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Innovations in English Language Education: New Issues and Trends

Edited by Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo



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INDEX

BRONWEN HUGHES and MARGARET RASULO Reimagining language education today	7
LUCIA ABBAMONTE How (Thoroughly) Does the Medium Shape Teaching? Some Considerations on Doctoral Courses in EPP at Vanvitelli University	19
ANNA ANSELMO and ELENA REFRASCHINI Combining SLA Theory and Teaching Practice: “Big Bowl of Serial”, or, How to Use TV Series to Become Autonomous Learners of English	45
GIUSEPPE BALIRANO and MARIA DE SANTO Learning English in the Digital Age: eTandem, Autonomy and Intercultural Communication in Online Educational Environments	63
FRANCESCA D’ADAMO Gamifying English Learning and Assessment to Reduce Anxiety and Foster Speaking Skills: The Case of Secondary School Students	91
FRANCESCA D’ANGELO Bilingualism and “Bilingualisms”: Different Dimensions and Contexts of Acquisition	131
STEFANIA D’AVANZO Storytelling as a Teaching Tool: Some Reflections from Experiences with Undergraduates Students	153
BRONWEN HUGHES and MARGARET RASULO Questioning Across Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of Higher-Order and Lower-Order Questions in CLIL and EMI	169
DIANGHA ANTHONY YUH Digitalization of the Post-pandemic Language Classroom in Cameroon and the Use of Technology in Teaching: Rethinking Local Policy on Classroom Praxis	187
Notes on contributors	209

FRANCESCA D'ANGELO*

Bilingualism and “Bilingualisms”: Different Dimensions and Contexts of Acquisition

Abstract

The present paper provides insight into the concept of bilingualism and bilingual education under different perspectives of investigation. First, it highlights the complexity of the phenomenon, together with its ambiguity in terms of categorisation, depending on the specific factor considered. Second, it analyses various aspects of bilingualism in terms of educational outcomes, cognitive development, and socio-cultural background. Third, the role of a particular factor is examined: the context of acquisition of each language mastered by the multilingual speaker. In particular, the methodology and findings of the most significant studies on the influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition (TLA) will be compared and contrasted to discuss their contribution to the study of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism. Finally, a discussion on the implicit and explicit paradigm is included with a focus on the impact of metalinguistic awareness on additional languages, related to the different routes of acquisition available to learners. The implications of the research are portrayed in pedagogical terms, advancing a teaching approach focused on multilingualism, i.e. on the whole linguistic repertoire of the language learners.

Keywords: bilingualism, instruction, multilingual education, third language acquisition, ESL, multilingualism, metalinguistic awareness

1. Introduction

The study of how individuals can master two or multiple languages has attracted the attention of different scholars from different perspectives: cognitive, linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic etc. The rise of interest, especially in the last two decades, is due to the increased awareness of the sociological reality that, in most parts of the world, over 50% of the population is, in fact, bilingual (Grosjean 2010). Interestingly enough, if one considers the impact of dialects too, the percentage becomes even higher, and bilingualism becomes the norm rather than the exception since almost everyone also speaks (or at least understands) a dialect.

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The present work focuses on several factors affecting bilingual education and bilingualism, particularly the context and the different routes of acquisition available to bilingual language learners. The aim is to provide an insight into the phenomenon by comparing the most important definitions and contributions which examine the effects of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism on additional language learning. Specifically, it delves into the multifaceted realm of bilingualism and bilingual education, approaching the subject through various lenses.

First, the intricate nature of bilingualism is explored, revealing its intricacy and the challenge of categorization depending upon specific factors under investigation (e.g., age of acquisition, number of languages, method of instruction, social prestige of each language etc.). Indeed, the work aims at disentangling the relationship between methods of instruction and bilingualism by reviewing the most relevant definitions proposed by scholars in the last decades, based on the dimensions of bilingualism taken into account. Second, a comprehensive analysis of different facets of bilingualism, encompasses the educational outcomes, cognitive development, and socio-cultural dimensions. The examination then narrows down to the pivotal factor of language acquisition context for multilingual speakers. This involves a comparative assessment of methodologies and findings from influential studies, specifically delving into the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition (TLA).

Furthermore, the paper scrutinises the educational, cognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions of bilingualism, illuminating its far-reaching impact across diverse domains. Central to this discourse is an in-depth analysis of the contextual factors influencing language acquisition among multilingual speakers. Through a comparative evaluation of the most influential studies on bilingual education and TLA, the work sheds light on the crucial role of acquisition context in shaping linguistic development. The synthesis of these findings contributes to a deeper understanding of the effects of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism. In particular, the implicit and explicit paradigm within the language acquisition domain is examined, with a specific focus on metalinguistic awareness and its implications for bilingual learners. To better understand the intricate interplay between implicit and explicit learning processes, divergent routes of language acquisition are critically reviewed. The implications of this research reverberate within pedagogical spheres,

advocating for a holistic teaching approach centred on multilingualism. Embracing the entire bilingual learners’ linguistic repertoire, this approach seeks to foster an inclusive educational environment conducive to the diverse needs of language learners.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Who is bilingual? Different dimensions of bilingualism

The most salient feature that can be observed about bilingualism is the complexity and multifaceted aspect of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is not possible to establish clear cut-off points defining where it starts, where it ends, and who can be considered bilingual. Hence, there is no unique definition pointing out what bilingualism is, considering the multiple factors characterising and affecting the phenomenon itself. It is exactly the ambiguity and lack of precise boundaries that allow so many different definitions and interpretations.

It is worth starting with the disambiguation of some key terms which may often be responsible for misinterpretations and confusion in TLA research. After a close look at the most relevant literature in the field, it can be claimed that the term ‘multilingualism’ has several meanings. For instance, in Jessner’s view (2009) both terms – ‘bilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’ – are still used as synonyms for ‘multilingualism’ as, in the past, most studies focused on second language learning and bilingualism. For instance, in his pioneering work on multilingualism, Haugen included ‘bilingualism’ under the meaning of ‘multilingualism’ and argued that the term ‘bilingual’ also refers to ‘plurilingual’ and ‘polyglot’ (Haugen 1956: 9).

Cenoz (2013) on the other hand, points out that the term ‘multilingualism’ has recently gained currency at the expense of ‘bilingualism’. However, literature shows no consensus on that, which means that there are still different positions and uses for the terms ‘bilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’. The traditional position, reflecting the importance of research involving two rather than additional languages, considers ‘bilingualism’ as a generic term. Even so, it is also used in a broader sense to refer to two languages but can also include more languages (Cook/Bassetti 2011).

On the other hand, the mainstream position, nowadays, considers ‘multilingualism’ to be the generic label used to refer to two or more languages (Aronin/Singleton 2008). On these grounds, ‘bilingualism’ and

'trilingualism' can be considered as instances of 'multilingualism'. Finally, some scholars use 'bilingualism' and 'multilingualism' as different terms, to distinguish between speakers of two languages and speakers of three (or additional) languages (De Groot 2011). Even though the latter is regarded as the most common approach among researchers working on Third Language Acquisition, the most traditional position considering 'bilingualism' as the broader, generic term will be adopted in the present work.

2.2. Context of acquisition

By taking into account the different types of competencies achieved in a second language, namely grammatical and communicative, it is possible to introduce definitions of bilingualism based on the context of acquisition of the second language. The former is what lay speakers mean by knowing a language or speaking properly. More specifically, grammatical competence refers to speakers' ability to produce and recognise well-formed utterances in a language. In other words, it enables a speaker to make grammaticality judgments. On the other hand, communicative competence refers to the ability to use those utterances in ways that are considered unmarked or appropriate in a particular situation. To determine what is unmarked, one needs to consider the participants, topic, and setting of the conversation. Besides, communicative competence allows us to recognise marked usages and what the speaker intends by such utterances. A marked choice of words and expressions conveys the level of communicative competence. For instance, the ability to choose different registers to address somebody, yet reflects communicative competence.

Several terms have been propounded in the literature to refer to bilinguals who acquired the second language in a naturalistic setting and bilinguals who learned it in a formal setting. The German linguist Braun (*apud* Jessner 2008), for example, in the attempt to find a definition for multilingualism, distinguished between natural multilingualism, in the sense of acquired from birth, and learned multilingualism. In his view, learned multilingualism can also result in active balanced proficiency, but this is an unusual case linked to specific circumstances.

Yet, another common terminology employed is primary and secondary bilingualism to distinguish between a dual competence acquired naturally

through contextual demands, and one where systematic and formal instruction has occurred. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that these cannot be considered watertight compartments. Indeed, for instance, a speaker might develop fluent conversational skills in a language, in a relatively informal way, and only later feel the need to add some formal literacy skills. This would, incidentally, reproduce the way a mother tongue is acquired, and it has been reflected in many second language programmes.

2.3. Age of acquisition

Besides, the age when bilinguals acquire languages is regarded as one of the most important factors affecting the nature of their bilingualism. Indeed, it has been considered as the most striking variable which explains success in second language acquisition. When dealing with this type of distinction, the terminology employed is early bilingualism and late bilingualism. Specifically, an early bilingual can either fall within the category of infant bilingualism or child bilingualism (Haugen 1956: 72), where the conventional cut-off point between the two has been established at the age of three (Mc Laughlin 1984: 73). On the other hand, as far as late bilingualism is concerned, the line established to discern between child and adult bilingualism falls at the age of puberty. Generally speaking, the main differences observed between these types of bilinguals concern different cognitive features including language production and perception, language processing, and storage.

Paradis (2004) has advanced a possible neurobiological cause to explain the age effects. The author suggested that it is caused by the decline of procedural memory for late L2 learners (i.e., a more limited capacity to learn implicitly), forcing them learners to rely more on explicit learning. He claims that the upper age limit changes according to the specific component of the implicit language system acquired through exposure to language interaction. For instance, prosody has been observed to precede phonology, morphology, and syntax. Since the learning of vocabulary resorts to declarative (explicit) memory, it is not susceptible to the age effects.

It has been argued (Myers-Scotton 2005) that native speakers of a language, i.e. those who have learned the language since early childhood, do not need to be taught either grammatical or communicative competence as they acquire them with no particular effort. Indeed, the acquisition process

requires some exposure to the language in use in the speakers' community, and it is based on the innate learning principles that all humans have. This is not the case when the second language is taught in a formal setting since the focus is mainly on teaching the grammatical competence of the language. Because of the belief that grammar constitutes the essence of the language, different programmes only concentrate on explicitly teaching a language, i.e. on teaching grammatical constructions. That is why many L2 speakers show more control of the L2 grammar than of its appropriate use in a specific context. Nonetheless, lately, more and more second language programmes are giving importance to communicative competence.

2.4. Social prestige

There are some important and socially relevant differences worth discussing between those who became bilingual informally and those whose second competence is more self-consciously acquired. For instance, Edwards *et al.* (2013) point out that it would not be appropriate to gather under the same label English-Gaelic bilinguals in Ireland or Scotland who are fluent in both languages due to growing up in a particular location and those who set themselves to become bilingual.

This last nuance has been usually conveyed by referring to *élite* and *folk* bilingualism. The former refers to two prestigious languages and has to do with social status marking, the need for knowledge and cultural boundary-crossing. Folk bilingualism, on the other hand, is generally suggestive of a more informal and necessity-driven expansion. Both varieties are driven by necessity even though we are talking about different levels and types of necessity. Moreover, formal education *per se* does not seem to be enough to elicit the *élite* label. Real-life mixture examples show how inaccurate simplistic categorisations are.

As Fishman observes (1966), the distinction between *folk* and *élite* bilingualism is more related to the prestige and social status of the languages involved rather than to the context of acquisition or necessity type. Folk bilinguals are immigrants and linguistic minorities who exist within the milieu of a dominant language that is not their own and whose own language is not held in high esteem within the society. The *élite* are those who speak the dominant language and whose societal status is enhanced through the mastery of additional languages. The following observation

by Fishman is very meaningful to understanding the social implications as well as the perception that lay speakers have of language prestige: "Many Americans have long been of the opinion that bilingualism is a good thing if it was acquired via travel (preferably to Paris) or via formal education (preferably at Harvard) but it is a bad thing if it was acquired from one's immigrant parents or grandparents" (Fishman 1966: 122–23).

It is important to notice that not only does this observation deal with the social perception of the languages involved, but it also has important implications from a pedagogical perspective. It affects the actual involvement and use of bilinguals' heritage languages, both at home and school. Indeed, the child who acquires a language is presented to it in a given context, which may be fused or separated. The former situation occurs when both parents speak both languages to the child or when both languages are used in the child's environment, i.e., in a multilingual society. The latter situation occurs when the parents follow the one-parent-one-language rule or when one language is learned in a context/country and the second in the other. All these scenarios characterise the so-called ascribed bilingualism, to use Houston's own words (1972), or the aforementioned natural or primary bilingualism.

On the other hand, the label achieved bilingualism (Adler 1977), that is instructed or secondary bilingualism, describes the situation when a person learns a language through systematic instruction. A further, interesting distinction has been advanced by Skutnabb-Kangas (1984: 95) between natural bilingualism on one hand and school/cultural bilingualism on the other. School bilingualism is involved with formal language teaching in a school environment, and the language is rarely used outside this context. Cultural bilingualism applies more to adults, who learn a language for purposes of travel, leisure, and work, and who recognise the cultural value of knowing more than one language.

Nonetheless, despite the distinctions just introduced, there are still some researchers who do not acknowledge school bilinguals as authentic bilinguals. Indeed, in their view, those who acquired their second language in a formal setting only have a good command of the language, but they are not necessarily bilinguals. Malmberg, for instance, claims that knowledge of a second language laboriously acquired does not result in bilingualism. This establishes an acceptable boundary between bilingualism on one hand and knowledge of foreign languages on the other, which will be further

discussed in terms of cognitive development and language learning skills in the following sections. More specifically, according to his definition:

A bilingual is an individual who, in addition to his mother tongue, has acquired from childhood onward or early age a second language by natural means (in principle not by formal instruction) so that he has become a fully competent member of the other linguistic community within the sphere, the occupation or social group, to which he naturally belongs. (*apud* Skutnaab-Kangas 1984: 96)

The author points out that there is a connection between the origin of bilingualism and the bilinguals' dependency on it when she establishes that "for naturally bilingual people, bilingualism is a must", while for school and cultural bilinguals "bilingualism is often more or less voluntary [...], not vital for them, but a desirable extra, something they enjoy or find useful" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984: 96). However, instructed (or secondary/achieved) bilingualism is a more common situation if we consider that second language learning in a classroom setting is a necessary reality in many parts of the world. Indeed, almost every state in the world has a population characterised by different first languages. The minority language groups need to learn the majority language both for practical reasons and because, most of the time, schooling is only available in that language.

In nations where no one language group dominates in number or politically, then, either one regional language or an outside language is selected as a *lingua franca*. In this case, this language is studied at school and becomes the medium of instruction for at least the upper primary grades. Besides, in many countries, apart from studying the official language of schooling and education, upper-level students must study one or more international languages as part of the programme, such as English. Indeed, it is important to highlight that English is spoken by 400 million people as a first language but at least one billion people study it as a foreign language or as an official second language (Crystal 1987).

3. The role of previously acquired languages on Third Language Acquisition

Many researchers have examined the recurring features of the classroom environment to be relevant to students' development of a second

language. Specifically, they examine the type of cognitive components or mechanisms available to second language learners. Based on the point of view they assume on this matter, especially on the role given to instruction, they have been distinguished into two main groups. The first group includes the Universal Grammar proponents, also called nativists, arguing that second language acquisition has distinct similarities to first language acquisition. In their opinion, learners have some access to the same innate language faculty that makes first language acquisition rather effortless. Therefore, their main aim is to provide evidence that in the performance of L2 learners, it is Universal Grammar and not the instruction that plays the most important role in determining any success.

The other group of Second Language Acquisition researchers attributes a more important role to instruction (e.g., Cenoz/Valencia 1994; Sanz 2000; Thomas 1988). Their starting point used as the main assumption is that the process of second language learning is very different from the acquisition of the mother tongue. They argue that even though the L1 acquisition is based on an innate language faculty, it is no longer active to the same extent for second language learning. Their main focus is to find evidence for the type of learning that is possible for L2 learners. It is precisely the type of learning promoted that determines a further internal division within the group.

On one hand, there are the promoters of explicit learning, convinced of the benefits of instruction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The SLA supporters also include an additional group of researchers, i.e., Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA) considering the age of acquisition of a second language as a fundamental factor affecting the level of proficiency of the target language on different levels of the language system. A study by Meisel (2018), for instance, highlights similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition, focusing on the role of age of onset (AO) as a possible cause of qualitative differences in the knowledge acquired by learners of these acquisition types. Specifically, it investigates the acquisition of grammatical gender in French by German L1 children. The findings indicate that the turning point is around AO 3;6, highlighting that it is a crucial factor in determining successive language acquisition. On the other hand, there is the claim that learners achieve the best results through teaching methods that favour implicit

learning. Finally, an additional group, with similar theoretical premises to the second main group described, pays particular attention to the context of acquisition in which the learning takes place as well as to the learners' motivations and expectations related to the level of success attained.

In an influential work, after comparing previous research into the field, Rothman (2015) argues that early bilinguals outperform late bilinguals in TLA due to having two activated grammatical systems developed from an early age. On the other hand, Jaensch's view (2012), following the Universal Grammar approach, relies on the assumption that there are more advantages for learners of an L3 if their L2 experience begins at an older age since they can have access to a more enhanced MLA in contrast to the more implicit learning environment of younger learners.

The present work aims to provide an insight into the role and implications of each of the aforementioned perspectives of study on additional language learning, considering the benefits of multilingual education from a different point of view. On the role and effectiveness of instruction in second or additional language learning, there is a large amount of literature. It has been claimed (Jessner 2008) that, to benefit from multilingual education in classroom environments, two main principles need to be followed. First, languages being taught in the classroom need to be linked to profit from transfer and to exploit the resources that students have already developed, through previous language learning. Second, as Jessner suggests, some form of linguistic background documentation should be obligatory in any classroom so that to identify and exploit any positive effects of multilingualism.

Considering these issues on the role of instruction, it is worth recalling Cummin's distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism (1994). In the first, the L1 continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued while the second language is added. In subtractive bilingualism, instead, the second language is added at the expense of the first language and culture, which diminishes as a consequence. To support this claim, in his work, the author specifically refers to research which suggests that students working in an additive bilingual environment succeed to a greater extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued by their schools and by the wider society. Cummin's theories have had considerable implications for multilingual teaching in mixed classrooms. Specifically,

they encourage teachers and educators to explore every possibility to incorporate the different cultural backgrounds of immigrant students into their daily teaching and curricula by stressing the equal importance of their first language and culture.

Nonetheless, as already argued, there is a group of researchers who do not acknowledge any specific effect on instruction since, in their view, L2 learning is an incidental process guided by universal mechanisms (e.g., Krashen 1985; Cho/Krashen 1994). Therefore, the so-called non-interventionist group implied that no positive effect on intervention (i.e., instruction) could be acknowledged and that SLA was best cultivated in ways that resemble first language acquisition. On the other hand, the supporters of an effective role of instruction in SLA claim that instruction is fundamental in SLA, especially for adult and foreign language learners who do not receive enough input outside the classroom and for those wishing to achieve a high level of grammatical accuracy (Ellis 1991, 2005; Long 1988). Indeed, based on the findings of a wide range of studies in the field, it can be argued that secondary bilingualism represents, in fact, an advantage when both type and amount of naturalistic exposure and instruction are held constant (Doughty 2003).

More specifically, the effects of instruction have been investigated along the three basic dimensions of the L2 learning process: the route, rate, and end state of learning. The general findings of the studies have been summarised and reported by De Graaff and Housen (2009) in the following terms. As regards the first dimension, it has been argued that both instructed and uninstructed learners follow the same route. Therefore, instruction will only affect the acquisition of specific linguistic patterns when the learners are developmentally ready to acquire them.

Also, it is worth stressing that, contrary to previous beliefs that developmental orders are primarily driven by universal processing constraints, recent research has shown that they are primarily caused by learners-external features such as the perception of linguistic features in the input (Goldschneider/DeKeyser 2001). In terms of rate, instruction has been demonstrated to improve the speed of acquisition compared to non-instructed learners. Finally, as far as the end-state is concerned, instructed learners have been reported to achieve higher levels of interlanguage development as well as higher levels of proficiency than uninstructed learners.

4. The implicit-explicit paradigm

Once acknowledged the general benefits of instructed bilingualism, it is worth providing a brief insight into the types of instruction available to the learners together with an analysis of their specific outcomes. A first distinction can be made between Meaning-Focused Instruction (MFI) and Form-Focused Instruction (FFI). This latter is defined by Ellis as “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (2001: 2). The MFI, on the other hand, is characterised by focal attention exclusively on the communication of relevant meanings and authentic messages (Norris/Ortega 2001). Examples of this type of learning can be found in the Natural Approach to L2 teaching, in the Communicative Language Teaching methods as well as in the immersion programmes. On the other hand, FFI aims at drawing the learners’ attention to language form through an instructional activity where grammatical structures, lexical items, phonological features etc. are taken into account.

From a closer look at the latest research on the effects of FFI, a lack of clarity and consistency in definitions of terms such as Focus on Form, and Form-Focused Instruction can be noticed. Nonetheless, the common feature that all these expressions seem to share is the concept of language seen as an object. Yet, different scholars have different views on how this focus on form can be achieved. Long (1996), for instance, claims that focus on the form may occur in different ways including problem-solving tasks, provision of negative feedback, and common error-focus tasks. Brown (2007) proposes a continuum of explicit-implicit approaches to form. On one hand of the continuum are the explicit, discrete-point metalinguistic explanations, and discussions of rules and exceptions. On the other, there are the implicit, incidental references to form, noticing, i.e. the learner’s paying attention to specific linguistic features in input and, finally, the incorporation of forms into communicative tasks or, to say it in Ellis’ words (1997), “the grammar consciousness-raising”.

Sharwood-Smith (1991) propounds an interesting re-analysis of the notion of consciousness-raising in language learning. The input enhancement, i.e. the process by which language input becomes salient to the learner, can be a result of deliberate manipulation or it can be considered as the natural outcome of some internal learning strategy. Moreover,

according to the author, it can vary both quantitatively and qualitatively. Interestingly enough, it does not necessarily involve the conscious analysis of rules. Yet, on the implicit-explicit dichotomy, according to Ellis (1994), there are three main ways used by learners of a second language to acquire a new form: i.e. explicitly, via given rules following instructions; explicitly, through selective learning, searching for information, comparing and contrasting hypothesis; implicitly, by abstracting unconsciously the structural nature of the material derived from the experience of specific instances. Additionally, he argues that adult L2 learners are likely to make use of all the aforementioned procedures. Based on these learning procedures, the two types of form-focused instruction may be applied in a second language classroom, that is to say, implicit and explicit.

Some researchers have looked, more generally, at the effects of monolingual and bilingual school environments on the overall language and cognitive development of language learners. Paul and Jarvis (1992), for example, compared English language learners in bilingual and monolingual pre-kindergarten classrooms and found positive outcomes for children in the bilingual classroom. Another study in which classroom activities were carried out exclusively in Spanish (Campos 1995) shows similar positive effects of first language use on second language acquisition.

These works point to the importance of understanding the linguistic environments of institutional settings that serve as the primary base for second language acquisition. Thus, it can be argued that understanding even the preschool environment is critically important in predicting the outcomes of learning for several reasons. First, it has been demonstrated that the development of the native and second languages are interdependent in the sense that they affect each other thanks to the implicit transfer of knowledge of the languages. Learners develop cross-linguistic awareness, the learners' tacit and explicit awareness of the links between their language systems.

As suggested, studies on the nature of what can be transferred from first to second-language reading ought to consider not only the level of first-language reading but also the level and content of the second-language reading material (Hakuta 1998). Second, the quantitative methodology should be completed by qualitative data since it is not only a matter of how much but also in which way the input has been internalised. What is more, it can be argued that future successful readers typically arrive at school with

a set of prior experiences and well-established skills conducive to literacy, including an understanding of literacy, and abstract knowledge of the sound and structure of the language. Third, early instruction is impacted by a lack of explicit instruction in the local orthography and the absence of background knowledge and skills acquired in highly literate environments.

Concerning the role of transfer, Khaled and Hossein (2013) reviewed several studies indicating that L2 writers make considerable use of their L1 when writing in the L2. Particularly, the use of the L1 as a composing strategy may also compensate for the possible deficiencies in their L2 proficiency, facilitating their writing process. Besides, they report the use of L1 for generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, organizing information, and planning purposes. Interestingly, they report that learners also transfer some other L1-based strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies to L2 writing, transferred across languages positively.

The additive effect of instructed bilingualism is also supported by the findings of another study (D'Angelo/Sorace 2022) which contributes to shed light on the role of implicit and explicit instruction as well as the level of metalinguistic awareness achieved in additional language learning. Specifically, the research question of the study examines whether bilinguals' level of both implicit and explicit MLA in the L2 is related to their attainment in third or additional language acquisition over and above their proficiency in L2, amount of formal instruction received, context of acquisition, and age of acquisition of L2. To demonstrate this hypothesis empirically, on one hand, the correlation between implicit and explicit MLA was investigated, on the other, it was the ability to learn an additional language at the initial stage was examined.

The participants, 42 adult bilinguals aged between 20 and 70, with German as an L2, with different levels of instruction received, and different ages of acquisition of the L2, were assessed in their ability to learn an additional language at the initial stage through an artificial language task (Llama-F/Meara 2005). The study was conducted with participants living in Scotland and England. The majority of them had English as a first Language. The level of implicit MLA was assessed with a Self-Paced Reading (SPR) task focused on sensitivity to case and agreement ambiguity in German L2 (Gerth *et al.* 2017). The level of explicit MLA was assessed with a task of Grammatical

Knowledge (Roehr 2008). The influence of the other background variables, i.e. number of languages mastered, proficiency, age of acquisition of each language etc., was recorded with a Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (Leap-Q) (Blumenfeld/ Kaushanskaya 2007).

The main findings suggest that explicit MLA also developed in an L2 is the most important factor which assists and enhances the process of learning additional languages over and above implicit MLA, level of bilingualism (i.e., proficiency in an L2), and age of acquisition of L2. Moreover, the study also demonstrates that bilinguals performed better in the artificial language task of grammatical inference the more languages they knew (specifically, more than three) and the more explicit their level of grammatical MLA was. The influence of the other aforementioned mediating factors such as participants' age and age of acquisition of German L2 was also controlled through partial correlation analyses.

More recently, numerous studies (e.g., Cenoz/Gorter 2022; D'Angelo 2023) have focused the attention on strategies and pedagogical practices, including translanguaging, aiming at enhancing bilingual linguistic, cultural, and semiotic resources in TLA. More specifically, these words support the holistic, multilingual approach along three dimensions: the multilingual speaker, the multilingual repertoire, and the socio-educational setting. Pedagogical translanguaging is presented as an approach which allows learners to activate and fully exploit their prior knowledge when dealing with additional languages. Indeed, by going beyond the existence of conventionally defined linguistic boundaries, translanguaging allows a higher degree of freedom of expression and self-confidence, for both students and teachers, as well the use of more diverse linguistic resources. Hence, developing multilingual awareness and valuing their whole multilingual and multicultural background significantly boost TLA in terms of quality of process and linguistic proficiency.

5. Discussion

In terms of pedagogical implications, considerable discussion has taken place on the effectiveness of the different contexts of acquisition of previously acquired languages presented in the current work. Specifically, it seems necessary to develop didactic methodologies which draw the learners' attention on form too, to develop explicit MLA. Nonetheless, as

Sorace (1985) points out, if one believes that formal knowledge of a foreign language does have a positive function on MLA, the question is open to how to exploit this potential in a lively, communicative-oriented learning situation. This requires a better comprehension of the psycholinguistic processes underlying the complex relationship between knowledge and use in language learning. Besides, once acknowledged that languages are interdependent in the mind of the learner and that previous and subsequent learning of languages affects each language they know, it seems advisable for educators to develop language materials drawn upon learners' knowledge of other languages to explain and exemplify the target language.

In particular, it has been argued that studies on SLA have mainly focused on the differences between languages. In the language learning classroom, the willingness to activate prior language knowledge has been generally ignored, although it is part of the actual process of language learning. As Jessner (1999) maintains, among teachers, it has been the exception rather than the rule to underline common features between L1, L2, and L3. Indeed, it can be claimed that increased transfer strategies, built on a language system already established, seem to be facilitative. In other words, the role of previous languages must be exploited in terms of both similarities and differences. The traditional contrastive method should be complemented by a psycholinguistic approach to the interlinguistic strategies used in language learning.

In the specific case of TLA, particularly if the languages involved are typologically related, it is important to create the conditions to exploit students' prior experience as language learners, focusing not only on the commonalities among languages. Indeed, what is fundamental in this context is to recall the learning strategies and processes used with previous languages and apply them to TLA. That is to say, students must be stimulated and assisted in the process of conscious reflection and manipulation of the metalinguistic awareness developed for this latter to play a significant role in subsequent language learning. Accordingly, an alternative methodological approach, considering the whole linguistic repertoire of students as well as the interactions and similarities among languages and, most importantly, their socio-cultural background is sought. Hence, a shift of focus from the target language to the multilingual learners together with their whole linguistic background is needed.

The emphasis should extend beyond merely identifying commonalities among languages and delve into the conscious reflection and manipulation of metalinguistic awareness developed through previous language acquisition. By recognising the significance of learning strategies and processes used with prior languages, language teachers can guide students to effectively apply these skills to the TLA context. Moreover, an alternative methodological approach that considers the entirety of students’ linguistic repertoires, explores interactions and similarities among languages, and incorporates socio-cultural backgrounds proves to be advisable. Therefore, a shift in focus from the target language to the multilingual learners, embracing their comprehensive linguistic background, becomes imperative for fostering a more holistic and effective language learning environment.

6. Conclusion

Starting from a detailed terminological disambiguation of the terms ‘bilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’ and the different nuances of bilingualism, the paper provides an insight into the concept with a specific focus on the type of bilingualism characterised by the context of acquisition of each additional language (i.e., L2, L3, Ln). As it has been argued, if one hand the advantages that bilingual individuals possess in comparison to monolinguals when acquiring an additional language have been widely acknowledged in the literature, on the other, the specific factor that may be responsible for a better performance of bilinguals is still a matter of intense debate among scholars. Bilinguals exhibit heightened proficiency as language learners, potentially having developed learning strategies to a greater extent than their monolingual counterparts. Furthermore, they possess a more extensive linguistic and intercultural repertoire.

The extensive reviews of methodology and findings of the studies investigating the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition suggest that formal instruction may be indicative of a higher level of metalinguistic awareness. The latter, in turn, supports and facilitates bilingual learners in the process of additional language learning. Hence, introducing a novel perspective – the ‘focus on the multilingual learner’ –, the paper advocates for a more appropriate approach to analyse the influence of bilingualism on TLA and contributes to the broader field of multilingualism research. The holistic perspective propounded concentrates on multilingual speakers and

their linguistic repertoires, emphasizing the intricate interaction between their languages.

This perspective allows us to overcome the monolingual bias in TLA, giving voice to language users involved in a process of meaning making, using all the linguistic and semiotic resources available in their multilingual repertoire. Finally, the focus on multilingual learner approach allows the enactment of plurilingualism, as defined and described in the CEFR CV (Council of Europe 2020). That is, plurilingualism aims to capture the holistic nature of individual language users/learners linguistic and cultural repertoires. In this view, language learners/users are seen as social agents who draw upon all sorts of resources in their linguistic and cultural repertoires and further develop these resources in their trajectories. Moreover, the Council of Europe stresses the dynamic use of multiple languages and cultural knowledge, awareness and experience in social situations. It is therefore worth transforming language education to meet the needs of a highly diverse, multicultural and multilingual society.

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