THE FORUM

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Towards a Plurilingual Approach in English Language Teaching: Softening the Boundaries Between Languages

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■ This forum article presents a critique of the policy of language isolation in TESOL and proposes an innovative plurilingual approach to the teaching of English that softens the boundaries between languages. First, the article looks at how teaching English as a second or foreign language has traditionally been associated with teaching practices that encourage the isolation of English from the other languages in the student's repertoire and in the school curriculum. Then, some proposals that consider the need to make the boundaries between languages softer are considered, including the concept of *plurilingualism* of the Council of Europe. The article ends by providing some teaching implications for TESOL professionals.

English is the dominant language of international communication, and as such it is intensively used and taught in the European Union (EU) as well as elsewhere in the world. The results of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) indicate that, outside the United Kingdom, English is the most widely taught foreign language in the EU with the exception of the Flemish and German communities of

Belgium (European Commission, 2012). This survey reports on language skills, including reading, writing, and listening in foreign languages. The survey focused on 53,000 secondary students from 14 European countries who completed tests of second language proficiency. The countries with the highest percentages of students who reach the upper-intermediate level, that is, the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), in secondary school were Malta (60%), Sweden (57%), and Estonia (41%). The countries with the lowest scores were France (5%), Poland (10%), and the French community in Belgium (10%). The CEFR will be discussed in more detail below.

Learning English in Europe cannot be separated from the use of other languages in education. English is most often a language directly addressed in the curriculum and accompanies other state languages or minority languages that are also given priority within the curriculum (De Houwer & Wilton, 2011; Gorter, 2013). This article discusses hard and soft boundaries between the teaching of English and other languages in the European context. In the next section, we look at how teaching English as a second or foreign language has traditionally been associated with teaching practices that encourage the isolation of English from other languages in the student's repertoire and in the school curriculum. Then, we look at how this policy has been questioned and how the boundaries between languages need to be made softer and more fluid.

HARD BOUNDARIES: LEARNING ENGLISH AS AN ISOLATED LANGUAGE IN THE CURRICULUM

Whereas the study of plurilingual[1] communicative practices indicates that it is common for plurilingual speakers to combine elements from different languages, the boundaries between languages are usually defined, or hard, in school settings. There is a strong notion of isolating the teaching of English from that of other languages in the curriculum. Thus, the English language teacher is often expected not only to use English, but also to avoid any reference to elements of the first language (L1) or other languages. These ideas are deeply rooted both in society at large and in second language and foreign language teaching. Lüdi and Py (2009) explain how the idea of monolingualism

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[1] Although there are conceptual differences between the Council of Europe's uses of *plurilingualism* and *multilingualism*, the European Commission uses the term *multilingualism* for both concepts as they are framed by the Council of Europe. *Multilingualism* is also the most common term in English, and in this article the terms *multilingualism* and *multilingual* share the characteristics of *plurilingualism* and *plurilingual*.

as "an original state" (p. 155) has been reinforced in Europe by the *one nation–one language* ideology since the 18th century and still has currency in many parts of the world. Within the educational context, this monolingual principle excludes the use of the L1 in second and foreign language classrooms; the principle, associated with the *direct method*, has been widely accepted for many years (Cummins, 2007). The related monolingual policy in English language teaching is associated with the goal of achieving native-like command of the target language, which is an unattainable goal for most students of English as a foreign language (Cook, 1999).

The ideology of language separation and the use of the native speaker as an idealized reference in the teaching of English are well rooted in European education. Schools aiming at multilingualism often try to have different teachers for each language and teachers pretend to be monolingual in the target language. Another indicator of this separation is the use of different classrooms for different languages. The teaching of content subjects through the medium of English in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs encourages the integration of language and content but not the integration of languages, because CLIL isolates the teaching of English from the teaching of other languages in the curriculum (Cenoz, 2013). At the same time, the monolingual ideology encourages students and teachers to act as if they were monolingual speakers of English so as to achieve the unreachable goal of speaking English as if they did not know other languages.

TOWARDS SOFTER BOUNDARIES BETWEEN LANGUAGES

In this section, we will see how the ideas of establishing hard boundaries between languages and having the idealized native speaker as a reference have been challenged in the European context. The notion of boundaries between languages is not new. Decades ago, Grosjean (1985) and Cook (1992) discussed the specific characteristics of bilingual speakers. Grosjean (1985) considered bilinguals to be fully competent speaker–hearers with unique linguistic profiles that cannot be divided into separate parts. Cook (1992) proposed the term *multi-competence* as a complex type of competence, which is qualitatively different from the competence of monolingual speakers of a language. The implication of this view is that a bilingual or plurilingual person's communicative competence is not comparable to that of a monolingual speaker. Cook (1999) has discussed the fallacy of comparing L2 learners to native speakers, because these new language learners bring

with them part of the L1 and therefore judging them against native L1 speakers is inappropriate. He considers that L2 learners are fundamentally different from native speakers and their competency should be examined using a different lens.

The Council of Europe (2007) makes a distinction between plurilingualism as the "repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use" so that "some individuals may be monolingual and some may be plurilingual" and multilingualism, which is understood as "the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one 'variety of language'… in such area individuals may be monolingual, speaking only their own variety" (p. 8). This distinction is based on the individual and social dimensions of communicating in different languages, but at the same time the concept of plurilingualism goes in the direction of softening the boundaries between languages and questioning the role of the native speaker. In fact, plurilingualism "is not seen as a juxtaposition of distinct competences, but as a single competence, even though it is complex" (p. 10). The idea is to acquire a unique competence that encompasses different languages: national, minority, European, and non-European languages, which are referred to as the speaker's linguistic repertoire. The concepts of plurilingualism and linguistic repertoires call into question "the model of the native speaker as the only legitimate objective" (Council of Europe, 2007, p. 46) because a plurilingual speaker does not have the same skills in all languages.

According to the Council of Europe (2007), the concept of plurilingualism implies that

- it is not an exceptional competence, it is a competence that can be acquired by all speakers;
- the linguistic repertoire does not have to be homogeneous and therefore can encompass different degrees of proficiency in the different languages;
- the linguistic repertoire is dynamic and changes over time;
- speakers use a repertoire of communicative resources for different functions and can use different varieties at the same time in code-switching;
- plurilingualism is a transversal competence and the teaching of different languages should be linked to one another; and
- plurilingualism also involves a cultural aspect and the development of pluricultural competence. (pp. 38–39)

The Council of Europe has developed an analytical tool for defining levels of proficiency: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) that is used widely

all over the world. The CEFR is a descriptive guideline that can be used for language teaching and language assessment because it was developed to provide "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). It uses "can do" descriptors to define six levels of communicative proficiency, as can be seen in Table 1. For example, the upper-intermediate level (B2) mentioned in the introduction uses the following global descriptors, as can be seen in Table 2.

Apart from the global scales such as the one for the B2 level, there are specific scales for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing for all the levels. These scales describe learners' communicative language competences and strategies.

Another tool using the CEFR is the European Language Portfolio (Little, Goullier, & Hughes, 2011) that includes the Language Passport, the Language Biography, and a dossier with concrete examples of how languages are used and learned.

Some European scholars working in education have questioned the monolingual perspective that isolates and establishes hard boundaries between languages; these scholars have argued for the need to soften these boundaries (see, e.g., Coste & Simon, 2009). This softening is particularly necessary in a context in which "teaching English should be conceived so as to stimulate speakers' plurilingualism" (Council of Europe, 2007, p. 30). An approach to softening the boundaries between languages, *focus on multilingualism,* has been put forward by Cenoz and Gorter (2011, forthcoming). This approach

TABLE 1
The Six Levels of the Common European Framework of Reference

Basic user A	A1 Breakthrough or beginner
	A2 Waystage or elementary
Independent user B	B1 Threshold or intermediate
	B2 Vantage or upper intermediate
Proficient user C	C1 Effective operational proficiency or advanced
	C2 Mastery or proficiency

TABLE 2
Global Scale at the B2 Level

B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and independent disadvantages of various options.

aims at improving efficiency in language teaching by using the resources pluriligual learners have at their disposal. At the same time, this approach aims at raising researchers' awareness about the need to adopt a holistic plurilingual perspective. It explores the possibility of establishing bridges between second and foreign language teaching and school and plurilingualism in real-life communication. This aim of this focus is to involve all the languages and plurilingual discursive practices of speakers. A basic principle is that plurilingual students can use their own resources to a larger extent in formal education.

Focus on multilingualism has important implications for language teaching in school contexts. It shows that learners use their plurilingual resources across languages, and this opens possibilities to learn languages in a more efficient way because some language competences are general and can be taught in one language while being reinforced and transferred to other languages. A single curricular proposal for the teaching of languages can give learners the opportunity to apply their skills in one language to other languages. Elorza and Muñoa (2008) explain that an integrated curriculum "brings together complementary facets of the learning processes, while contrasting the specific linguistic aspects of each language" (p. 91). An integrated curriculum is consistent with a holistic view of language learning in educational contexts where plurilingualism is an aim.

CONCLUSION

This article argues for a language policy that moves from the traditional monolingual ideology towards adopting holistic plurilingual approaches in the teaching of second and foreign languages. Although monolingual approaches are still pervasive, the influence of the Council of Europe's (2007) concept of plurilingualism as a dynamic competence that combines linguistic repertoires has contributed to the development of a plurilingual approach in English as a foreign language (EFL). A plurilingual approach allows for maximum exposure to the target language and for work on communicative and academic skills in English, but at the same time plurilingual teaching practices draw on learners' metalinguistic awareness and experiences as plurilingual speakers so as to learn English in a more efficient way. In short, they can benefit from their status as plurilinguals.

A plurilingual approach has several implications for TESOL teachers and teacher educators:

1. *Setting attainable goals.* This refers to the need to set realistic goals for teaching English as a second or foreign language. The

goal is for students to develop skills to become competent pluri-lingual speakers who can communicate in two or more languages and not monolingual native speakers of English. The idea that nonnative speakers are deficient communicators is still widespread, and as most learners do not achieve this goal, the process may result in a feeling of failure and incompetence. A plurilingual approach is in disagreement with this reference to the idealized native speaker.

2. *Using plurilingual competence.* Here the idea is that there is a dis-tinct advantage of using students' plurilingual competence as a tool to progress faster when learning English. In fact, the students' plurilingual repertoires can be an excellent resource to develop not only linguistic and discourse skills but also meta-linguistic awareness. Plurilinguals can draw on their knowledge of other languages when learning how to communicate in English or when learning vocabulary or grammar. Learners can also use their discourse and pragmatic knowledge of other languages when writing an academic text or when formulating speech acts in a communicative situation.

3. *Integrated syllabi.* This refers to the need for creating integrated syllabi for language teachers so that there is coordination between the teachers of English and other languages. Teachers can work together on the same type of text, communicative event, or grammatical structure in two or three languages so as to reinforce what the students learn in each of the lan-guages. The level expected to be achieved in each of the languages can be different when writing a text in the L1, L2, or L3.

4. *The creation of resources.* This is the possibility of creating activities using code-switching and translanguaging that are generally ignored at school but are common among plurilinguals. These activities could be used to raise awareness of different types of communicative contexts.

A plurilingual approach highlights how learners relate the languages in their repertoire to each other when learning English as an additional language and when they use their languages in a social context. It is time for TESOL professionals to use the opportunity to accelerate the learning process by using plurilingualism as a resource and not as an obstacle by setting attainable goals, using the learners' plurilingual repertoire, integrating syllabi, and using learners' linguis-tic creativity as a resource.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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