



THE END OF MONOLINGUALISM, THE RISE OF MULTILINGUALISM IN LITERACY SCHOLARSHIP AND THE ROLE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION BY SETIONO SUGIHARTO

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MULTILINGUALISM IN LITERACY SCHOLARSHIP AND THE
ROLE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE
ACQUISITION***

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Abstract

This article examines the ideological fissures in literacy scholarship situated in a global context, arguing that the battle between these two contesting ideologies showcases a heightened awareness of the subaltern communities to elevate their identities and rhetorical traditions, long suppressed by the dominant world's language like English. However, in the context of multilingualism the struggles to bring one's local identities through language have yet to be ardently promoted. This is due to the fact the hegemonic spread of the dominant English language, albeit paradoxical in nature, is perceived to be more beneficial than harmful. The article also shows that despite the recent fetish about multilingualism, monolingual ideology seems to withstand the test of time and has still been embraced by both Indonesian teachers and scholars alike. This is partly motivated by the local scholars' need for submitting their articles to international publications as well as by widespread assumptions that one's home language hurts and curtails the development of additional languages. For the latter case, an understanding of the positive role of one's native language to the acquisition of additional languages is not only relevant, but can also throw light into the contemporary language acquisition theory.

Key words: monolingualism, multilingualism, dominant language, monolingual ideology, additional languages, language acquisition

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Introduction

Living in a global contact zone compels everyone to be able to communicate both orally and in a written form in different languages. With this reality in mind, resorting exclusively to the notion of monolingualism sounds anachronistic, and therefore seems no longer appropriate. As Canagarajah & Wurr (2011) asserts, “Developments such as diaspora communities, transnational relations, migration, and digital communication, all of which result from today’s globalized world, “have created more multilingual interactions” (p. 1). Yet, while it is true that these development entails multilingual competence, in the context of global language pedagogy the monolingual norm still hitherto stands as the powerful gatekeeper to filter out language differences and to mandate the pursuit of uniformity, thus creating a power imbalance between the peripheral and center communities. For instance, the so-called Standard English is still enjoying a paradigmatic status in English language teaching in peripheral countries worldwide. By contrast, the other emerging varieties of Englishes, which scholars consider perfectly legitimate English varieties (see Ren, 2014), are deemed non-standard and “bad” or “broken” English, or even not acknowledged as the variety of English from the Kachurian Inner Circle (Yoo, 2013).

This article examines the rise of multilingualism in literacy scholarship, which leads to the eventual ideological battle among scholars in the field, and then argues that in the Indonesian context it takes arduous efforts to challenge the established monolingual norm and to promote the notion of multilingualism. As I argue that one of the contributing factors that make scholars and language teachers cling to the monolingual norm is the fallacious assumption of negative transfer, I will provide some anecdotal evidence which demonstrates the benefits of home language mastery to the acquisition of additional languages.

Monolingualism vs. Multilingualism in Literacy Scholarship: The Ideological Battle

In the context of literacy scholarship, the notion of monolingualism is often associated with the “English Only policy”, which imposes the use of Standard English or the “Edited American English” model (Horner, 2010; Horner, et.al. 2011, p. 305). This model assumes the transcendence of knowledge construction via writing process, viewing the literacy scholarship as if it is inhabited by monolingual people speaking and writing in just one language (i.e. English). Such a model, as Horner (2010) points out, envisages “a

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monolingual, native-English speaking writer writing only in English to an audience of English-only readers” (p. 1), and reifies the “myth of linguistic homogeneity”, defined by Matsuda (2010) as, “the tacit and widespread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English” (p.82). Without doubt, the monolingual model has been employed as a ‘norm’ to be conformed to by those who wish to be included as an exclusive member of academic discourse community in particular and as a global citizen in general.

The enforcement of this monolingual norm – most apparent in both the writing pedagogy and scholarship – bring with it ideological constructs such as modernity, neutrality, international intelligibility and scientific objectivity. These ideological constructs have been subsumed under the so-called “colonial-celebration” and “laissez faire liberalism” (Pennycook, 2000). Through these constructs, the spread of the monolingual norm through the imposition of mainly English language teaching and the publication in English has been seen as a common phenomenon, and treated as an “academic apoliticism” (Pennycook, 2000). What’s more, the monolingual norm has been disposed to the subaltern communities due to arguments which promote the English language as a lingua franca (Phillipson, 1992) and the language of the inevitability in contemporary life (Canagarajah, 2005). These arguments are classified in term of the “capacities”, “resources”, and “uses” of the English, all of which venerate the language.

Yet, the ideology of monolingualism manifested in the English-Only policy, which perpetuates the myth of homogeneity, has been severely challenged. This challenge was originally stem from the increased numbers of international college students with diverse languages studying in the U.S. (Matsuda, 2010), which gave birth to the idea of multilingualism in composition pedagogy. Multilingualism, unlike monolingualism, honors and acknowledges linguistic diversity. Efforts to reconsider the relevance of monolingual norm in the context of global literacy was felt vital by many scholars, as “By not challenging the notion of a standard language, we are passing along a naive and even damaging view of language to our students” (Mangelsdorf, 2010, p. 113). In fact, as students studying English writing have become linguistically diverse and heterogeneous, the appeal to embracing multilingual norm grows even stronger. As Matusda (2012) has recently asserted:

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...the question is no longer limited to how to prepare students from around the world to write like traditional students from North America; it is time to start thinking more seriously about how to prepare monolingual students to write like the rest of the world (p. 50).

Undergirded the revolutionary attempts to embrace multilingual norms are the fact that monolingualism has been alleged to further and strengthen the hegemony of English worldwide, leading to linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 2009a), the destruction of language ecology (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996), linguistics genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), the violation of linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006). For Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, p. 40), imposing monolingualism norm is tantamount to spreading “Americanization and homogenization of world culture”. In a rather provocative tone, she goes on to say that:

What has been promoted especially by some of the powerful Western states so far during this century has been their own linguistic and cultural lack of awareness, their intolerance of linguistic and cultural diversity, and their conscious underdevelopment and killing off of the world’s linguistic and cultural (along with biological) resources and diversity (p. 41).

In a more specific context like writing pedagogy, there are strong appeals from some scholars to make writing teachers conscious of the pivotal role of the students’ home language and even to combat “the constant efforts to make “English Only” the law of the land” (Lyons, p. 140). These ideological attacks have not been in vain. They encourage more voices from the periphery – voices which have long been silenced and relegated, as has been evident in the burgeoning literature which attest to the emergence of the so-called multilingual writing (Canagarajah, 2002, 2013a, b; You, 2010, to mention just a few). These publications have sent a clear signal that literacy scholarship ought to radically shift their anachronistic orientation to a perspective which embraces and honors linguistic democratization.



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The Demise of Monolingualism?

The question that is critical to pose now is “If enthusiasm about multilingual norms has paved the way for linguistic democratization process in writing pedagogy and scholarship in particular and language teaching in general, and therefore, augur well for the promotion of minority languages revitalization, does it follow then that monolingualism is dead at worst, or on the moribund state at best? Are there any signs which signal its demise and its moribundity? In my view, monolingual norms are still widely employed, if not glorified, in many post-colonial communities, and in fact still shows its vibrancy as the powerful frame of reference in the field of language teaching (see Shin, 2007 ; Sugiharto, in press, Yoo, 2014).

For one thing, as the contesting multilingual ideologies see the imposition of monolingual norm as having imperialistic and ecologically destructive bearings, scholars’ efforts to ideologically attack the monolingual norm in the name of such notions as imperialism, language rights, home language or mother tongue, language ecology, preservation, plurality, and multilingualism have been suspected to operate under the mainstream linguistic thoughts (Pennycook, 2006) and are thus less likely to be successful in yielding the desirable effects –the employment of multilingual norms. One way out to overcome this, as Pennycook (2006) further argues, is “to move away from [the] dichotomy between linguistic imperialism and language rights” which he considers “the grandest critical narrative of recent times” (p. 67), and “to try to understand in more mobile, fluid, and contextual ways how language resources are mobilized in different ways” (p. 69).

For another, the subaltern communities’ attitudes towards the global spread of English are more positive than harmful. While the spread of English brings economic, politic, and social advantages, paradoxically it effects inequalities in these factors (Tollefson, 2000). Yet, for many people in the post-colonial countries, the spread of the language is often perceived as offering ideological benefits to them. Its harmful effects are hardly seen as an ideological threat to their local identities and ideologies. This, however, should come as no surprise, as English is the language which “serves key societal purposes in many domains”, and are therefore “described as a *lingua economica* (in business and advertising), a *lingua emotiva* (the imaginary of Western art products such as pop music and advertising, consumerism and hedonism), a *lingua academica* (in research publications and a medium of instruction in



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higher education), and *a lingua cultura* (the reliance on English literary texts for foreign language learning)” (Phillipson, 2009b, p.92). In a specific context like Indonesia, for example, the dependence upon the English Only policy or monolingual norm in scholarship is often motivated by the Indonesian’s government regulations that require local scholars to submit their articles to international journals for the purpose of their academic promotion. Likewise, in writing pedagogy the exclusive adherence to the English Only, often the erasure of learners’ home language, is due to a widespread assumption among teachers and scholars here that learners’ first language will cause a negative transfer in learning additional languages including English. In other words, the inclusion of learners’ mother tongue in learning additional languages is perceived to have been distorting the learning process, and will eventually hurt additional language development.

In the latter case, it is important to understand what current insights have disentangled regarding the role of one’s home language in the acquisition of additional languages. Evidence espousing the positive contributions of one’s first language indeed abounds (see for example, Krashen, 1996, 2004). In the next section, I provide compelling cases of the positive roles of the first language in language acquisition –cases which help debunk the widely-held assumption that first language is the source of a negative transfer in learning additional languages.

The Role of the Mother Tongue in the Acquisition of Additional Languages: Some Anecdotal Evidence

In the context of learning additional languages such as the official language (Indonesian) and foreign languages (especially English), a strong foundation in one’s native language has the potential of accelerating the acquisition of these additional languages, a position that has been consistently buttressed by empirical research on second language acquisition.

Krashen (1996, 1999, 2004) argues one’s native language or first language does not cripple, but instead can speed up the process of second language acquisition. Specifically, he contends that education provided in the first language leads to greater knowledge, which makes second language input more comprehensible. Also, learning to read in the first



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language is a short cut to second language literacy: It is easy to learn to read in a language one understands, and once one learns to read in one language, this ability transfers quickly to others, even if the writing systems are different. Research confirms these arguments.

The strongest evidence so far supporting the use of one's home language in school comes from McField and McField's (2014) recent meta-analysis of studies in the US of bilingual education, studies in which bilingual education is compared to all-English "immersion" style programs. Previous meta-analysis had concluded that students in bilingual programs did better on tests of English reading. McField and McField found similar results, but also found that when both program quality and research quality were taken into account, the size of the effect was considerably larger than that reported in previous analyses.

This new finding has certainly further strengthened the idea that bilingual education program where a child's home language is allowed to be used in classroom contexts, helps accelerate, rather than hinder, second language development. I present here a few case studies that confirm that one's native language does not hinder the development of second language.

Tasha Stoltz, an Indonesian student at Sekolah Bogor Raya, West Java, Indonesia, who managed to have her writing published for the first time in the Indonesia's leading English newspaper, *The Jakarta Post* in 2006, aspire to become a writer. She describes herself as a ravenous reader of fanfiction, both in Indonesian and in English, and as a "Potteraholic." Clearly, her reading in Indonesian did not inhibit her ability to write in English.

Kimmo Kosonen (personal communication, February 19, 2014), a Finland native, also provides evidence supporting this position, saying that his daughter was educated in his home language Finnish, that he communicated using Finnish at home with her, and that she was a dedicated pleasure reader in Finnish. His daughter's rapid acquisition of several other languages along with other studies he conducted led Kosonen (2014) to come to the conclusion that competence in the first language does not hinder, and probably helps the acquisition of other languages.

Further evidence for the above contention comes from my own case history (Sugiharto, 2010). As a native of Indonesia and a native speaker of Indonesian, I attribute my



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proficiency in reading and writing in English to my early exposure to reading in my native language, Indonesian.

When I was at elementary school, I was fond of reading Indonesian folk-tales. So intriguing were the stories depicted in the books that when I read I found myself “lost in the book”. My interest in reading the Indonesian folk-tales continued until I attended senior high school where I began reading these folk-tales written in English in graded readers, beginning with the beginner level and soon moving to the intermediate and advanced levels. My early exposure to light reading in my home language certainly did not hinder my development of English literacy.

It is interesting to note that the majority of Indonesian intellectuals (those who write and publish in their native languages, the official language and English) are multilingual, that is, they are proficient in at least three languages, including their own native languages.

The pedagogical implication for all of this evidence is that the teaching of English and other languages “cannot be enacted in total separation from other language practices” (García, 2014, p. 7). The case histories evidence also dilutes the monolingual instructional approaches, but further strengthens bilingual education “by means of bilingual instructional strategies, in which two or more languages are used alongside each other” (Creese and Blackledge, 2010, p. 103).

Conclusion

Globalization in literacy pedagogy and scholarship as well as English language education has compelled us to reconsider the relevance of the monolingual norm, on which the English Only policy is based, and accept the reality that linguistic diversity is inevitable. “The assumption of linguistic homogeneity, as Matsuda (2010, p. 92) reminds us, ...became increasingly inaccurate as linguistic diversity grew over the last two centuries.” Nevertheless, while the urge of continuously pursuing linguistic diversity in both literacy and language pedagogy can help push the fields forward, we need to be cognizant that monolingual norm still stands as a powerful gate-keeper in filtering out language differences which do not conform to the standard conventions disposed to us. The challenge we are facing now is not only to revitalize mother tongue-based education so as to prepare students to counter the dominant hegemonic discourse, but also to help them conscious that the solid foundation in



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their home language accelerates the learning of additional languages, and that the mastery of home language is a most strategic way to appropriate the dominant discourse.

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