

Measuring and Describing Bilingualism

Bilingualism and Testing: A Special
Case of Bias

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Major Issues

- There is a lack of consensus on how bilingualism can be measured.
- It's generally assumed that native speakers of a language do not need to be tested for linguistic competence, however, in order to assess second language "proficiency" among bilinguals, their native language must be assessed and used as a base standard.
- The selection or development of test instruments poses enormous challenges in assessing bilinguals.

What it means to know a language

- “the mental representation of systematic, organized information about the target language...” and retrieving and using the knowledge appropriately. (BIALYSTOK, SHARWOOD-SMITH, 1985)
- Three types of competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic. (CANALE, SWAIN, 1980)
- Communicative language ability: interactive components of language that emphasize the mental capacity, including intuitions and tacit knowledge, and use these contextually. (BACHMAN, 1990)

Second Language Testing Considers Knowing a Language

- And how to use it; as having the mastery and control over several interdependent components and elements that interact with each other and are affected by contextual factors in natural settings where communication takes place.

Who is Considered Bilingual and Which Language is His/Her Native Language?

- Is a bilingual a native speaker of two languages, or one who has no native language?
- Circumstantial bilinguals: acquire both languages among bilingual speakers of both languages, and speak a contact variety of each.
- A prescriptive, monolingual perspective views contact variety features as lacking linguistic mastery.
- Among speakers of language varieties, circumstantial bilinguals are viewed as

Assess What? Verbal Ability or Language Proficiency?

- Verbal ability used by cognitive psychologists to refer to language skills;
- Language proficiency used by language researchers looking for finite familiarity with a language.
- Normal monolingual speakers are not assessed; bilinguals are assessed and compared against monolingual norms or standards.
- The bilingual individual is perceived as a learner in the process of acquiring a fully native system. (THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Is Circumstantial Bilingual a Learner of Two Languages?

- Non-native-like features may not be a manifestation of underdevelopment, but rather part of a fully developed system of a speaker of a contact variety of either language.
- The verbal abilities of circumstantial bilinguals reflect legitimate varieties of fully developed native English as are other varieties of English among monolinguals.

In Assessing Circumstantial Bilinguals, 3 choices

One can decide to view:

- The bilingual speaker as a native speaker of both languages;
- The bilingual speaker as a native speaker of one of the languages and a second speaker of the other language;
- The bilingual speaker as a native speaker of neither of the two languages.

The Purposes of Measuring Bilingual Proficiency

- To determine the degree by which the bilingual can speak, understand, read, and write in each of the two languages;
- To determine whether a bilingual has enough mastery of one or both languages to carry out a particular task.

The Evolution of Tests That Measure Proficiency

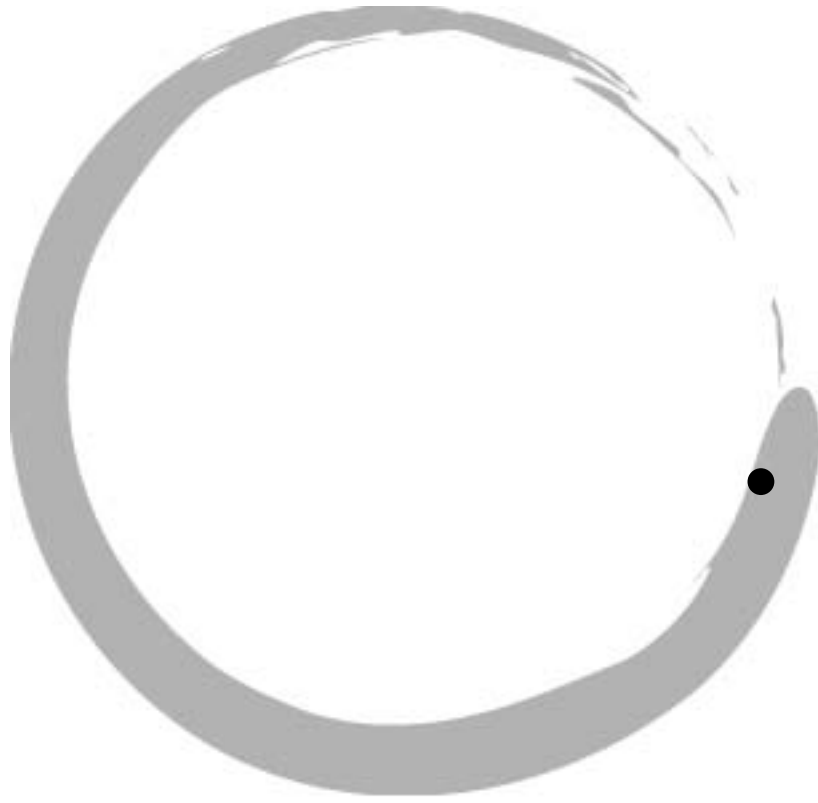
- Prescientific stage: students translated, composed and completed sentences. They needed to know *about* the language.
- Psychometric-structuralist stage: students needed to recite memorized dialogues with precise pronunciation, respond to requests in drill patterns to demonstrate their knowledge of grammar.
 - This resulted in the development of discrete-point tests - focusing on one point of grammar at a time.

The Third Stage....

- Psycholinguistic - sociolinguistic stage: based on the belief that language instruction should be focused on functioning competence, the ability to communicate with real speakers.
 - One type of test is the integrative - using text items that are connected rather than isolated;
 - Another type is integrative and pragmatic - examining performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Major Question in Assessing Bilinguals in Bilingual Education

- How much English is needed to have full access of academic success at the same degree or rate as native speakers of English?
- Caveat: It's important that the use of standardized instruments be avoided to test for language ability among bilinguals.



• THE END

