

The Implications of Switzerland's Multilingual Education Model for Taiwan

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1. Introduction

Language constitutes a foundational pillar of international education and a vital role for understanding the intricate fabric of diverse cultures, histories, and value systems. Beyond its utilitarian function as a medium of communication, language plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities, fostering social integration, and cultivating intercultural empathy. In today's interconnected world, its influence in promoting global awareness and international cooperation has become increasingly significant. As García (2008) noted, the accelerating forces of globalization have disrupted traditional, territorially bound notions of language and culture, giving rise to a more fluid and dynamic sociolinguistic landscape. In this context, multilingualism is no longer a supplementary asset but a core necessity.

Against this global backdrop, bilingual and multilingual education have emerged as transformative paradigms. No longer viewed as optional pedagogical approaches, they are now recognized as essential strategies for developing the competencies needed to navigate an era defined by mobility, cultural pluralism, and global interdependence. By enabling learners to operate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries, such educational models not only support individual cognitive and academic growth but also foster broader socio-economic development and national resilience. Cazden and Snow (1990) provide a compelling perspective on the evolving nature of the classroom environment. They argue that rapid technological advancements have ushered in a new era of "super-diversity." In such classrooms, students bring with them a wide spectrum of cultural identities, life experiences, and linguistic repertoires, challenging traditional educational models premised on homogeneity. This unprecedented heterogeneity demands a reimagined approach to bilingual or multilingual education—one that is not only inclusive and culturally responsive but also equipped to foster global citizenship, critical inquiry, and intercultural competence, as Coyle and Meyer (2021) emphasize.

In line with global trends, Taiwan has embarked on a language policy initiative to elevate its international profile through language education. In 2018, the Executive Yuan introduced the Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a Bilingual Nation by 2030.

This initiative is grounded in the belief that enhancing language proficiency is key to boosting national competitiveness, attracting global talent, and increasing Taiwan's visibility and engagement on the world stage.

However, Taiwan's sociolinguistic landscape presents complexities that extend beyond a straightforward bilingual paradigm. The enactment of the National Language Development Act in 2019 formally acknowledged Taiwan as a multilingual society, home to Mandarin, Taiwanese Hokkien, Hakka, and a rich tapestry of Indigenous languages spoken by 16 officially recognized Indigenous groups. These languages are not only cultural assets but also vital carriers of identity, history, and their respective communities. Consequently, any attempt to institutionalize bilingual education must contend with the inherent tensions between globalization and cultural preservation—between embracing English as a global lingua franca and safeguarding Taiwan's diverse linguistic heritage.

Achieving a meaningful balance between the promotion of English and the protection of local and Indigenous languages necessitates a contextually informed, ethically grounded approach. In this regard, Switzerland offers a compelling model. With its deeply rooted tradition of multilingualism—including German, French, Italian, and Romansh—Switzerland exemplifies how linguistic diversity, when underpinned by inclusive policy frameworks and strong educational systems, can function as a cohesive rather than divisive force. Its experience demonstrates the feasibility of constructing a national identity that embraces multiple languages, fostering civic participation, mutual respect, and social cohesion.

By studying Switzerland's multilingual education model, Taiwan can derive valuable lessons on how to craft language policies that are not only pedagogically sound but also culturally responsive and socially equitable. Taiwan's objective should extend beyond the enhancement of English proficiency to the cultivation of a multilingual, globally competent citizenry that remains deeply connected to its unique cultural and linguistic roots. Through such an integrative and inclusive vision, Taiwan can chart a path toward a bilingual or multilingual future that is both globally engaged and locally grounded.

2. Overview of Language Education Policies

Language education policies are commonly situated within two overarching paradigms: monolingual and bilingual or multilingual frameworks (Biseth, 2009; García, 2008; Lee, 2018). These paradigms reflect divergent ideological stances on national identity, cultural integration, and the societal role of language. They not only

shape the design of educational systems but also embody broader assumptions about diversity, citizenship, and social cohesion.

Monolingual policies are typically anchored in the nation-state model, wherein language is construed as a cornerstone of sovereignty and a primary vehicle for constructing a cohesive national identity. Under this paradigm, a single dominant language—usually the official or majority tongue—is elevated as the normative medium for education, governance, and public life. The rationale behind such policies rests on the belief that a shared language facilitates communication, promotes unity, and simplifies administrative processes by minimizing linguistic plurality.

Yet, this unifying logic often comes at the expense of linguistic diversity. Minority and Indigenous languages are frequently devalued or excluded from formal education systems, relegated instead to informal or private domains. As a result, these languages may experience marginalization and disconnection from institutional structures. Over time, the lack of systemic recognition and support can lead to language attrition, intergenerational discontinuity, and, ultimately, language extinction. Such losses are not merely linguistic but also cultural. The suppression of linguistic diversity under monolingual regimes thus undermines both cultural resilience and the democratic principle of inclusivity.

In contrast, **bilingual and multilingual policies** represent a more inclusive and pluralistic vision of society. Rather than viewing linguistic diversity as a problem to be managed, these policies embrace it as an asset to be nurtured. Grounded in principles of **multiculturalism, equity, and human rights**, multilingual policies aim to support the coexistence and mutual enrichment of multiple languages within the same societal framework. They promote **additive language learning**, where new languages are introduced without displacing existing linguistic identities. This model recognizes that linguistic plurality can enhance cognitive development, cultural empathy, and cross-cultural communication. By ensuring the **linguistic rights of all citizens**, multilingual policies also contribute to a more just and participatory democracy, where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel seen, heard, and valued.

Despite the theoretical appeal of multilingual policies, their practical implementation remains uneven and highly context-dependent. In many Western European countries—particularly those with centralized governance structures or colonial legacies—monolingual frameworks have historically dominated. However,

recent decades have witnessed a notable shift in both policy discourse and educational practice, spurred by significant demographic changes. The growing presence of immigrants, asylum seekers, and transnational families has compelled governments to reconsider how their education systems respond to an increasingly linguistically diverse population. This linguistic heterogeneity has prompted renewed attention to minority and heritage languages, many of which were previously marginalized or rendered invisible in public life. These languages are now increasingly recognized not only as tools for personal communication but also as vital repositories of cultural heritage, identity, and historical continuity. Such a reconceptualization reflects a broader understanding that language preservation extends beyond vocabulary and syntax—it entails sustaining the cultural ecosystems and community lifeways that languages embody. Nonetheless, transforming this recognition into coherent and effective policy remains an ongoing challenge. Addressing multilingual policies requires a commitment to equity, linguistic justice, and pluralistic values at both the institutional and societal levels.

In response to shifting sociolinguistic realities, language education policy has emerged as a critical role for negotiating the terms of multicultural citizenship. The design and implementation of language programs reflect deeper societal choices about whose languages are recognized, whose voices are validated, and whose histories are brought into the national narrative. For many nations, the move toward bilingual or multilingual education represents not merely a pedagogical reform, but a broader reimagining of the nation as an inclusive, dialogic, and globally engaged community.

Crucially, moving beyond monolingualism requires more than simply adding additional languages to school curricula. It demands a fundamental paradigm shift: a reorientation of language from being a boundary marker to a connective force; from a hierarchical resource to a shared cultural asset. Within this framework, bilingual and multilingual policies are not just reactive measures to demographic changes—they are proactive commitments to a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future.

3. Overview of Multilingual Education in Switzerland

Switzerland, officially known as the Swiss Confederation (Confoederatio Helvetica, CH), has long been regarded as a paradigmatic model of multilingual governance and cultural coexistence. Rooted in the signing of the “Eternal Alliance” in 1291 by the founding cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden (Wang, 2013), Switzerland’s confederation system reflects a deep-seated commitment to political decentralization, local autonomy, and inter-cantonal cooperation. This foundation not only shaped Switzerland’s unique federal identity but also created ground for the

development of a multilingual educational framework that is responsive to regional linguistic realities.

At the heart of the Swiss political system lies a layered governance structure that deliberately disperses power across federal, cantonal, and municipal levels. While the Federal Council (Schweizerischer Bundesrat) sets overarching policy objectives and ensures intergovernmental coordination, responsibility for education—including language instruction—rests primarily with the country's 26 cantons (Wang & Chen, 2010). This decentralized structure enables each canton to develop curricula that reflect its specific linguistic, cultural, and historical context. Rather than imposing a uniform national curriculum, the Swiss model promotes diverse educational pathways that honor the linguistic composition of each region.

In response to the demands of globalization, the Swiss government reorganized key federal institutions in 2013 to form the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER). This structural consolidation signaled a strategic policy shift, highlighting the interdependence of education and economic development (Zhang & Zeng, 2014). Central to this vision is the cultivation of a multilingual workforce capable of navigating both domestic diversity and global markets, positioning language proficiency not merely as a cultural asset but as a national economic imperative.

Multilingualism in Switzerland is more than a symbolic ideal; it is embedded in federal law, institutional practice, and everyday life. The country recognizes four national languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—all of which hold equal legal status at the federal level. Government documents, public signage, and educational resources are routinely made available in multiple languages depending on regional demographics. However, practical language use is uneven. According to the Federal Statistical Office (FSO, 2024), German dominates workplace communication (61.4%), followed by French (27.9%) and Italian (7.9%), while Romansh is spoken by only 0.3% of the population—a figure that underscores its vulnerability despite constitutional protection.

Nonetheless, Switzerland remains committed to preserving linguistic diversity, and education serves as a central mechanism for enacting this commitment. Multilingual instruction begins early, with second national languages introduced in primary education. In German-speaking cantons, French is typically the first additional language taught, while French-speaking cantons prioritize German. Cantons where Italian or Romansh are dominant similarly incorporate other national languages into their curricula. This early and sustained exposure fosters cross-linguistic competencies

and cultural awareness, equipping students to participate fully in both national and international contexts.

Switzerland's multilingual education system, long grounded in its four national languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—has increasingly embraced English as a key component of its language curriculum. Reflecting a broader European trend noted in the European Commission's 2023 *Key Data on Teaching Languages at Schools in Europe*, where over 90% of countries include English in both primary and secondary education, Switzerland integrates English not as a replacement but as a complementary addition to its national language instruction. Typically introduced as a third or fourth language, English supports Switzerland's outward-looking, globally connected stance while reinforcing its internal goals of fostering communication across linguistic regions. Similar to other multilingual countries like Belgium and Luxembourg, Switzerland aims for students to become proficient in at least two national languages in addition to English, cultivating a multilingual literacy that bridges both local diversity and international engagement.

The Swiss experience underscores the complex challenges of maintaining a truly multilingual society. Symbolic recognition alone does not ensure functional vitality. A telling example is Romansh, which, despite its legal protection and support through regional curricula, teacher training, and media programs, continues to face decline. Factors such as demographic shifts, economic migration, and the increasing dominance of German and English contribute to its vulnerable status. Similarly, the 2023 *Key Data on Teaching Languages at Schools in Europe* report points to the widespread inclusion of English in both primary and secondary education across Europe. Yet, it also reveals that the overall range of foreign languages offered remains narrow in many contexts—especially in vocational education—and that actual implementation often lacks sufficient instructional time and depth. Thus, while many languages may be formally acknowledged in policy, such recognition often remains superficial, failing to produce meaningful language proficiency without sustained investment in practice and pedagogy.

This disjunction between policy aspiration and practical outcomes offers important lessons for other multilingual contexts, including Taiwan. How can governments ensure that recognized languages are not only legally protected but actively supported in everyday life? How can smaller linguistic communities retain their identities amidst the gravitational pull of dominant global languages?

In sum, Switzerland's multilingual education system represents a dynamic and adaptive framework that balances regional autonomy with federal unity, tradition

with innovation, and diversity with social cohesion. While unresolved challenges—particularly regarding the vitality of minority languages like Romansh—persist, the Swiss experience illustrates that with sustained political will, inclusive policy design, and societal commitment, multilingualism can thrive as both a cultural legacy and a strategic asset for national development.

4. Insights from Switzerland' s Multilingual Education for Taiwan' s Bilingual Education

Switzerland' s multilingual education system presents a compelling reference point for Taiwan. While often cited as a paradigm of successful multilingual governance, Switzerland' s experience also reveals the nuanced tensions embedded in such systems. For Taiwan, this dual perspective highlights the importance of designing a bilingual policy that is not only functionally effective but also culturally inclusive and ethically grounded.

1. Balancing Multilingual Policies and Cultural Identity

Switzerland' s approach illustrates that a multilingual education policy must be firmly anchored in respect for cultural identity. The country constitutionally guarantees equal status to four national languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—each associated with a distinct linguistic region and cultural heritage. While disparities in language use persist, all four languages are symbolically and institutionally represented in government, education, and public media. In recent years, Switzerland has also begun to acknowledge the presence of immigrant and minority languages, reinforcing its commitment to multiculturalism.

Taiwan' s linguistic landscape is equally rich. This diversity reflects a complex history shaped by migration, colonization, and the resilience of Indigenous cultures. As Taiwan advances its bilingual education policy—primarily focused on English and Mandarin—it must be cautious not to marginalize the languages that form the backbone of its local and Indigenous identities.

One key lesson from the Swiss model is that symbolic recognition alone is insufficient. Taiwan must embed its local and Indigenous languages into the core architecture of the education system—not merely as elective options, but through curriculum design, teacher training, language revitalization programs, and community engagement. Only through such integrative efforts can Taiwan preserve its linguistic heritage while building a bilingual system that is locally rooted and globally responsive.

2. Avoiding the Risks of Language Hierarchization

The Swiss experience also reveals the risk of language hierarchization, even within officially multilingual systems. While all four national languages enjoy legal equality, German overwhelmingly dominates in federal institutions, business, and education. By contrast, Romansh—despite legal protections—remains functionally marginalized and vulnerable to language shift. This dynamic underscores how policy intentions can diverge from lived realities if not backed by sustained and equitable investment.

A similar concern arises in Taiwan. As the government elevates English within the “Bilingual Nation” framework, there is growing unease that local languages—particularly those of Indigenous communities—may be devalued or displaced. This risk is especially acute in rural and marginalized areas, where educational resources are limited, and where language is deeply intertwined with identity, land, and oral traditions.

To avoid such outcomes, Taiwan must resist framing English as the singular benchmark of educational success. Instead, multilingualism should be promoted as an additive rather than a subtractive process. Educational strategies must emphasize the coexistence and complementarity of English with Mandarin and local languages. In Indigenous contexts, mother-tongue instruction should be the foundation, with English and Mandarin introduced in developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways. This approach not only prevents linguistic displacement but also strengthens students’ ability to navigate both local realities and global opportunities.

3. Intercultural Education and Social Inclusion

In Switzerland, multilingual education serves not only linguistic objectives but also civic and intercultural aims. By exposing students to multiple languages from an early age, the system cultivates empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and national cohesion—especially important in a country where linguistic regions align with distinct political and cultural identities.

Taiwan can draw meaningful inspiration from this intercultural ethos. Bilingual education should not be limited to technical language acquisition; it should be framed as a vehicle for cultivating mutual respect, civic values, and national solidarity. Incorporating Indigenous languages, narratives, and perspectives into the national curriculum enables all students—not just Indigenous learners—to engage with Taiwan’s cultural pluralism. Moreover, regionally tailored bilingual models—such

as Hakka-Mandarin—can create more locally relevant and empowering learning experiences.

Switzerland’s multilingual education system exemplifies how bilingual and multilingual education can serve as a foundation for societal integration beyond mere language acquisition. Reflecting García’s (2008) vision, Swiss schools foster dynamic and integrated linguistic environments by requiring students to learn at least two national languages—often complemented by English—thereby enhancing their intercultural competence and national cohesion. This approach aligns with UNESCO’s (2003) advocacy for linguistic equity and cultural preservation, as Switzerland formally recognizes its four national languages and actively supports their use through regionalized curricula and policy protections. Moreover, the Swiss model resonates with Cummins’ (1981) emphasis on inclusive learning contexts: by validating students’ home languages—whether French, German, Italian, or Romansh—Swiss education affirms diverse cultural identities, strengthening learners’ confidence and participation. Thus, Switzerland offers a compelling example of how multilingual education can promote social inclusion, foster mutual respect among linguistic communities, and support democratic coexistence in a culturally diverse society.

4. Recognizing the Complexity of Multilingualism

Despite its achievements, Switzerland’s model also reveals the inherent complexities of multilingual governance. As Becker (2024) observes, the country continues to wrestle with ideological tensions, interregional communication gaps, and subtle forms of language-based stratification. Citizens from French- or Italian-speaking regions may perceive disadvantage in a system largely dominated by German, while Romansh-speaking communities face steep challenges in maintaining linguistic visibility and transmission.

These realities offer a cautionary note for Taiwan: multilingualism is not a one-time solution but an ongoing process that requires negotiation, adaptation, and sustained political and social commitment. Policy success depends not only on legal frameworks but also on the engagement of educators, communities, and local stakeholders. Language equity must be continuously cultivated—not assumed.

5. Conclusion

Switzerland’s multilingual education system provides Taiwan with both a visionary blueprint and a reflective mirror. It shows that language education can be

a powerful tool for unity, identity affirmation, and international engagement. Yet it also reminds us that without deliberate support for non-dominant languages and marginalized groups, even the most progressive policies may fall short.

For Taiwan, the journey toward becoming a balanced and inclusive bilingual nation should not involve emulating monolingual or purely English-centric models. Instead, it should involve embracing the full richness of Taiwan's own linguistic ecology—valuing Indigenous and local languages, promoting intercultural dialogue, and designing educational pathways that reflect the island's unique cultural and historical context.

Ultimately, “Bilingual Nation 2030” should be seen not simply as a language initiative but as a nation-building project grounded in pluralism, justice, and shared identity. By learning from Switzerland's successes and shortcomings, Taiwan can reframe bilingual education as a bridge connecting generations, communities, and futures.

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