

BICULTURALISM: AN ENDLESS ENIGMA

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Resumo: Neste trabalho discutimos, de maneira sucinta, o conceito de cultura relacionado ao ensino e à aprendizagem de língua estrangeira. A relação existente entre bilingüismo e biculturalismo é também levada em consideração dentro de uma perspectiva sociolingüística.

Palavras-chave: Biculturalismo. Educação bilingüe. Ensino e aprendizagem de língua estrangeira.

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Abstract: In this paper we discuss, in a very brief way, the concept of culture related to foreign language learning and teaching. The relationship between bilingualism and biculturalism is also taken into consideration within a sociolinguistics perspective.

Key words: Biculturalism. Bilingual education. Foreign language learning and teaching.

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Introduction

In her 1978 article, *Biculturalism: Some Reflections and Speculations*, Cristina Bratt Paulston noted the dearth of literature on the subject of biculturalism. In the years that have followed, considerably more attention has been paid to the concept, and yet, it remains a somewhat mysterious entity, often linked in one breath to bilingualism. While the connection may be less clear than it seems, the link between language and culture has long been considered undeniable. “Language is unique in its dual role as an intrinsic component of culture and as a medium through which other aspects of culture [...] are expressed and transmitted” (SAVILLE-TROIKE, 1985). It is to the credit of educators that more attention has been paid to the issues of culture and biculturalism and their impacts on learning, and yet biculturalism remains an enigma.

Despite the connection, unlike bilingualism, which within ranges is a quantifiable phenomenon, biculturalism, not only defies measurement, but, to a great extent, resists clear definition.

At the root of our understanding of biculturalism is the definition of culture. The literature reveals a broad array of conceptualizations of the subject. Culture has been variously defined as systems of knowledge, systems of collective symbols and meanings, cumulative creations of mind, shared codes of meanings (KEESING, 1974). Hall (1959) suggests that culture is communication and further that “Culture is the link between human beings and the means they have of interacting with others.” In a fairly inclusive definition, Saville-Troike (1978) has written, “culture includes all of the rules for appropriate behavior which are learned by people as a result of being members of the same group or community, and also the values and beliefs which underlie overt behaviors and are themselves shared products of group membership.”

From this broad range of descriptions, we attempt to arrive at a definition of *biculturalism*, which, thus itself, is no more easily defined or measured than culture. As Agar (1991) so aptly points out, “The

grand sweep and problematic nature of the culture concept is difficult to reconcile with the narrow focus and systematic demands of the Anglo-American empirical research tradition.” Culture does not lend itself to the rigors of scientific measurement, nor does biculturalism. Also muddying the concept is the imposing of group norms on the individual. The focus of culture is always patterns of the group, rather than individual behavior and values. Keesing (1974) warns that “any effort to reduce cultural systems to the cognitive system of an idealized individual actor is fraught with danger.” And yet he also suggests that culture is “an idealized body of competence differentially distributed in a population, yet partially realized in the minds of individuals.”

It is, then, this partial realization within the range of idealized whole with which we concern ourselves in any discussion of the individual with regard to culture or biculturalism. For while culture is a pattern of the group, biculturalism is a phenomenon of the individual (FISHMAN, 1980). Given the difficulty of defining *culture* and the fact that biculturalism manifests itself in the individual, it is no wonder, then, that biculturalism means different things to different people (PAULSTON, 1978).

In our definitions of it we carry forward our somewhat fuzzy conceptions of culture. Saville-Troike (1982) has succinctly defined biculturalism as the selective maintenance and use of both cultural systems and Grosjean (1982) has described it as the coexistence and or combination of two distinct cultures within an individual. The existence of two distinct cultures in one nation is the definition given by Longman, (1991). Tullock (1995) defines biculturalism as having or combining two cultures. Clark (2002) refers to these definitions as a minimalist notion of biculturalism, and claims that there was unlikely to be “an equivalent measure of support for biculturalism in the sense of equality” (p. 96). It is lack of clarity of just what culture is which, we think, leads to the ambiguity in defining for the individual just what, specifically, biculturalism is. For even if one accepts a combination of the definitions above, biculturalism is a unique experience for each individual in whom coexist two cultures.

Biculturalism versus Bilingualism

While biculturalism is often linked to bilingualism, that it is an entity unto itself is clearly illustrated by examples of individuals who function bilingually within a society of diglossia but who are monocultural. As Agar (1991) points out, “acquisition of another culture isn’t a necessary part of learning another language.” Paulston (1978) describes the case of intelligence agents who have native proficiency in the language in which they are collecting information but who have, clearly, not taken on that culture. Grosjean (1982) points to countries in which people regularly use two languages but are monocultural, such as functional bilingualism in Switzerland or Luxembourg. In countries with a lingua franca, such as Tanzania, Kenya, and other African nations, one could argue that a bilingual really has only one culture: that of his or her ethnic group” (GROSJEAN, 1982).

At the same time it may be argued that situations exist in which individuals are monolingual but bicultural, in that they share “the beliefs, attitudes and habits of two (at times overlapping) cultures” (GROSJEAN, 1982). Such situations as monolingual English speaking Scots or monolingual French speaking Bretons (GROSJEAN, 1982) might be cited as examples, as well as Hispanic children in the United States who have lost Spanish language but may carry aspects of both their home culture and the dominant Anglo culture.

If we accept that biculturalism is the range of human experience in which, within an individual, coexist, combine or are maintained two cultures, it is clear that the individual must in some way be in contact with both cultures. The age at which this contact occurs may be a factor in the degree to which he/she becomes bicultural, although, depending on the individual personality and features of each person, there may be other variables which are even more significant.

Adults and Biculturalism

There are a number of life circumstances which may lead to biculturalism within an individual. Let us consider first the adult who comes in contact with a second culture. Elanor Harz Jordan (1992) describes culture as such a deep and unconscious force that her characterization calls into question any possibility of adults developing biculturally:

Within the boundaries of an acquired culture system we find variation among individuals at the surface level, and it is the surface level that may change as a result of extended contact with other cultures, but the deepest level, acquired during early socialization, can be expected to remain constant and persistent.

Whether or not this is true may not be provable, but contrary to it, many *adults* who have contact with another culture do consider themselves bicultural. Some, certainly, have no intention of taking on any aspects of the new culture or are not allowed to do so by the surrounding society. At the opposite extreme of the adult experience, other individuals reject their native culture and attempt to assimilate into the new culture. Neither of these experiences represents biculturalism, nor would the individuals involved claim that they do. However, between these two extremes upon the continuum of results of contact with two cultures lies a group of adults who combine, to greater or lesser degrees, both cultures and develop a bicultural identity. Most bilingual individuals with whom we spoke felt that the length of time one is in contact with the second culture is crucial to the degree of biculturalism developed.

The research of Ervin-Tripp (1967) suggests that a bicultural individual might actually compartmentalize, keeping separate the two cultures, in fact, shifting values as she/he moves from one culture to the other. Bicultural individuals with whom we have spoken do not experience biculturalism in this way. (Certainly, one must consider

possible differences between reported experience which contradicts observed behavior that might indicate shifts from one cultural system to the other; however, given the relative inability to measure culture, it seems reasonable to utilize self-report in understanding biculturalism.) Some describe feeling truly comfortable in neither culture, while others indicated they feel at ease in both cultures. In all cases they feel that they select from their two cultures to create a unique third culture which is neither wholly one nor the original culture. Paulston (1978) writes about her own experience, “what I like and dislike does not conform to any one culture; it is an idiosyncratic mixture of Swedish and American cultural competence even though I am capable of appropriate socio-cultural performance.” She makes a distinction between performance which might be *viewed* as biculturalism and competence which seems, for her to be involved with self-concept.

Paulston (1978) points out that it is “of crucial importance [...] whether or not the process of becoming bicultural is voluntary or involuntary, whether it represents integration or forced assimilation.” The scenario of voluntary integration could be viewed as a form of additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1978) resulting in biculturalism. While forced assimilation represents a subtractive situation in which the new culture is resisted, biculturalism resisted. The individual’s resulting attitude toward the new culture is an important variable in the degree to which he/she becomes bicultural.

Children in contact with two cultures

The experiences of children in contact with two cultures have been studied by a number of researchers (LAMBERT, 1978; MILLER, 1983). They have found extremes similar to those exhibited by adults. Some children reject the new culture, identifying strongly with their original culture. Others, motivated by peer pressure and the desire to fit in, reject their native culture, orienting themselves, instead, with the new culture. A third group, identifying with neither culture, experiences varying states of anomie finding refuge and support in neither culture.

A fourth group identified by Lambert might be described as bicultural in that they are proficient in both languages, identify with both cultures, and are comfortable with their bicultural identity. Our own informal research reveals similar experiences among children who have moved to the United States. Biculturalism being the most positive outcome for the self-concept of the individual, one would hope that children, who experience anomie, over time, develop a comfortable identity which combines both cultures.

Another experience of children, which may result in biculturalism, is growing up in a bicultural society, one in which the child learns at an early age to function within two cultures. This experience is often characteristic of Hispanic children growing up in the United States who move between the Spanish culture of the home and the dominant Anglo culture of school and societal power. It might be argued that such a situation results in functionally bilingual monocultural individuals. As discussed above, it also can result in monolingual bicultural individuals, and within the range of experience, certainly there are those who take on aspects of both cultures, who not only are able to function, but also identify with, and feel at ease in both cultures.

A third situation which is probably most likely to result in biculturalism is that of children born into mixed culture marriages. These individuals potentially acquire the deep cultural knowledge. Eleanor Harz Jorden describes their native culture as "biculture." They grow up knowing two cultures, feeling comfortable in both, and, according to one such individual (now an adult) we spoke with, able to view each culture from the perspective of the other. They report being able to observe each culture with some degree of detachment and objectivity. Yet, even in these cases, individuals describe having developed their own third culture, somewhat deliberately and consciously. All feel, culturally, they have more options from which to choose. Reynolds (1990) describes this phenomenon, using the term 'bilingual,' though his statement is clearly descriptive of the experience of bicultural individuals:

Balanced bilinguals have the freedom to choose (to some degree) the environment in which they will be players: to the extent that the cultures of the two language communities differ in the values they cherish and the aptitudes and interests they reward, bilinguals automatically have two cultural reference groups open to them for membership.

Final Considerations

Whatever circumstance leads a person to combine aspects of two cultures, being bicultural is an individual matter which does not lend itself to stereotyping (PAULSTON, 1978). In fact, whether or not we are able to measure, record, and define the experience, whether or not biculturalism involves a switch of values from one culture to the other or the development of a unique third culture may be of no consequences in the long run. Keesing (1974), in describing the issue of defining culture, makes an important point which might well be said about biculturalism also, “Whether in this quest the concept... is progressively refined, radically reinterpreted, or progressively extinguished will in the long run scarcely matter if along the way it has led us to ask strategic questions and to see connections that would otherwise have been hidden.”

Certainly, the absolute link between language and culture has come into question in recent years. Appel and Muysken (1987) write that “the relation between language and culture does not seem to be as strong and fixed as is often assumed. It is not true that speaking a certain language inevitably leads to holding certain values.” It may well be that increased mobility within the world and the resulting bicultural nature of great numbers of people have blurred previously clear lines linking languages and cultures.

Saville-Troike (1992) comments on the arbitrariness of the connection between language and other aspects of culture. She points to the fact that English is used in many parts of the world to maintain indigenous cultural patterns, rather than to express the culture of

England or the United States, and further, that English may be used in this country to maintain the cultural tradition of Native Americans whose language is carried out through the linguistic code of English language. While these individuals may speak English, they live in a situation which can lead to biculturalism.

It is the questions and connections at every level of education which should be encouraged. Within the classroom teachers should be aware of cultural differences even when they are not marked by language differences. Tony Burgess (1988), in an article exploring the ramifications of diversity within the English classroom, concludes, “for difference is a point about cultural experience. To attend to it is to attend fundamentally to people’s experience in time, across cultures, as these are given, unequally and unevenly, in history.” It is the richness of the difference and the resources represented by the unique experience of those who are bicultural to which we must attend.

For the unifying aspect among all those who are bicultural is the bridge that each makes between two cultures. More than ever before, as telecommunications have made links throughout the world which were not possible twenty years ago, the earth has become smaller. Throughout the world there is a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of the earth’s eco-system. The “global village” must face collectively, the problems of its environment and its people. The building of bridges like those represented by individuals combining two cultures, however small they may seem, is an important goal. To the extent that we encourage and foster biculturalism in individuals we are also building bridges which may, ultimately, unite the world. The unique perspective of the bicultural individual which allows him/her to view two cultures with some objectivity, also gives opportunity for social change. As Keesing (1974) writes, “Perceiving ‘the system’ one has some free rein to try to beat it, change it, etc.” the potential for global social change as the result of biculturalism should not be overlooked nor viewed lightly.

We live in a world characterized by a greater flow of people. Therefore, knowledge and training in bilingual and bicultural education prepare foreign language teachers and educators in general, to understand issues surrounding the education of linguistically and culturally diverse students. This can provide a means to reduce prejudice and discrimination against them. As teachers of foreign languages, it is important for us to find ways to enhance our understanding and critical awareness of educational theory and practice drawing upon issues of culture, language and identity. By so doing, we are able to develop in ourselves a more inclusive and inter-cultural approach to foreign language teaching and learning across a wide range of educational sites, by covering current educational policies, curriculum frameworks, teaching, learning and assessment practices. In education, the focus on culture and the creation of a positive environment are believed to be a means of facilitating educational and cultural dynamics.

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