

Focus on Multilingualism: More Dots to Connect

Timothy Hall

Teachers College, Columbia University

Across the four selected papers, Cenoz and Gorter present a research program entitled *Focus on Multilingualism* (FOM), which is underpinned by two questions: (1) how to understand multilingualism, perhaps from a humanistic perspective, and (2) how to implement it in education. In exploring these questions, the authors cite an intellectual and methodological lineage drawn from the fields of bilingualism and second language acquisition (SLA). I do not see inherent contradictions in invoking both bilingualism and SLA for the purpose. However, the thesis of this commentary is that the argumentation for these goals might benefit from a more explicit reflection of current understandings of SLA, from a macro view to a micro view, such that its own descriptive adequacy can be bolstered. Furthermore, I have concerns about how the implementation of such understanding will follow in education. First, I describe the scope and motivation of the FOM framework. Then, I suggest that more constructs from the field of SLA be invoked in FOM, namely from a Usage-based framework. I also suggest borrowing some of SLA's methodological rigor. Last, I express broad concerns about the implementation of FOM for the purposes of education.

What about FOM? The authors observe that previous conceptualizations of multilingualism seem to have descriptive inadequacy and infer that one must take a comparatively more expansive view. First, we need to consider language representation, language processing, and the interplay between them. We also need to view multiple languages in one mind as synergistic, and we need to view multiple language use from a broader framework of cultural and communicative goals. Multilingualism must enter a state of embrace from cultural and educational perspectives. Might the phrase "celebrate multilingualism" become cliché as a result? Perhaps FOM is not ready to suffer for that yet.

While I cannot attest with any authority on breadth of bilingual research, I shall take it as given that bilingual research spans both cognitive and communicative skill concerns. Nevertheless, it seems to me that because SLA also shares a cognitive interest, and perhaps that same interest in particular, FOM should be able to flesh itself out conceptually with a more comprehensive set of SLA constructs. Furthermore, I disagree that SLA must be limited to an understanding of relationships between a first and second language, which is where Cenoz and Gorter suggest there are limitations. Perhaps theirs is a view founded on SLA's *reticence* in freely extending implications of L1-L2 interactions beyond the L1-L2 paradigm.

But as a current practitioner within the field of SLA currently focusing on cognitive mechanisms and relationships between languages, I feel that caution is warranted for empirical reasons. Descriptive adequacy is born of an understanding of relevant variables, even within a dynamic systems approach. For example, the authors cite several studies in which monolinguals and bilinguals were compared in terms of their acquisition of the next language. While the authors concluded that bilinguals showed advantage in several cases, there was no discussion of typological differences between initial state languages and target languages. This is a critical perspective that SLA has fostered in the last several decades. Of course, an L1 Romanche speaker of L2 English will have an easier time learning aspects of L3 Spanish than an L1 English

speaker learning L2 Spanish. This is due to direct typological similarities for transfer on one hand, and perceived typological similarities that lead to confidence on another.

There are several emergent SLA paradigms that the authors cite as a good fit for FOM. The first is that of dynamic systems. A dynamic systems understanding might well do some good in pervading SLA research. I would also argue that another useful font is a usage-based view of SLA. Usage-based (UB) theories assert that language structure is formed and organized in the mind based on regularities in language use. That is, based on environmental demands and individual needs for communicating meaning, language structure is acquired and organized. As with Dynamic Systems, there is an understanding of multivariate interplay, of attractor states, and of a process of emergence, whether there be one language involved, two, or three. This is because UB theorists are likely to say that the mechanisms and processes for L1 acquisition are also used in L2 and L3 acquisition. The only caveat is that new input is always processed under the influence of prior cognitive states. And while the notion of communication is not, in its broadest sense as described in these papers, in the home court of SLA, a more micro-focused notion communication entailing a sequence of meaningful utterances such that UB theories might describe, is in the home court.

Many usage-based ideas seem germane to the authors' program. For example, one could connect dots between individual patterns of use, through social communication, and their relation to language policy in the Basque country. However the dots have yet to be more explicitly connected between environment and cognition both for FOM and UB. UB researchers like me are content to clarify a few variables, that is, to define a few dots within a synergistic L1-L2 field before extending to a synergistic L1-L2-L3 field for further validation. Thus for the question, *how to understand multilingualism*, there needs to be more work done on the cognitive front.

With regards to the question *what to do with multilingualism* from an educational perspective, one concern I have is the willingness to tie in constructs of cognition and education all in one fell swoop. As a matter of intent this is natural, but as a matter of practice this is problematic. Most importantly, language acquisition is not the same as literacy acquisition. Some of the studies cited in the readings could be misconstrued as, or were even presented as *literacy development = language acquisition*. Language is a precondition of literacy, not vice versa despite the overlap of many underlying proficiencies. The relationships between language proficiency, literacy, and common underlying proficiency have been well discussed by Cummins and acolytes, yet strangely Cummins is only cited secondarily in the references section. If one is to create a FOM manifesto, the dot-connecting endeavor may have to be divided up across a more sequence cogent papers.

And finally from an educational perspective, what expectations are we to derive from the readings with regards to the quality of the language code being acquired? Yes, we can admire code-switching skill. We can better understand motivations for code switching as they relate to socio-political needs. We can understand that there is cognitive interaction between attractors in L1, L2, and L3, and that there are priming effects differentially applied at a neural level. But as a language educator, I am concerned about the expectations of the teaching-learning paradigm. I am concerned about final projects. My students and I will not be "celebrating multilingualism" when their French *thèse* is peppered with anglicisms or calque. I will be even more concerned that the learner has failed to acquire *le mot juste* in the language and circumstance he or she is expected to perform in that will prevent stigma as someone who is unable to make appropriate choices regardless of linguistic ability. I would like to see an addendum celebrating "linguistic

inhibition of L1 during L3 performance,” or celebrating “multilingual control.” The concept of target language, as imperialistic as it may seem, does have social value when appropriately executed.

In sum, Focus on Multilingualism is rather broad in its current state. While ambitious, this can be fruitful as long as there are attempts to connect the substantive dots. It has been suggested here that some of the more granular focus can appropriately be drawn from the field of SLA, as well as some of the methodological caution. At the level of implementation, FOM would do well to articulate its goals with regards to education.

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Timothy Hall is a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. His research focus is usage-based theories of language acquisition and grammaticalization of language forms.