

## Teaching, Assessing, and Testing Trends in Multilingual Education

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### Abstract

The paper aims to explore and evaluate the existing procedures and approaches in multilingual education, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and implications for the educational practice. By reviewing the current research and discussing the challenges and opportunities in assessing multilingual learners, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to enhance assessment practices and promote equitable educational opportunities for multilingual learners. The discussion primarily revolves around defining the constructs involved in multilingual assessments, exploring different approaches to measuring these constructs. Additionally, the shifting concept of multilingualism and multilingual competence will be addressed together with current practices in multilingual assessment, ongoing research efforts, and the identification of challenges in conceptualising, implementing, and interpreting multilingual assessments. Lastly, the attention will be focused on the identification of areas that require further research to develop valid and reliable multilingual assessment tools.

### Keywords

Multilingual Education; Multilingual Assessment; Test Design; Multicompetence.

### 1. Introduction

Multilingual education has been recognised as a crucial aspect of education systems worldwide due to the growing linguistic and cultural diversity of modern societies. With a substantial portion of the global population being multilingual to some extent, it is imperative to develop effective assessment tools that can accurately evaluate the language abilities and progress of multilingual learners in educational settings. The evolution of these assessment tools has been driven by the acknowledgement of the sociolinguistic reality and the need to move away from monolingual perspectives towards a multilingual framework.

Indeed, in this increasingly globalised world, various factors such as immigration, transnational relationships, and advancements in technology have created environments where individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact. These multilingual contexts have prompted extensive research to focus on understanding the dynamics of multilingual interactions, including how individuals perceive and experience language differences and develop proficiency in multiple languages. Hence, there is a growing urge for reliable measures of multilingual competence and practices. In recent years, significant efforts have been made to develop assessment tools that align with the complexities and unique characteristics of multilingual learners. Researchers and policymakers have recognised the limitations of previous monolingual

and bilingual education programs, which mainly focused on code-mixing, cross-linguistic influence, and proficiency levels within a single language (Lopez et al. 2016).

Previous and current studies assume that the imposition of language policies that disregard multilingual diversity is a prevalent issue. Stavans and Hoffmann (2015: 157), for instance, argue that assessments measuring multilingualism are primarily driven by educational, political, and economic motivations, rather than taking into account socio-psychological factors. This perspective is further supported by Shohamy (2011: 420), who contends that language tests serve as tools for enforcing monoglossic political ideologies that aim to maintain "national and collective identities". This tendency is particularly evident in countries with significant immigrant populations, where language tests are increasingly employed in immigration and citizenship decisions (McNamara & Shohamy 2008). To obtain residency and citizenship, many countries require immigrants to demonstrate proficiency in the dominant language, thereby disregarding and undervaluing the minority languages and language practices of multilingual individuals (McNamara et al. 2015). It has been argued that such assessments in immigration and citizenship contexts often impose monolingual policies, neglecting the overall language competence of immigrants (Barni 2015).

Another example of a monoglossic language policy can be seen in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 in the United States (2002). Under NCLB, all students, including recent immigrants, are required to participate in state wide academic assessments for accountability purposes. These assessments reflect a monolingual perspective, as they mandate academic proficiency in English for all students, including English learners who were born in the United States and immigrant students. Consequently, many immigrant students are disadvantaged as their limited English language skills prevent them from demonstrating their knowledge in academic content areas. Current monolingual academic assessments often fail to recognise the language, knowledge, and experiences that immigrant students bring to the educational setting (Lopez et al. 2014, Shohamy 2011). Furthermore, NCLB places accountability on states for students' progress in English language proficiency, prioritizing the development of English language skills while neglecting proficiency in minority languages and multilingual practices from a federal accountability standpoint.

As a reaction to the monolingual bias in multilingual education, the concept of multicompetence has emerged as a more comprehensive and inclusive framework for assessing multilingual learners (Aronin 2016). In particular, what is worth stressing is that the multicompetence theory emphasises a holistic and dynamic perspective on language proficiency, taking into account an individual's total language repertoire. This approach recognises that multilingual individuals possess multiple linguistic systems and can navigate and integrate these systems effectively. By considering the entire linguistic repertoire of multilingual learners, assessment tools based on multicompetence theory aim to capture the complexity and diversity of sociolinguistic backgrounds prevalent in multilingual communities (Cook 2002).

Thus, to deal with the aforementioned complexity and diversity of multilingual learners, the development of effective assessment tools for multilingual education requires careful consideration of various factors. Specifically, cultural and linguistic contexts, educational goals, and the unique needs of multilingual learners must be at the centre of the assessment and testing processes. These tools should provide accurate and reliable measures of language proficiency, while also considering the dynamic nature of multilingual language development and the potential for transfer and cross-linguistic influence.

## **2. The monolingual bias in multilingual testing and assessment**

Multilingual testing and assessment have improved considerably in the last decades due to the higher level of attention devoted to this field of research. This was due to a number of sociolinguistic and educational factors including the perceived and acknowledged need of policymakers, researchers and educators to integrate immigrant students into mainstream education programmes and to adapt the assessment tools to the diverse varieties of language backgrounds, educational contexts and geographic origins characterising multilingual classrooms.

Nonetheless, despite the step forward compared to monolingual assessment practices, as De Angelis (2021) argues, most academic discussions still focus on speakers of two languages, including bilingual assessment and testing needs in homogeneous settings where the amount and quality of input received in each language are equal (i.e. balanced bilingualism). Hence, the majority of testing material developed in the last decades has been tailored to the specific needs of bilingual speakers and learners and does not seem suitable to test and assess multilinguals. De Angelis maintains that finding a solution suitable for a more heterogeneous population, considering both individual variability and different linguistic contexts, is not always possible. Indeed, most scholars seem to belong to either the traditional or the holistic approach, that is, two polar extremes incompatible with each other. On the one hand, traditional approaches to testing and assessment are characterised by the use of monolingual tools to assess multilingual speakers ignoring that the language of the test may not be familiar to all test takers. On the other hand, holistic approaches recognise the limits of monolingual testing tools and suggest the use of tests written in multiple languages. However, this cannot be considered a viable or effective solution when more than three languages are involved.

Indeed, the field of multilingual education research has long been influenced by a pervasive monolingual bias, which has shaped the understanding and investigation of language learning and teaching in multilingual contexts. This bias stems from the historical dominance of monolingual education systems and the assumption that monolingualism is the norm. As a result, research has often focused on monolingual practices and pedagogies, neglecting the complexities and unique needs of multilingual learners. This monolingual bias has limited our understanding of multilingual language development, language interactions, and the potential benefits of multilingualism in educational settings. Researchers have called for a paradigm shift to address this bias and promote a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to multilingual education research (García 2009, García & Wei 2014). By acknowledging and challenging the monolingual bias, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of multilingualism and guide the development of effective educational policies and practices that support multilingual learners in their language development journey.

### **3. Testing and Assessing Multilinguals: Main Challenges**

As discussed, increasing globalization and multiculturalism of societies have prompted to develop more accurate and fair assessment and testing methods in multilingual contexts. Multilingual assessment and testing present unique challenges due to the complex interplay between language proficiency and content knowledge. This section aims to explore the main issues faced in multilingual assessment and testing, including problems concerning test validity, language bias, cultural fairness, and the development of reliable assessment tools.

Test validity refers to the extent to which an assessment accurately measures what it is intended to measure. In multilingual contexts, ensuring test validity becomes challenging due to the inherent language complexities. Assessments must be designed to accurately assess both language skills and subject knowledge. Language proficiency and content knowledge may not always be

perfectly aligned, leading to potential bias and invalid test results (Cizek 2017). Balancing the focus on language proficiency and content knowledge is crucial to ensure the validity of multilingual assessments.

Another main issue to face in multilingual testing is language bias, that is, the presence of unfair advantages or disadvantages for individuals based on their language background. In multilingual assessing and testing, bias can arise when the test content or format favours certain language groups over others (Abedi 2018). Such bias can undermine the fairness and accuracy of the assessment results, leading to potential discrimination against certain groups. Hence, designing assessments that account for linguistic and cultural diversity is vital to minimise language bias and ensure equitable evaluation. Cultural fairness, on the other hand, refers to the consideration of cultural diversity when designing and administering assessments. Since multilingual contexts often involve students from diverse cultural backgrounds, each with their unique perspectives, experiences, and knowledge systems, assessments must reflect this diversity by incorporating culturally relevant content and avoiding cultural biases (Abedi 2018).

Adapting assessment methods to accommodate different cultural perspectives helps create a fair and inclusive testing environment for all students. Nonetheless, developing reliable multilingual assessment tools presents challenges due to the lack of standardised instruments across languages. Creating assessments that are reliable across languages requires extensive research, piloting, and validation (Cummins 2019). Moreover, translating assessment materials accurately while maintaining the intended meaning can be difficult since language nuances may be lost in the process. Hence, collaborative efforts among experts in language assessment, psychometrics, and language acquisition are essential for developing reliable multilingual assessment tools.

One of the primary challenges in multilingual assessment lies in conceptualizing the constructs that require measurement. To ensure that multilingual assessments accurately capture the dynamic and fluid nature of language practices, it is essential to allow test takers to draw upon their linguistic repertoire in a manner that aligns with their communicative needs (García & Wei 2014, Lopez et al. 2014). This necessitates a paradigm shift from a monolingual/monoglossic/fractional perspective to a multilingual/multiglossic/holistic view (Shohamy 2013). Consequently, changes in assessment policies and practices are crucial to promoting and valuing multilingualism, as well as to operationalising the constructs of multilingual assessments. Therefore, it is important to develop language standards that encompass a holistic perspective of multilingual competence, reflecting the intricate language practices of individuals in multilingual societies and providing clear descriptions of linguistic performance in different languages and across languages.

Another related challenge pertains to the implementation of the holistic view of language in multilingual assessments. If the objective is to establish assessment policies and practices that allow test takers to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire by accepting and encouraging language mixing, the role of the test administrator becomes paramount. In such multilingual assessments, test administrators serve as mediators, working collaboratively with test takers to negotiate and construct meaning. Consequently, a practical constraint arises as multilingual assessments may require test administrators to possess the same languages and regional dialects as the test takers, as well as be familiar with the communicative practices and strategies employed by test takers to navigate language differences.

Scoring poses yet another challenge for multilingual assessments. A holistic view of languages defines performance in two or more languages as complementary, enabling multilingual individuals to dynamically employ various language skills depending on the context and audience. Thus, it is necessary to develop appropriate scoring models that accommodate this construct definition. Additionally, score interpretation may be problematic in multilingual assessment due to

the difficulty of incorporating every possible target language use situation that multilingual individuals are expected to engage in within a single assessment. Consequently, it is critical to examine specific language skills and functions that can be generalised across communicative tasks and languages.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses the development of language standards based on a holistic view of multilingual competence, the training of test administrators as effective mediators, the adaptation of scoring models to account for multilingual proficiency, and careful interpretation of scores. These endeavours aim to promote and value multilingualism, while accurately assessing the language abilities of individuals in multilingual contexts. Thus, multilingual assessment and testing bring forth various challenges that need to be addressed for fair and accurate evaluations. Test validity, language bias, cultural fairness, and the development of reliable assessment tools are among the key challenges faced in multilingual contexts. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of language proficiency, content knowledge, and cultural diversity. Collaboration among experts and stakeholders, along with ongoing research and development, is necessary to advance the field of multilingual assessment and testing.

#### **4. Multilingual Teachers and Plurilingual Approaches**

An interesting approach to multilingual assessing and testing practices is propounded by De Angelis (2021). The author maintains that finding the right solution that would be flexible enough to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous population, considering both individual variability and different linguistic contexts, is not an easy task. In her recent work, the author suggests overcoming the dichotomies characterising the monolingual and bilingual approaches with a third approach, i.e. an integrated approach to testing and assessment of multilinguals. After analysing the complexity of multilingual populations as well as the limits of the traditional and holistic approaches, she proposes to reject existing barriers, introducing greater flexibilities in the way tests are designed, administered, scored and interpreted. Indeed, tests in multiple languages require much more effort and time on the part of test designers and teachers. In some cases, test content needs to be simplified, including visual forms, or translated into the other languages of the test takers.

However, one cannot assume that all teachers have developed the considerable level of linguistic awareness required to make a test simpler or to translate it. If, on the one hand, assessing academic content in multiple languages is an ethically noble and fair principle, on the other, teachers face numerous practical obstacles that make the tests difficult to design, administer and interpret. Good quality tests must adhere to the principles of validity, inclusivity, viability and accessibility (VIVA) (De Angelis 2021). Validity refers to the accuracy of predictions from the interpretation of test scores. Thus, a good quality test must demonstrate construct validity showing that the test is able to measure all the stated factors of investigation even though it is a simplified or translated version. That is, they must successfully provide versions of similar difficulties in multiple languages.

The criterion of inclusivity refers to the addressees of the test. In the specific case of multilingual tests, linguistically and culturally heterogeneous speakers and learners who may show different levels of proficiency, contexts and methods of instruction in each language. The third criterion mentioned is probably one of the most challenging, i.e. viability, in that it must offer a workable option. The more languages involved in the test design, the lower its viability. Finally, the last criterion characterising multilingual tests is accessibility; it must be easy to understand by all test takers, including those with lower proficiency levels in the language of instruction and students

must feel confident to access their knowledge resources to take the test. These resources include personal language or content knowledge as well as the use of linguistic support. Bearing in mind that meeting all the VIVA criteria is a challenging objective for teachers and test takers, they can still work as a guide and a point of reference to design and administer multilingual tests.

The aforementioned integrating approach to multilingual testing and assessment aims to be a flexible solution to record students' proficiency levels and linguistic progress by referring to all the gathered information about the participants. The basic assumption of this approach is that the combination of different types of information allows test designers and teachers to make better decisions when dealing with multilingual tests, from the design to the interpreting phase. The author distinguishes between two crucial aspects, that is designing, administering and scoring multilingual tests on the one hand, and assessing multilingual individuals on the other. Indeed, she observes that several scholars in the field of multiple language acquisition have started to highlight the need to find test design techniques that are suitable for multilinguals and that guidelines on large-scale assessment have recently been published by the International Test Commission (2019).

These guidelines describe considerations relevant to the assessment of test-takers in or across countries or regions that are linguistically or culturally diverse. They were developed by a committee of experts to help inform test developers, psychometricians, test users and test administrators about fairness issues in support of the fair and valid assessment of linguistically or culturally diverse populations. Nonetheless, if, on the one hand, these guidelines represent an important step forward since they aim to make the tests more accessible and inclusive to meet a variety of linguistic needs, on the other, test scores and interpretation have not been adequately adapted to multilingual test takers' profiles. Tests' interpretation is a crucial part of the test that often risks being overlooked. A test provides information on students' progress and performance but, if incorrectly interpreted, it cannot be considered a reliable tool. Indeed, De Angelis (2021) points out that:

Tests must not only be designed with sufficient sensitivity towards linguistically and culturally diverse students but must also be scored and interpreted using all relevant information about the test takers. Without this last step, unfairness and inequality are likely to occur (2021: 66).

Recently, there have been several efforts to develop adaptable multilingual evaluation methods that provide participants with the flexibility to switch languages as needed. The realms of learning, teaching, and assessment are intricately interconnected. Acknowledging that this interaction is central to language acquisition and that it does not occur in isolation—often, we express ourselves in writing or speech based on what we've encountered in our daily experiences—test designers and educators must grasp the significance of prioritising combined proficiencies in language instruction. Hence, given the strong correlation between instructional content and evaluative criteria, it is paramount for language classrooms to incorporate tests that assess integrated skills. Integrated skills assessment pertains to the integration of multiple language proficiencies into a single measurement. Unlike discrete assessments that appraise individual language abilities separately, integrated assessments heavily rely on authentic applications, seamlessly merging language proficiencies due to the fact that real-life language usage is not isolated. Numerous researchers have underscored the significant role of integrated testing, particularly within the context of learning a foreign or second language.

Lopez et al. (2016) introduced an inventive technology-enhanced evaluation platform designed to cater to the diverse linguistic proficiencies of individuals who are multilingual. This

platform facilitates the utilisation of various assessment attributes, enabling test-takers to leverage different languages and linguistic practices available to them. The evaluation interface provides a variety of choices, including visual and auditory exposure to assessment items in multiple languages, the ability to craft written responses, and the option to provide recorded spoken answers. Within this platform, inquiries are presented in multiple languages, granting test-takers the flexibility to opt for the language in which they are most skilled. They are also empowered to resort to all their linguistic capabilities, encompassing both standard and informal linguistic variations, to construct their answers.

Additionally, test-takers have the freedom to blend languages as necessary, without facing penalties for such language amalgamation. Moreover, the platform accommodates diverse modes of communication, allowing test-takers to convey their responses through writing, verbal expression, or visual representation. Importantly, the assessment of test-takers' responses follows a conceptual scoring framework. This methodological approach evaluates responses based on underlying concepts rather than being confined by the specific language or mode of communication employed. The platform's adaptive nature is evident in its ability to deactivate specific assessment features based on the targeted language skill. For instance, if the evaluative focus pertains to writing proficiency, the recording function for responses will be deactivated.

An additional contribution stemming from the integrative testing and assessment paradigm arises from a study conducted within South Tyrol by De Angelis (2021). This investigation exemplifies the practical adaptability offered by the integrated approach, offering valuable insights to assessment developers on how to tailor materials to address the nuanced requirements of multilingual participants. It is noteworthy that the test employed in the study was deliberately structured to embrace multilingualism, thereby permitting the occasional incorporation of words from languages other than the designated language of narration during the scoring process. The comprehensive two-year longitudinal study was carried out in South Tyrol, an apt locale chosen due to its distinct multilingual composition and its diverse ethnic coexistence. The triad of dominant languages in this region comprises German, Italian, and Ladin. The research seeks to scrutinize disparities in language performance between two distinct cohorts, with a specific focus on language narratives. The first cohort encompasses Ladin L1 speakers who have been consistently exposed to trilingual instruction since birth, while the second group consists of first or second generation immigrants accustomed to employing languages differing from the language of instruction within their familial milieu. The choice of narratives as the central theme of inquiry is motivated by several factors, including their educational salience and their reflection of a significant facet of children's lives. Notably, the scrutiny of story grammars offers a pertinent lens through which to explore the intricate interplay between language proficiency and the development of narrative skills.

A salient facet of the multilingual test, given the heterogeneous linguistic composition of the participants, is the deliberate elicitation of narrative production in distinct languages, thereby affording an opportunity to discern the interrelation between attained proficiency levels in each language and the stage of macrostructure stability. Interestingly, this is a construct that encompasses proficiency benchmarks, the extent and nature of language exposure, and other pertinent factors. Concerning the input modality, the test design demonstrates deliberate consideration for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the cohort. Thus, the introduction of a silent video component serves to accommodate students grappling with limited language proficiency. Furthermore, owing to the necessity of conducting the task across various individual languages, it is imperative to avoid favouring any specific linguistic input. The study's findings underscore the robustness of macrostructure stability within languages among members of each respective language group.

Nonetheless, disparities observed between the two groups suggest that narrative aptitude is notably responsive to variations in proficiency levels.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the field of multilingual testing and assessment presents various challenges that need to be addressed in order to develop effective and comprehensive evaluation tools. The conceptualization of constructs in multilingual assessments requires a shift from a monolingual perspective to a holistic view that captures the dynamic and fluid nature of language practices. This necessitates the development of language standards that reflect the complexity of linguistic repertoires in multilingual societies and provide clear descriptions of performance across different languages.

Implementing the holistic view of language in multilingual assessments requires test administrators to play a crucial role as mediators, working alongside test takers to negotiate and create meaning. This highlights the importance of having administrators who possess the necessary language skills and familiarity with the communicative practices of the test takers. Additionally, scoring models need to be adapted to accommodate the complementary nature of language proficiency in multiple languages, allowing for flexible and context-dependent language use. Furthermore, score interpretation should focus on identifying transferable language skills and functions that can be generalised across tasks and languages.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines the development of language standards, training for test administrators, adaptation of scoring models, and careful interpretation of scores. By promoting and valuing multilingualism, these efforts aim to ensure that assessments accurately assess the language abilities of individuals in multilingual contexts. Moving forward, continued research and collaboration among educators, linguists, and assessment experts are necessary to advance the field of multilingual testing and assessment. By embracing the complexity of multilingual language practices and considering the diverse needs of test takers, we can develop assessment tools that effectively measure language proficiency and provide meaningful insights into individuals' language abilities across multiple languages. Ultimately, the goal is to create fair, inclusive, and valid assessments that support and promote multilingualism in our increasingly interconnected world.

Hence, it is essential to recognise the significance of integrating pedagogical theories with instructional practices and promoting collaboration between researchers and teachers in the field of multilingual instruction and testing. Action research plays a pivotal role in the development and implementation of effective instructional strategies and assessment practices for multilingual contexts. Researchers provide valuable insights and theoretical frameworks that can guide teachers in applying appropriate instructional approaches based on students' multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Conversely, teachers contribute to the advancement of educational research by observing the learning strategies employed by multilingual learners when engaging in metalinguistic tasks. To effectively teach in multilingual and multicultural environments, teachers must receive proper training to address the unique challenges that arise.

Furthermore, a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by multilingual students in acquiring additional languages can only be achieved through the integration of multilingual teaching, testing, and assessment practices. Multilingual learners possess a complex and distinct cognitive and linguistic profile that cannot be reduced to a mere quantitative comparison with several monolingual individuals. Their qualitative differences lie in their specific language processing, learning strategies, and communicative needs. Therefore, a holistic

examination of multilingual learners necessitates the combined insights provided by these three practices.

To conclude, the collaboration between researchers and teachers, supported by action research, is crucial in developing effective instructional strategies and assessment practices for multilingual contexts. Properly trained teachers can apply theoretical frameworks and observe the learning strategies of multilingual learners while recognizing the qualitative differences that make their language acquisition process unique. By embracing this comprehensive approach, we can enhance multilingual instruction and testing, leading to a better understanding of the complexities and needs of multilingual learners.

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