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Beyond bilingualism and SLA: Acquiring several languages in school contexts

Presented at the AAAL Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, USA; 6 March, 2010.

This colloquium discussed a multilingual approach to language learning, language teaching and language assessment in school settings. This approach implies looking at language acquisition and use from a holistic perspective, taking into account not only the target language but all the languages known by the learner; such a perspective brings together the traditions of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and bi/multilingualism because it looks at the whole linguistic repertoire of learners when acquiring and using languages. This perspective does not regard the boundaries between languages as clear-cut; nevertheless, those boundaries are themselves used as a resource in communication. In contrast to traditional teaching approaches, code-mixing, code-switching and translanguaging are considered common practices in the behavior of multilingual learners. The multilingual approach also represents a reaction against the 'monolingual bias', which leads to the judging of multilingual speakers' competencies by native speaker norms. It also goes beyond common practices not only in foreign language classrooms but also in bilingual and multilingual schools.

The colloquium attracted a large international audience and brought together European and North American perspectives. Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter introduced the colloquium by setting out the difference between a multilingual and a monolingual approach in multilingual education.

Rita Franceschini (University of Bolzano, Italy) looked at theoretical and historical perspectives in the study of multilingualism in her presentation 'Multilingualism: theoretical and historical perspectives'. She combined the concept of multilingualism, which is rooted in sociolinguistics, with the term 'multicompetence', more commonly used in psycholinguistics. Francheschini concluded her talk by explaining why multilingualism is a natural phenomenon and has a historical foundation.

Durk Gorter and Jasone Cenoz (University of the Basque Country/Ikerbasque, Spain) reported on a study of multilingual competencies conducted in Basque multilingual schools in their paper 'Developing multilingualism in school contexts'. The study focused on writing competencies in Basque, English and Spanish and clearly showed the interaction between languages. Gorter and Cenoz highlighted the additional information that is obtained when focusing on the whole linguistic repertoire rather than on one single language, and went on to outline future research directions.

Li Wei (University College London, UK) examined multilingual practices in Chinese complementary schools in the UK in his paper 'Classroom code-switching and multicompetence'. Basing his report on participant observation and ethnographic interviews, he described how British-born pupils of Chinese origin use code-switching to create their

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own multilingual social space. Li Wei explained how by using code-switching these students contested the policy and ideology imposed upon them.

Ofelia García (City University of New York, USA) in 'Translanguaging in multilingual classes' described how multilingual classrooms often have strict language arrangements about how the different languages should be used by teachers and students in different classes. However, as she pointed out, students and teachers use multiple discursive practices in these classrooms. These practices, referred to as 'translanguaging', are common among students, but can also be used by teachers as a pedagogical strategy. García argued that students' languages can act on learning rather than being assigned a space, time, place or person in the curriculum.

Elana Shohamy (Tel Aviv University, Israel) discussed in 'Assessing multilingual competence' how assessment methods routinely take a monolingual approach, testing languages separately, with no legitimacy awarded to code-switching or related skills. In this situation, multilingual users are penalized. Given current multilingual policies and the effect of testing on learning and policy, Shohamy explored strategies for designing multilingual assessment procedures such as using academic texts in two languages and processing in one, or using monolingual texts but processing in two languages, or combining scores from different tests.

The discussants, Suresh Canagarajah (Penn State University, USA) and Tim McNamara (University of Melbourne, Australia), highlighted the fact that translanguaging is a naturally occurring phenomenon for multilingual students. Both discussants provided excellent comments, pinpointing some of the challenges arising when breaking new ground by using a multilingual approach in research, teaching and assessing languages in school contexts. The final part of the colloquium was an open discussion with the audience, which combined psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and educational perspectives.

The general consensus view of the colloquium was that it is time to change the perspective of multilingual education from a monolingual approach, which isolates the target language from other languages used or being learned by multilingual speakers, and adopt a new perspective based on the way multilingual speakers use languages for communication in natural contexts, mixing and switching languages in order to communicate in a more effective way.

The papers presented at this colloquium, together with papers written by the discussants, will be published in 2011 in a special issue of the *The Modern Language Journal* edited by Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter.

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