

## MULTILINGUALISM, PLURILINGUALISM AND ELT

By

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### Abstract

*This paper traces, broadly, the European origins of multilingualism and plurilingualism in formal educational contexts and their rationale. It examines some south Asian and Indian strands of research into the teaching of English as a second language in multi/plurilingual contexts. It does so in order to place the concepts and ideas in their historical contexts and consider their usefulness.*

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**Keywords:** multilingualism, plurilingualism, Council of Europe, translanguaging

### Introduction

The teaching of English language has received attention in terms of its linguistic and socio-cultural contexts in the last few decades, particularly with a growing awareness among countries that hitherto regarded themselves as monolingual. A European trajectory of multi/plurilingualism however fails to address the alternate trajectories of multilingual contexts where local approaches have amended and adopted the precepts and practices of teaching English as a second language. There has been considerable research in recent years from Asia and Africa around the teaching English language in contexts where more than one language operates. This paper will trace, broadly, a European shift towards multi/plurilingualism and the rationale behind it. It will examine some Asian/Indian strands of research into the teaching of English as a second language in multi/plurilingual contexts. It will do so in order to place the concepts and ideas in their historical contexts and consider their usefulness.

### Multilingualism

The ability to use more than one language across our individual, educational, social and other institutional contexts, or the co-existence of different languages in a society has long been termed 'multilingualism'. It may be distinguished as individual, societal, institutional, and discursive multilingualism (Franceschini, 2011). Multilingualism is also regarded as an extended, or expanded, view of earlier research into bilingualism and second language acquisition. This school of thought comes from a long history of research into bilingualism and involves research into language

acquisition (L1, L2, etc.) from disciplines such as linguistics, including sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

However, the term ‘multilingualism’ in such contexts was understood in broad terms that were inattentive to the power differentials and conflicts between linguistic communities and states. On the one hand, this meant that multilingualism could be perceived as a superficial tool for marketing or public relations. On the other hand, the vagueness of the term meant that non-standard varieties or the languages of immigrant or minority communities which were important for local and individual situations on the ground were neglected. Thus, the policies that emerged from such perspectives could not address conflicts and problems that arose from the fact that not all languages operated on a level playing field, that they were not equal and diversity was not necessarily respected. There were, for instance, strong local arguments to keep a specific language dominant in a region which resonated with market or job-related concerns and was a factor in identity formation.

Researchers have also noted how an overtly non-ideological or balanced orientation masks implicit and covert ideologies beneath the surface. In particular, these vague principles and policies impacted education among minority and marginalized communities where there were few significant changes. To quote Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988), the causes of such educational failures ‘...cannot be understood unless the educational questions are considered in the context of the historical and current power relations between dominant and dominated groups’. Instead, they argued for a ‘conflict’ perspective that analyses educational problems for instance from ‘institutionalized racism/ethnicism/ classism/linguicism in society’. Scholarly work that emerged from such a perspective argued for multilingual education (MLE) to support the linguistic and cultural diversity (LCD) across the globe as well as to be inclusive of minority communities and indigenous peoples (IP).

Such a perspective also suggested that a subtractive education (one that subtracts or effaces the indigenous and tribal minority, ITM, language) could be harmful in social, psychological, economic and political terms. So much so that it could be termed a linguistic and cultural genocide. Interestingly, Skutnabb-Kangas has (2009) argued that a reason to maintain the linguistic and cultural diversity is in fact related to our planet’s urgent need to maintain its biodiversity, given that they are ‘...likely also causally related’ as they have co-evolved historically and mutually influenced each other. She points out the knowledge required to maintain biodiversity, particularly in ‘biodiversity hotspots’ is likely ‘encoded in the small languages of Indigenous and local peoples’ (39).

### **Plurilingualism: A European history**

The discomfort of a multilingualism that seemed to only acknowledge the coexistence of several languages and not so much the ‘richness and diversity’ of cultures

embedded and structured by their languages led the Council of Europe to devote more resources towards ‘developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries’ (3).

It was the formation of the European Union around the 1980s that led to a formal need to develop competencies in languages and cultures across its member countries. The Council of Europe’s *Common European framework for reference of languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* was developed between 1989 and 1996 ‘to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe’ (1). The document pointed out that individual’s experience languages as they move from their home to educational institutions to society at large and that languages and cultures do not operate in strictly compartmentalized categories. Therefore, the aim was to ‘reduc[e] the dominant position of English in international communication’ and build ‘a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact’ (4).

From such a perspective, the aim of educational institutions would not be simply to build competency in two or three or more languages measured against an ‘ideal native speaker’. Instead, the objective was ‘to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place’ (5). Moreover, the document also noted that learning a language was a life-long activity and therefore the task of a formal learning context was to develop a learner’s ‘motivation, skill and confidence in facing new language experience’ in order to ‘strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility’ (4). The framework of proficiency set out in the document was hence meant to measure levels of proficiency in terms of the progress of learners during formal learning as well as on a life-long basis.

The European Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism is an organization that advocated ‘practices of and research into multilingualism and plurilingual competence in Europe and beyond’. Its website lists several interesting projects such as ‘Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe’ (MIME), ‘Languages in a Network of European Excellence’ (LINEE), ‘Modularizing Multilingual/Multicultural Academic Communicative Competence (MAGICC) and so on to identify language policies and strategies that would best combine ‘mobility’ and ‘inclusion’ or address linguistic diversity across Europe.

### **Multilingualism: South Asian perspectives**

Researchers and scholars have argued for several decades now that multilingualism is ‘endemic’ to countries such as India, where functioning in more than one language is more than norm. A speaker of one language ‘naturally’ switches from one language to another as they move across domains, without conscious thought of a multilinguality and language maintenance is the norm. Khubchandani (1983) pointed to

the fuzziness of linguistic boundaries and Debiprasad Pattanayak famously noted, ‘If one draws a straight line between Kashmir and Kanyakumari and marks, say, every five or ten miles, then one will find that there is no break in communication between any two consecutive points’ (1984, 44). Annamalai (2011) pointed out that Indian multilingualism begins with socialization at home and at workplaces for the vast majority, and is characterized as a ‘normal societal phenomenon’ (40). The heterogeneity of languages is also marked by an ‘internal’ variation. In fact, research has established that this largely true of most postcolonial communities, including south Asia.

The mixing of several languages, literacies and discourses may often take place within particular speech situations in multilingual communities such that it would be difficult to see the interaction in terms of one language alone. Khubhchandani (1997) commented on this phenomenon thus: ‘The edifice of linguistic plurality in the Indian subcontinent is traditionally based upon the **complementary** use of more than one language and more than one writing system for the same language in one ‘space’ (96; emphasis in the original). And this linguistic mixing is constantly and actively negotiated in order to construct meanings that are produced in practice. So much so that ‘individuals in such societies acquire more **synergy** (i.e., putting forth one’s own efforts) and serendipity (i.e., accepting the other on his/her own terms, being open to unexpectedness), and develop positive attitudes to variations in speech (to the extent of even appropriating deviations as the norm in the lingua franca), in the process of “coming out” from their own language-codes to a neutral ground (94; emphasis in the original). While we may wish to demur from such essentializing readings of attitudinal transformations, it is nonetheless unarguable that quite a different orientation is at work in communication in multilingual communities. It is an emphasis that is quite different from practices in monolingual communities.

This ground reality of a lived multilingualism in countries such as India has also led scholars to comment that language is not simply a tool for communication or an external object or something with a capacity for a systematic inquiry by linguists. Agnihotri pointed out (2010) that such views often ignore the ‘... diversity, iconicity, symbolic power’ of languages and its association with ‘ethnicity, cultural practices and socio-political dynamics’ (2). Multilingualism is thus not merely about linguistic abilities but also cultural practices and knowledge systems. In fact, Agnihotri argued that the ‘obsession’ of linguists with language as a system has happened concomitantly with the emergence of the concept of nation-states in late nineteenth century, where ‘territorial identity’ was coupled ‘even if by force’ with ‘linguistic and religious identity’ (3).

Agnihotri further notes that all children have the ability to acquire languages and this happens through interaction and processes of socialization. In fact, he argued, a three-year-old is a 'linguistic adult' in terms of the basic lexicon, structures and rules of discourse of a language. Given this, the role of a teacher in formal contexts is merely to maximize, following Stephen Krashen, the exposure to language in anxiety-free contexts. Inevitably, language becomes 'inextricably linked with the social, political, gender and power structures of society' and therefore it is more than an instrument or a product or a set of LSRW skills. Agnihotri contended languages are 'constitutive' of us and therefore best acquired in holistic contexts (6).

In a context where multilingualism was an accepted societal norm, formal education inculcated multilingualism as 'an essential part of its curriculum' and this began in the context of India when the educational policy of a newly-independent nation defined the three languages to be taught in secondary schools. This was what was called the three language formula, which envisaged the country in terms of Hindi speaking and non-Hindi speaking regions and was later incorporated into the National Policy on Education in 1968. At present, these three languages are understood to be a regional language, Hindi and English. What this means for a learner finishing school is that they will have been taught three languages in school. Nonetheless, Annamalai believed that 'only a quarter of the multilingualism is contributed by formal learning in schools and it is of the elite kind' (36).

Moreover, given that multilingualism is a norm, the acquisition of an additional language in formal contexts, it was believed, would not commonly lead to a gradual loss of the first or home language. On the other hand, given that languages and linguistic communities are unequal in terms of populations or access to resources, such formal acquisition of languages may be in the direction of greater socio-economic mobility. Languages acquired through socialization on the other hand are retained or erased based on the behavioural and perceptual norms of a group, and usually it is the oral skills that remain valuable.

### **Plurilingual practices**

The use of English in such already multilingual communities has been termed World Englishes by one school of thought. However, scholars such as Canagarajah (2009) have identified multilingualism, particularly among individual language users, as a '...separate, whole and advanced competence in the different languages one speaks' (7). Instead, he suggested that south Asia has had a plurilingual tradition of communication from precolonial times that is 'natural' to its linguistic ecology (5)

Canagarajah drew on the work of Khubchandani and others to identify some features of plurilingual competence. To begin with, he insisted that proficiency in several languages not be thought of in terms of each language but rather in terms of each language. So, the emphasis is on a linguistic repertoire that comes together in an



‘integrated competence’ (5). Second, he asserted that instead of an equal level of proficiency in each language for all purposes we must consider the use of ‘different languages for distinct purposes’ as competence. Moreover, competency in a language is not to be considered in isolation but in terms of a social and intercultural competence. In addition, we must be attentive to the plurilingual competencies of speakers outside of formal institutional spaces. Indeed, Canagarajah was critical of a discrete view of language that appeared to posit languages as separate monolingualisms.

### **Translanguaging with English**

Research in plurilingual practices have postulated arguments about a ‘highly fluid’ form of language practice in the south Asian context that has accommodated English in its tradition. Language users therefore negotiated ‘different Englishes’ for intelligibility and effective communication. The use of English in such contexts, it was argued, is not quite similar to the concept of World Englishes.

World Englishes suggests a stability of language, where there may be borrowings from local languages which become systematized and included in the local variety of English. On the other hand, plurilingual Englishes combine local languages in English in idiosyncratic and unstable ways in such a manner that phonology, grammar, semantics are largely different from the metropolitan varieties of World Englishes.

The argument was that plurilingual Englishes are a form of pidgin, albeit not with a functionally reduced grammar or semantic range. In the words of Annamalai (2001),

It is similar to incipient pidgin in its indeterminacy. The words taken from the English language differ from speaker to speaker and even in the same speaker from time to time. Even the same sentence repeated after a few seconds may not have the same words from English. (173)

A speaker may have a complete range of expressions for all the possible contexts of use. However, unlike codeswitching which may be deployed to add to a referential or rhetorical meaning, the mixing in plurilingual uses of English happens along a continuum. The mixing is also not about codeswitching because the world of multilingual communities constitutes the same system and influence the shape and sound of each other. Instead, language users access a language as part of a communicative system in a move that has been termed ‘translanguaging.’ Garcia (2009), talking of translanguaging, says

Rather than focusing on the language itself and how one or the other might relate to the way in which a monolingual standard is used and has been described, the concept of translanguaging makes obvious that there are no clear cut borders between the languages of bilinguals. What we have is a languaging continuum that is accessed (47).

In other words, the languages are accessed for a user’s purposes at will and without seeing them in discrete categories. If we consider communication in

multilingual contexts in terms of competence, we may think of communication in plurilingual contexts in terms of strategies of interaction. So language users switch across languages and negotiate meanings in creative ways and therefore learning never stops.

### Conclusion

In societies where users learn to work with several languages in order to communicate across domains, the decisions or lessons about which grammars or forms or conventions to use may shift rapidly during a linguistic encounter. The constant and unpredictable negotiation as users strive to communicate effectively may make it challenging to produce ‘standard’ languages. Instead, the idea of English as a language that is aligned and operationalized in social, situational and affective dimensions in ever-changing contexts is both intriguing and has implications for classroom teaching. Such an idea resists the notion of language being the sole repository of meaning and allows us to consider language proficiency creatively and critically.

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