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Assessing Multilingual Competence

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What is Multilingualism?

Multilingualism is the unitary (single and combined) linguistic and sociolinguistic ability of individuals to use more than one language in everyday and academic contexts.

- **Multilingualism is growing in importance because:**

- Globalization and immigration have made multilingualism increasingly important for academic success and socioeconomic progress.

- Multilingualism is also becoming the norm in education systems globally, even when it's not supported by an official policy. Students are encouraged to learn additional languages in or outside the school.

- **Measurement and assessment of multilingual – or heteroglossic – competence has become more common.** However, Current assessment paradigms are outdated.

Early Developments

Defining Multilingualism

Traditional research on bilingualism/multilingualism often adopts a **monolingual (monoglossic) or fractional** view. In this view, multilinguals are assumed to develop language like monolinguals, with each language as a separate, detached system that develops in a linear fashion.

Multilinguals are treated as the sum of two or more monolinguals implying that multilinguals should have full, **native-like** control of all their languages. However, in reality, most multilinguals do not achieve this native-like competence in all their languages.

Assessing Multilingualism

- Historically, educational and testing environments have used a **monoglossic paradigm**, which often ignores actual multilingual practices.

The traditional method for testing bilingualism is to assess each language system separately and then compare the results. This perspective assumes multilinguals should achieve native-like proficiency in all their languages.

- When multilingual speakers are measured according to monolingual criteria, they often appear **disadvantaged linguistically and cognitively**. Test takers are expected to use only the target language. Using any other language (either partially or completely) results in their responses getting ignored or them getting penalized. In traditional testing, the same measures and scoring rubrics are used for both monolinguals and multilinguals.

- Monolingual assessments tend to **ignore** the different needs that bilinguals have for the two languages and do not account for the fact that multilingual people use their different languages for different purposes, with different speakers, and in different contexts.

Major Contributions

In this section, the authors review how the concept of multilingualism and multilingual competence has shifted and discuss current practices in multilingual assessment.

Redefining Multilingualism

- **Shift in perspective:** In recent years, many scholars have called for a more holistic view of language, language acquisition, multilingualism, and multilingual development, focusing on social context, learning environment and communicative strategies rather than mastery of individual languages. (Block 2003; Lafford 2007).
- Herdina and Jessner view **the interaction between language systems** in multilingual individuals as multifaceted and multidirectional, with each language system influencing and being influenced by other language systems.
- Various scholars have pointed out that **multilingual individuals differ from monolinguals** by having *a specific linguistic configuration* where the two languages coexist and constantly interact and also by having *a larger linguistic repertoire* which they use across different communities and domains.
- **Translanguaging:** This ability to shuttle between languages and use the entire linguistic repertoire as one unified system. Multilinguals strategically use their full repertoire based on context and need.
- **Multicompetence:** Multilingual competence is not an absolute state; a person's languages are in constant flux. The concept of multicompetence views a multilingual individual as having an extended and integrated linguistic repertoire and being able to use the appropriate linguistic resource(s) for an appropriate occasion. Multicompetence is a general concept but scholars believe that we can use it to capture the totality of linguistic knowledge in a multilingual's mind to understand how multiple languages interact and are used together.

Multilingual Assessment Continuum

Shohamy (2011) views multilingual assessment as a continuum

First end (monolingual view): Each language is treated as a closed, separate system. Even if learners know more than one language, their responses are only scored in the target language (e.g., English only). If they mix another language, they are penalized. In the U.S., for example, children in bilingual programs are tested in English and their home language (e.g., Spanish). However, the tests treat the

languages as separate skills. If a student mixes languages even if they show a clear understanding, the answer is marked incorrect.

Second end (heteroglossic view): considers all languages part of one system, allowing test takers to mix languages freely, with answers scored regardless of language choice (García & Wei, 2014) in other words All languages are seen as part of one integrated system. Learners mix and use any of their languages, even within the same sentence, and their answers are accepted regardless of the language used. This perspective supports translanguaging, code-switching, and code-mixing. **Currently**, most assessments are still positioned at the monolingual end of the continuum.

Works in Progress

The act of assessing multilingual competence can be implemented in a variety of ways. The following section presents several current applications and methods of assessment.

1-Flexible Mathematics Bilingual Assessments (Lopez et al., 2014). In the U.S., a study focused on designing flexible bilingual mathematics assessments.

Goal: to develop flexible bilingual assessments allowing students to use all their languages freely. This reflects translanguaging and helps provide deeper insight into both language and academic skills.

2-Measuring CALP for Bilingual Students (Sanchez et al., 2013) Measured Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in English and Spanish.

Goal: Measuring CALP in English and Spanish identifies students with learning difficulties more accurately. A student with a true disability should score low on CALP in both languages, not just one. Differences appeared between English and Spanish for some students, showing the importance of bilingual assessment for accurate special education decisions.

3. Longitudinal Bilingual Assessments (Swanson et al., 2011) Researchers conducted bilingual assessments over time, collecting multiple waves of data. They used the data to estimate latent models of oral language skills across languages.

As a result, four consistent profiles of bilingual students were identified: High-performing bilinguals, average performing bilinguals, low-performing bilinguals, and English-dominant bilinguals. Advanced statistical modeling helps understand the natural variability in performance among bilingual students instead of using a monolingual interpretation. (Fairer and more accurate assessment for English Learners (ELs).

Flexible Multilingual Assessment Methods

- There have been a few efforts to develop flexible multilingual assessment methods that **give test takers the freedom to translanguague** whenever needed. Flexible multilingual assessment methods give test takers freedom to use all the resources in

their linguistic repertoire (**standard, vernacular, and mixed varieties**). Because restricting students to one language may create unfair disadvantages, preventing them from showing their full competence.

- **Lopez et al. (2014) proposed a technology-enhanced assessment platform** that allows multilingual speakers to use multiple assessment features. It provides questions in multiple languages for test takers to choose from. Allows answers in different modes: writing, oral recording, or graphical representation. Test takers can translanguage or mix languages without being penalized. Test takers' responses are scored using **conceptual scoring**, which evaluates the meaning and knowledge demonstrated rather than the specific language or mode used. Ensures fair assessment across different languages. Assessment features can be enabled or disabled depending on the language skill being measured. For example, if the construct is writing, oral recording is disabled.

Problems and Difficulties

Imposing Language Policies That Neglect Multilingual Diversity

According to Stavans and Hoffmann (2015), “measures of multilingualism are usually driven by educational, political and economic forces rather than socio-psychological ones” (p. 157). In fact, Shohamy (2011) argues that tests serve as tools to impose monoglossic political ideologies to maintain “national and collective identities” (p. 420).

One important example is how many countries require **immigrants** to pass proficiency tests in a dominant national language to gain **residency or citizenship**. These tests take a "monolingual perspective," ignoring and devaluing the immigrants' existing skills in other languages and their overall multilingual competence.

Conceptualizing, Implementing, and Interpreting Multilingual Assessments

One of the biggest **challenges** in multilingual assessment is **conceptualizing the constructs that need to be measured**. Multilingual assessment should allow test takers to select language features that best fit their communicative needs. To do this, **a paradigm shift** from a monolingual view to a holistic view of language, where test-takers can dynamically use their full linguistic repertoire. This requires changes in policy, practice, and the development of new language standards that describe performance across languages.

Implementation is difficult because these assessments require test administrators to act as mediators, possessing the same languages and dialects as test-takers to negotiate meaning.

Finally, **scoring and interpretation** present challenges. Appropriate scoring models have to be developed to accommodate for the dynamic and varying language skills that multilingual individuals possess. **Score interpretation** is complex because it's difficult to assess every language situation multilinguals engage in within one assessment; therefore, determining which skills and functions are generalizable across tasks and languages is critical.