The Common European Framework of Reference, diglossia, and ESP

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The consideration of diglossia, and the implications for ESP

Diglossia, it will be recalled, is the existence of a High variety and a Low variety. The country I work in, Tunisia, has both plurilingualism (Arabic, French, English etc) and diglossia (Classical Arabic and Dialect Arabic). The language situation is incredibly complicated, and varies for instance with the school generation - since language policy has changed over the years. At the time of independence, a few were educated bilingually in Classical Arabic and French. The government gave high priority to making education widely. Initially French had an important place, and mathematics and science were taught in French even in the primary school. Today, Classical Arabic is stressed, and only in the last four years of secondary school are students taught mathematics and science in French. What has gained in all this has been Classical Arabic.

> 'Classical Arabic' in itself is a term with two meanings. It can mean the language of the Qur'ran. This is how I saw it used in Wikipedia. It can mean the formal form which is written and widely understood all over the Arab world, also known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This definition I saw used by Encyclopedia Britannica. In the case of diglossia, the two forms are commonly called High (Classical) and Low (Dialect). The final point is that the context is the main guide to meaning. Obviously if I am writing about a present day situation then the 'Classical' refers to current Arabic ie MSA. Therefore I choose to use Classical rather than MSA.

To some extent, Classical Arabic resemble a second language, in that it is taught formally in schools, and there are no native speakers of Classical Arabic. When students study sciences through French at University they are using their second language, and it can be that they only know how to express themselves on that subject in French not Classical Arabic. But obviously, because French is their second language, they will be weaker in it than teaching monolingual French students.

When people ask me how many 'languages' I speak, I am faced with a quandary. Dialect is rarely written therefore rarely read. Classical I hear sometimes and sometimes try to read, but I rarely write it, and never speak it. Whereas in English I am at C2 in all the five skills. It is a similar problem for Swiss-German speakers. Until recently Swiss-German was only for spoken interaction and listening - never for reading, writing, or speeches. Swiss German speakers usually learn all five skills in so called High German. So how many languages do German speaking Swiss know? Swiss Germans are like having one and a half languages. The problem is one of terminology. But with the CEFR it is very easy to score each language variety for each relevant skill. The CEFR seems to have been designed in total ignorance of diglossia, though it can easily be extended to cover that. For instance, I can score myself separately for spoken interaction in Classical, and spoken interaction in Dialect.

Skill	Dialect	Classical
writing	not applicable	
reading	not applicable	
spoken interaction	usual	rare
speeches	rare	usual
listening	common	common

Area of life	Dialect	Classical
home	almost always	
school	rare	subjects taught through Classical
informal	most common	
formal		common

Plurilingualism
The concept of plurilingualism is at the heart of the CEFR. People will learn the language they need for a given situation. Sometimes it will be Dialect, sometimes it will be Classical, sometimes it will be another language. It is possible for people in a situation of diglossia and bilingualism that someone will learn in their third or fourth language, without learning the language in their first language. In addition, people will frequently mix language codes, either mixing Dialect with Classical, or Dialect with a foreign language for instance. This code mixing or 'code switching' is frequent, normal, and usually highly skilled and can be so common among the educated that it forms the dominant language form. What follows is a simplification of a highly complicated situation.

Area of life	Dialect	Classical	French	English
home	common	rare	possible	rare
work	common (plus French or English)	common for written work	common for speech and writing	common for speech and writing
academic	common	rare	common but may be weak	??

ESP

The traditional view of ESP takes no account of diglossia. In the traditional view, students learn one language well - their native language - and in it they can do everything they want. In particular, they can express themselves fully on any subject area. Therefore, the in ESP the goal is to teach students to express in English what they have already mastered in their first language.

In my own ESP situation, French speaking North Africa, the sciences are usually studied in French. In this case the students may well NOT be very strong in Classical. My students tell me that while Classical Arabic can be used for science, it is much easier to use French or English. Therefore, even though students are forced to learn science in French, and they may well not be very strong in French, it would NOT be any easier though to switch into Classical. Students and teachers are faced with a difficult 'Hobson's choice'. The students do not possess a language form (Classical, French, or English) at level C1 or higher which would enable them to easily cope with content in those languages. They learn sciences through French while not necessarily being strong in French, but they end up stronger in French than in Classical - at least for the domain of science.

What can happen is that students learn the advanced French, while being weak on some of the basics. I have seen students, perfectly at home in a lecture, and totally lost in light social interaction which requires nuances of politeness. I have seen students learn semi-technical words and they learn the technical meaning without being aware of the common meaning.

Then we add English to the mixture. No wonder ESP is complicated! And the academic world of ESP seems to have totally ignored the complexity of life created by diglossia. Why has diglossia been so totally ignored in ESP? Here are just some of the implications.

In diglossia + ESP we are teaching English to students who do not have one strong language variety, who are used to mixing languages, and who may not know the material in any language. It is well known that in ESP we often end up teaching the reading skills that they do not know in any language, and this slows down the English teaching. The way things are going, ESP teachers need to be using content to drive the teaching of English. This means we need more subject specialists to teach English, or to teach their subjects in English. From intermediate level onwards, content should drive language. And the subject-content of the lessons should be at least equal to, and preferably be a little more advanced than the subjects they are studying in their main language.

 In short, in my situation, just as the content teaching pushes the development of French, English may end up pushing the content or skills. Pushing the skills is common enough in ESP, but pushing the content is less common.

At the heart of plurilingualism is need for language. When students need language they will acquire it. Far too often in the ESP lesson material I have seen, the content and the language exercises are trivial. In the past, material for doctors provided school level biology, for instance, though that has changed. Medical English texts I have seen have begun to be a little higher. But they still suffer from trivial exercises, texts which are too short and too easy

conceptually, and texts which merely repeat what they already know. What we need are courses which revise the basic language while teaching something new! ESP is not merely trying to teach people the language forms to express what they can already express in another language, but to go on and show them how to express themselves in ways they cannot do in L1 or L2; Classical or French.