Multilingualism and the Holistic Approach to Multilingual Education

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The number of multilingual speakers now outnumbers that of monolinguals (Tucker, 1998). In a figure provided by the Linguistic Society of America, nations that are monolingual or mono-ethnic are the minority; on the contrary, scholars estimate over five-thousand languages are spoken in 160 nations around the world (Valdés, 2012). For those people, the usage of multiple languages occurs on a daily basis, possibly due to the emergence of global markets or the development of the Internet. The present commentary discusses multilingualism in relation to a newer perspective to multilingual education. First, the scope of multilingualism will be provided, followed by a discussion on a newer trend – a holistic approach – to multilingual education. A particular focus will be placed on *monolingual bias* and insights for research on multilingualism will be proposed.

Multilingualism has been defined differently, depending on the level of competence and mastery of the languages spanning along a continuum. Researchers favoring a narrow definition argue that in order to be considered *multilingual*, the person should have native or native-like proficiency in each of the languages. In a broader definition, researchers studying bilingual and multilingual communities view bilingualism "as a common human condition that makes it possible for an individual to function, at some level, in more than one language. The key to this very broad and inclusive definition of bilingualism is *more than one*" (Valdés, 2012). On one end of the spectrum, individuals can possess high levels of proficiency in all aspects of the languages, or they can display varying degrees of proficiency for the skills in each of the languages. On the other end of the continuum, one can simply know several phrases, which is sufficient enough to get around using alternative languages. Multilingual speakers, as Cook (1991) argues, fall somewhere between minimal and maximal definitions.

Among various discussions on multilingualism, a group of researchers look at the interface of second language acquisition, multilingualism and education. Along this line of research, Cenoz and Gorter (2011) propose a holistic approach to multilingual education which "takes into account all of the languages in the learner's repertoire" (p. 339), as opposed to traditional approaches that look at the languages separately. For this group of researchers, a multilingual speaker is defined as an individual that has multiple repertoires. According to the holistic perspective, the competence of a multilingual speaker is fluid, and languages are intertwined with each other, rather than traditionally-viewed as separate.

Additionally, this group of researchers argues against the "monolingual bias" in research and school contexts, which considers the educated native speaker as the standard for achieving second or additional language competences (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). The concept of an ideal native speaker has been challenged in that it is quite exceptional for one to have equal and perfect knowledge in multiple languages (Grosjean, 2010). Instead, multilingual speakers access, interact and use their languages differently in various contexts and through multimodal literacy practices. In this sense, a multilingual's communicative competence is not comparable to that of a monolingual speaker (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Furthermore, research has reported positive influences of multilingualism for the cognitive system. Through learning additional languages, one changes and expands his or her worldviews. Cook (1997) also argues that knowledge of multiple languages changes how people think. Other advantages of being proficient in multiple

languages include having enhanced executive functions (i.e., the abilities to plan and prioritize) (Bialystok & Martin, 2004) and better resistance to dementia or Alzheimer's disease (Bialystok, 2011). Furthermore, with richer experiences with languages, multilinguals can manifest language playfulness and use their languages in creative ways (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).

Given such a wide variety of differences between multilingual and monolingual speakers, multilingual speakers and language learners should not be viewed as imitation monolinguals in the respective target languages (see, Cook, 1993, for the notion 'multi-competence'). On the contrary, they should be considered as "possessing unique forms of competence, or competencies, in their own right" (Cook, 1993, p. 270). Nonetheless, the conception of reaching native command of a language as the goal for learning additional languages and the idea that non-native speakers are considered deficient in the target language, have continued to be widespread.

To move beyond the current state, researchers advocate for the multilingual and holistic approach, which may bring new insights for research on multilingualism. For instance, in lieu of focusing solely on the influence of the native language on one's second language(s), or of comparing multilingual speakers to the ideal native speakers, we can look into multilinguals' usage of the languages known, as suggested by the holistic approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). As Ortega (2010) argued, it is only through focusing on the multilinguals' total language repertoire that we can understand how learners of additional languages process and use the languages.

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