummins, 2021): "Often, it is easier for students to learn new words in class if they are allowed to speak their native language among themselves. In that case, a friend can explain a foreign word to them better than I, as a teacher, can in Finnish" (Fin12). Additionally, respondents understood the cognitive load of learning (Roussel et al., 2017) through a new language: "No, I think the most important thing is that the students learn the subject and the meaning of technical terms. I see it as an advantage for them to discuss and figure things out in languages other than Norwegian, as it makes learning less complicated for them." (Nor11)

> [–] Sometimes those who are more proficient in Finnish can support those who are less proficient in their own language or in a common language. I think that the language repertoire of the whole group is beneficial for learning as a whole. -Fin13

The responses where teachers allowed the use of other languages without strong advocacy, were often dominated by mental and relational processes, and to a lesser degree material processes (Halliday, 1985). This clearly indicates that the discourse was primarily interpretative and evaluative, rather than action-oriented, including verbs referring to thinking, believing and evaluating. Very often these responses had a neutral tone: "No, because students often clarify things to each other in their own language" (Fin14).

In some responses, the teachers related multilingualism to larger democratic and social principles, where multilingual students were recognized for their diverse backgrounds. The Finnish teachers exemplified how speaking their primary language is a fundamental right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017), and they backed up their arguments with research showing the benefits of multilingualism. Often very strong expressions were used in the Finnish data: "Under no circumstances should this be the case. The mother tongue is a fundamental right, and its use is essential for both student well-being and learning." (Fin15).

> No, they shouldn't. All languages should be allowed to be used to aid learning. The better you recognize linguistic phenomena in your own native language or other languages you are learning, the better you can learn the language you are studying. Using your own language is also a human right. -Fin16

> Absolutely not. I think that would be an unreasonable demand and would violate people's freedom of speech. Students often benefit in their studies from being able to discuss the subject they are studying in their native language. Of course, Finnish has a special status as the language of instruction, but I don't think other languages pose a threat to it. -Fin17

In the Norwegian material, the democratic links were more subtle and related to immigration as an enrichment of society. In general, these responses reflected a respectful attitude towards students:

> That's probably normal, but at the same time it is important to show that we are a diverse society that accepts that not everyone is fluent in Norwegian or that people have just arrived in the country, and to show discretion when it comes to, for example, correcting tests. [--] there must be room for the student to make mistakes and learn while being taught, and for other classmates to be shown that they should respect the fact that the new students are trying their best to learn their language and that they should support them and not lead to

> bullying or the student not saying anything during the whole school day because they feel they do not master the language. -Nor12

In contrast to responses grounded in language-of-instruction-only principles, these teachers largely framed multilingualism as a pedagogical, social, and ethical resource. Their responses challenged deficit assumptions about the use of languages other than Finnish or Norwegian and instead emphasized learning, agency, peer collaboration, and linguistic rights. Although competence in the language of instruction remained an important goal, multilingual language practices were viewed as supporting rather than undermining this goal. These findings point to alternative language ideologies that acknowledge the benefits of linguistic diversity and the role of vocational schools in creating inclusive learning environments.

Construction of power

The second research question examined how power was constructed in the responses. Teachers established authority, defined monolingual norms, maintained language hierarchies and regulated classroom participation. The responses illustrate how teachers not only use language to express opinions but also perform actions and negotiate power (Gee, 2011). By stating what "should" or "must" be done, teachers enacted rules, granted or denied permission, and defined legitimate classroom behavior.

Teachers often referred to themselves as the ones controlling the classroom: "I think it's fine, as long as they explain to me what they're talking about" (Nor13). The power was thus primarily located with the teachers. Even though teachers mainly occupied the positions of rule makers, gatekeepers of inclusion and controllers of classroom discourses, they often justified it through institutional demands (i.e., curricula) or pedagogical and vocational benefits. This mirrors Bourdieu's (1991, p. 45) notions about the state language as the theoretical norm against which all other linguistic practices are measured, and teachers as 'agents of regulation' of the linguistic performance of the students. Students' benefits were still considered, although often conditionally and in a restrictive manner. The students could occasionally use their multilingual resources strategically for understanding, support each other and sometimes resist monolingual expectations implicitly: "They can use their native language, but they must make sure others are included." (Nor14). Thus, the students' agency is conditional on the teachers' approval (Beiler, 2020; Jaspers, 2022; Krulatz & Iversen, 2020).

The monolingual ideology was a strong underlying power structure, where the language of instruction was constructed as necessary for learning, inclusion, employment and even equity (cf. Fin4 above). Monolingualism was presented as a moral discourse, and when language was seen as inclusive, it was the majority-language speakers who had to be included and protected: "I would point out that they cannot use a language that we do not understand. We must have a common language. Language is inclusion" (Nor15).

Multilingualism was often linked to uncertainty and loss of interpretive control, constructing classrooms that reproduce institutional power through language practices. Teachers used words positioning themselves as needing access to understanding: "I need to understand", "I ask," "I check". An explicit enactment of classroom authority was represented by directive speech acts to maintain and obtain control: "I ask them what they are talking about to find out what they were doing" (Nor16).

Multilingual practices, although occasionally acknowledged as pedagogically beneficial, remained subordinated to a dominant monolingual norm in which the language of instruction was the primary and most legitimate medium of learning and classroom interaction (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45). Simultaneously, there was a clear hierarchy in the valuation of additional languages. English was consistently positioned as an acceptable "international language" that could be used for clarification or support (Andersen, 2024). Other languages (e.g., Arabic) were more frequently presented as potentially disruptive, particularly in relation to teacher comprehension and classroom control.

Notably, the absence of references to other than European languages suggests that multilingualism is not represented as a broad linguistic repertoire, but rather selectively constructed through a limited set of languages (Barakos & Selleck, 2019) that are visible within the teachers' epistemic frames. The linguistic order was therefore stratified, normalizing some languages as useful resources, while others were marginalized in pedagogical practices (Beiler, 2020). For the Finnish context, it should be noted that Swedish, an official language, was only mentioned in eight responses, and mainly in relation to the working languages in Finland being both Finnish and Swedish. This reflects a broader issue in Finland where the two languages have the same legal status, but Swedish is minoritized. A broader societal hierarchy of linguistic value is thus reproduced.

The teachers' responses demonstrate strong interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992), as several and at times competing discourses are articulated within the same response: "In principle, both, if it can support the teaching. But the actual teaching must be conducted in Norwegian" (Nor17). In particular, supportive discourses emphasizing learning, inclusion, and human rights often coexist with, and are constrained by, regulatory discourses of control, safety, and monolingual norms. This suggests that teachers' language beliefs are not coherent systems but discursive "packages", where ideological tensions between monolingual and multilingual orientations are continuously negotiated in talk.

Conclusions

We examined responses from vocational teachers in Finland and Norway when they reflected on the use of students' primary languages for learning, and how power was constructed in these responses. We identified three discourses: 1) Some languages are valued higher than others; 2) A common language as a

driver for inclusion and success, employability and protection; 3) Students' primary languages are good for learning and support human rights. These discourses show that vocational teachers often perceive the language of instruction as having higher value than their students' primary languages, and that they saw the language of instruction as being the primary pathway to success and employment, both which is in line with previous studies (Andersen, 2023; 2024, Jørgensen et al., 2021).

Majority language use was often justified with inclusive practices and protection of "everybody", i.e. majority speakers', and particularly the teachers', right to understand. Previous studies have shown that teachers with strong monolingual beliefs have less trust in their students (Pulinx et al., 2017), and that many teachers feel uncomfortable when other languages are used (Alisaari et al., 2025). However, some participants also acknowledged the value of primary languages in learning content and language in VET, reflecting the current understanding of the role of primary languages in educational outcomes (Cummins, 2021).

The teachers also felt threatened by other languages, and they indicated a loss of control if the students used their primary languages in the classroom. Furthermore, power was established through views of the language of instruction as the default, reinforcing a monolingual space in their VET classrooms (see also Alisaari et al., 2019; 2025; Andersen, 2024). The Finnish and Norwegian responses were very similar, which is also the reason for pooling the two data sets. This indicates that teachers hold related views and beliefs and reproduce the dominant educational discourses around spaces for languages in the classroom that have also been addressed in previous research. Although the teachers mean well, they unintentionally hinder the development of the students' professional language skills and global citizenship (Cummins, 2021). A difference was found mainly in how primary language was understood as a fundamental right: The Finnish teachers exemplified this directly, the Norwegian teachers more subtly. Although multilingualism is highlighted as a resource in Norwegian policy for VET, unlike in the Finnish policy, the policy level support does not seem to have translated into teachers' discourses.

The findings partly contradict the ideas of LRT (Lucas et al., 2008), where teachers should value their students' linguistic resources and advocate for their students. Nordic education has an emphasis on advancing educational equity; hence, teachers should contest structures that constrain students' participation and success. Furthermore, LRT should be positioned as both an instructional approach and an ethical stance toward social justice in education (Lucas et al., 2008). Teacher education should be more responsible for equipping teachers with the necessary tools to meet the needs of their diverse learners.

Overall, our results show that there are both persisting monolingual ideologies as well as acknowledgement of the benefits of linguistic diversity and the possibilities of inclusive learning environments within Finnish

and Norwegian educational contexts. Additionally, it seems that many respondents are trying to balance between requirements of supporting inclusion and language development on one side and, on the other side, educating responsible workers. Competing discourses are often articulated within the same responses indicating that teachers need to mediate between the different demands which might also cause identity tensions. Thus, the resulting tensions emphasize the complexity of teachers' language ideologies and the challenges of facilitating multilingual practices within an educational setting based on monolingual norms. This results in ideological tensions that are continuously negotiated in practice. Thus, this study demonstrates that examining multilingual practices in VET between and across national contexts reveals more continuity than variation, highlighting the need to address deeply embedded monolingual ideologies rather than assuming they are purely context-bound.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample is based on self-selection and self-reports, meaning that the responses might be biased through the teachers' special interest in the topic. We also don't know if the teachers' practices are the same as they report. Future studies should observe practices in addition to self-reports and investigate how the teachers' socio-demographic and educational background influence their responses. Furthermore, the Norwegian sample is smaller than the Finnish sample, because the mode of recruitment was different in the two countries.

In conclusion, when teachers allowed other languages than the language of instruction, the students were seen as knowledgeable, but when other languages were restricted or reduced, teachers maintained control over communication, access to knowledge and classroom participation. Teachers support multilingualism for different reasons, and these reasons reflect different understandings of language, learning, and authority. The identified discourses are interwoven yet competing, showing interdiscursivity. We see that teachers both recognize that all languages should be used, that multilingualism benefits learning and students have linguistic rights, but at the same time they highlight that learning the language of instruction is more important, ergo the societal language retains a special status. The dominant monolingual ideology is not completely rejected. Rather, it is negotiated and reconstructed. Teachers' positive attitudes were related to wider society and human rights, whereas negative attitudes constrained students, making them both socially and linguistically voiceless in the classroom.

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