

Focus on Multilingualism: Its Potential Contributions to SLA Theory and Research

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Posited as a “holistic” approach to the study of multilingualism and multilingual competence in educational contexts, *Focus on Multilingualism* (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011) attempts to bring together the fields of (1) second language acquisition (SLA), and (2) bilingualism/multilingualism studies – both in (a) theory and (b) research methodology. It has even been argued – from a language ecological perspective – that there is more validity to this new approach than its traditional counterparts, given its proximity to the way languages are *used* in a social context. Specifically, FOM differs from SLA and bilingualism in that it takes into consideration the individual roles as well as the interplay of (i) the multilingual speaker, (ii) the entire linguistic repertoire (i.e., the *multiple* languages spoken by the learner), and (iii) the context, such as seeing the linguistic landscape as an additional source of language input (see, for example, Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). While this emphasis on the interconnectedness and mutual support across the learner’s different subsystems during the course of development and social interaction may appear somewhat in spirit with the sociocultural and/or complex systems approaches to SLA, FOM apparently gets ahead in that it avoids comparing the competence of multilingual speakers against the benchmarks of the native speaker of the target language(s). As will be illustrated below, while FOM has the potential to supplement current approaches to SLA in certain aspects of theory and research, it unavoidably also has its limitations.

On the theoretical level, one putative merit of FOM resides in that it sees crosslinguistic influence (or transfer), codeswitching, and codemixing as being related, the latter two of which are domains of research specific to sociolinguistics by tradition (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Breaking away from such subfield confines, FOM (re)conceptualizes these types of interlanguage phenomena as matters of fundamentally the same nature on a continuum. This non-traditional approach towards the stated types of transfer-related phenomena has brought to bear some exciting methodological possibilities. For one, FOM opens up a plausible avenue through which transfer-related behaviors, especially *avoidance* (e.g., Schachter, 1974), might be studied in a finer-grained manner. For instance, by juxtaposing and extrapolating learner output in relation to an overarching topic over time, in not only the target language but also through multilingual-infused data, it might be possible to track down what target structure(s) the learner might be avoiding, and/or even the reason(s) behind the avoidance episodes. It goes without saying, though, that research designs which would serve to isolate developmentally rooted instances of avoidance from those triggered by non-acquisitional factors, such as a sense of belonging that stems from one’s social identities across different speech communities, would need to be in place in parallel.

Despite its encompassing view on what crosslinguistic influence essentially entails in both scope and depth, the lens through which FOM sees the goals of SLA theory and research appears to be somewhat limited *and* limiting. To Cenoz and Gorter (2011), the main focus of

SLA is on “the *process* (emphasis added) of becoming bilingual ...” (p. 356), as well as “the effect of different types of instruction on SLA” (p. 357). One key inference is that *Focus on Multilingualism* tends to define acquisition through multilingual *practices* rather than the cognitive processes and processing that learners employ to attain successful communication and develop their own identities. This seems also to be the rationale for its empirical approach of avoiding comparisons of competence in nature to be made between multilingual speakers, and the so-called “ideal” native speaker.

This understanding of the goals of SLA turns out to be quite problematic. According to Felix (1982), the ultimate mission of the field is to resolve “the logical problem of SLA,” which comprises the following: (a) to shed light on what constitutes L2 competence (i.e., the linguistic knowledge possessed by the learner), and (b) to identify and explain what causal mechanisms bring about the acquisition of the kind of L2 competence as noted in (a) (Gregg, 1998). As much as the study of SLA is concerned with probing into the *process of transition* throughout the development of the learner’s interlanguage (e.g., through analyzing learner language or output), it is equally interested in uncovering the *psycholinguistic mechanism(s) and/or processes* (and processing) that the learner undertakes throughout the course of acquisition. Together, these research interests seek to address part (b), or the transition theory portion of the logical problem. In confining itself to purely the languages being acquired and used by multilingual learners, FOM can at best only complement other existing *transition theories* in SLA (e.g., VanPatten’s model of input processing; see VanPatten, 1996, 2002, 2004) in explaining particular aspects, phenomena, and/or stages over the learner’s course of L2 development. Clearly, the property theory portion of the logical problem noted in part (a) is not even dealt with in any way, the culprit being: FOM does not have in play a theoretical framework with testable propositions that would potentially account for the language practices observed from corresponding multilingual data.

As is the case with any other existing transition theory, FOM does seem to have something exciting to offer, especially in filling some of the theoretical and empirical gaps within the current scene of SLA. To go as far as to say that it is superior to its transition theory counterparts, however, would evidently be a far-fetched stretch.

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