Multilingual Competence

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Multilingualism is a widespread phenomenon in modern societies. A considerable number of people speak more than two languages in their everyday life due to historical, social, or economic reasons (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998). They may live in a multilingual community as a result of colonialism and immigration, or they might be in constant contact with different monolingual communities because of globalization (Kemp, 2009). The continuing growth of individuals and communities that use three or more languages has led many researchers to investigate multilingualism and multilingual acquisition. Of the many key issues within the field of multilingualism, this short piece will focus on multilingual competence from the perspective of proficiency and acquisition goals. Identifying the extent to which an individual should be proficient in each of his or her languages is essential for defining a multilingual and for understanding which goals are attainable in multilingual education.

Traditionally, researchers tended to view multilingual competences as the sum of discrete monolingual competences. That is, instead of considering each language as a subset of the whole language system, researchers regarded each language within the individual's system to be equivalent in representation to the language of a monolingual (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Under this view, a *multilingual* is considered to be an individual who has a native-like control of multiple languages (Bloomfield, 1933, as cited in Kemp, 2009).

However, the traditional view of multilingual competence has now been challenged. Researchers now generally agree that the proficiency of a multilingual speaker is not comparable to that of a monolingual, and should be judged in its own right (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Thus, recent definitions of multilingualism do not entail a native level of proficiency in each language. This change in views stems from an understanding of the differences in language use between monolinguals and multilinguals. Cenoz and Genesse (1998) pointed out that multilinguals possess "a larger linguistic repertoire than monolinguals but usually the same range of situations in which to use that repertoire" (p. 19), resulting in multilinguals having more "specific distributions of functions and uses for each of their languages" (p. 19). As such, multilingual speakers use different languages for different contexts and purposes, and they are highly unlikely to have equivalent levels of proficiency in all the languages they possess (Kemp, 2009).

In an attempt to identify the linguistic capacity of multilinguals, Cenoz and Genesee (1998) proposed that multilingual competence involves using "several languages appropriately and effectively for communication in oral and written language" (p. 17). However, such a definition does not describe the exact level of language proficiency needed to be regarded as a multilingual. Defining multilingual competence is a complex and difficult task, and researchers have not yet agreed upon a single definition of multilingual competence (Saville-Mroike, 2006). Despite the disagreement on the conceptualization of multilingual competence, researchers have acknowledged that multilingual competence is distinctly marked from that of monolinguals and that multilingual competence should not be assessed against that of monolinguals. Based on this view, researchers have begun to compare multilingual speakers with monolinguals to determine their unique proficiencies rather than deficiencies. Researchers have now judged the proficiency

of multilinguals on the basis of its own merits relative to the multilingual speakers' real needs and uses (Cenoz and Genesee, 1998).

Such an understanding on the uniqueness of multilinguals' proficiency of implies that an appropriate and attainable goal of multilingual education is developing a different level of proficiency in each language based on learners' needs, rather than fostering native-like competences of all target languages. As suggested by Cenoz and Genesee (1998), schools that foster multilingualism should establish different goals for individual languages based on the learners' needs and objectives associated with each language. For instance, if one of the target languages is predominantly used for higher education but not for daily communication, the goal for language learning should be to develop competences solely for academic purposes.

Unlike monolinguals, multilingual speakers vary their language use in different contexts for different purposes, and their level of proficiency in each language is not equal. Researchers have attempted to apply the complexity of multilingual speakers' language use in their definition of multilingual competence, but they have not agreed upon the degree of proficiency required for an individual to be described as multilingual (Saville-Troike, 2006). Considering differences in the language use of monolinguals and multilinguals, the proficiency that multilingual learners aspire to should not be equivalent to the proficiency of a native speaker. Achieving native-like competence need not be the goal of multilingual education. Rather, the goals would differ in each language and should be based on learners' needs in a language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).

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