

On the Contribution of Bilinguality to Reading Proficiency

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Abstract: Conflicting evidence on the development of bilinguality and its effect on the academic achievement of bilinguals demand that the component skills of reading such as phonology, orthography and comprehension must be carefully assessed in both first and second languages in order to trace the development of these abilities in relation to the other. Thus, this study investigated the effect of bilingual reading on the comprehension skill of Yoruba-English bilinguals. The main effect due to bilingual reading was significant in favour of experimental group. However no significant difference was observed in the reading comprehension scores of male and female pupils who were exposed to bilingual reading. The implications for bilingual Education in developing African countries are discussed.

Key words: Bilinguality, reading, proficiency, bilingual, skill, languages

INTRODUCTION

Most African countries share the fate of having had colonial masters presiding over their destiny for decades. Thus the privileged position accorded foreign languages and the prevalence of bilingualism (the capacity to speak or communicate in two different languages) translating to bilinguality in the mainstream classroom in these lands is common knowledge. As noted by Mansour (1993) the colonial language policy of these colonial masters has paralyzed policy decisions and relegated the indigenous languages to the background-giving prime of place to the imposed languages.

The bilingual policy of these countries is dreaded by many educationists who wish to substitute the indigenous languages for the imposed language. This has been a Herculean task giving the multiplicity of indigenous languages. For instance in Nigeria, there are about 400 indigenous languages contending for recognition. The adoption of one destroys the autonomy of minority groups and makes them amenable to manipulation by the majority. The country has therefore found an escape route in the adoption of English (the colonial master's language) as the official language. Even though the indigenous languages are permitted to be used at the primary level of education, only those spoken by the larger groups (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) are encouraged to survive (NPE, 2004) the minority languages or dialects must die a natural death.

In Cameroon, the numbers of languages range from 100-250. Thus English and French are ordained as official languages (Mbuswe-Samba *et al.*, 2001). The story is not

different in Uganda, the multiplicity of ethnic groups each speaking languages mutually in comprehensible to each other strengthens ethno linguistic diversity. Thus in most African countries, many languages are a fact of life and a condition for existence.

It is unfortunate that literacy development in such countries is hampered by the imposition of the cost-benefit accounting, the economics of predominantly monolingual developed countries on the developing countries for instance the claims that the cost of teaching-learning literacy is greater in multilingual societies either because teaching materials must be produced in several languages or because local languages have no established writing system and/or no published reading matter. No doubt these views are obviously in comparison with a predominantly monolingual society.

This is not only bad economics; it also reflects a poor understanding of the multilingual ethos. The economics of monolingualism is such that two languages are a nuisance, three languages are uneconomic and many languages are absurd. But in multilingual societies restrictions on the use of indigenous languages is a nuisance and one language is not only uneconomic but absurd. It is also an attempt to promote illiteracy. The correlation between literacy and development and illiteracy and underdevelopment is too glaring to be ignored.

Literacy is consistently associated with educational success and achievement. It is part of the cultural capital valued by any society and achievement in it serves as a primary gatekeeper for entry into educational institutions, the workforce and leadership positions (Gutierrez, 1992).

Biliteracy, the ability to read and write in two or more languages has been associated with the academic achievement of students who speak English as a second language (Collier, 1992).

Furthermore studies have shown that when biliteracy is fostered, the language skills acquired from learning the first language may facilitate the learning of similar skills in the second or other language (Cummins, 1991). This notion was formalized in the linguistic interdependent hypothesis, which states that:

- The level of second language competence that a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in his mother tongue or first language at the time when intensive exposure to second language begins.

Maintaining first language literacy has also been associated with better overall academic performance and mastery of English (Afolayan, 1999).

Previous research on transfer of skills from Spanish to English indicates that children who learn to read and write in Spanish and home, at school in their country of origin or in another country do not have to start from the beginning when learning to read in English at school.

As stated by Lanauze and Snow (1989) Language skills acquired in a first language can at least if developed beyond a certain point in the first language (L1), be recruited at relatively early stages of second language (L2) acquisition for relatively skilled performance in L2, thus short cutting the normal developmental progression in L2.

Also Unoh noted that the language skills acquired from learning the first language may facilitate the learning of similar skills in the second or other language.

In spite of overwhelming evidence supporting the development of biliteracy, other studies have submitted findings to the contrary. For instance Okonkwo found that bilingualism increases scholastic retardation in children whose native language is not the principal school language and that biliteracy has very harmful effects on home-school bilinguals. These conflicting evidence demand that the component skills of reading such as phonology, orthography and comprehension must be carefully assessed in both the first and second languages in order to trace the development of these abilities in relation to the other.

The present study examines the possibility of cross-language transfer of comprehension skill in which a major indigenous language in Nigeria-Yoruba and

English as a second language are involved. This was with a view of determining whether the translation of the English passage to Yoruba would aid comprehension or not. Possible gender differences were also explored.

The study adds to our understanding of biliteracy and how it affects reading comprehension in the second language. In other words it provides the basis for supporting and nurturing literacy in the first language as a vehicle to developing literacy in English.

Languages in Nigeria: Two strands of Languages are discernible in Nigeria. These are English and the indigenous languages. English was introduced to Nigeria in the 16th century by British traders. It has become the most popular language in Nigeria today in terms of range of functions and ethnic spread of speakers. The other strand of Language is the indigenous languages. There are about 400 of such indigenous languages. It is possible however to make out three major clusters: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These are the three major indigenous languages recognized as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004). Hausa is spoken by the people of Northern Nigeria and Igbo by the Easterners. The Yoruba language is spoken by the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. They are also found in different parts of Africa, Haiti, Brazil and in many other prosperous nations of the world (Fakoya, 2004). Lagos state where this study was conducted falls within the Yoruba speaking zone hence the interest in the Yoruba language is this study.

Languages in the educational system: The New Nigerian Educational structure known as 9-3-4-6 consists of 9 years of compulsory basic education in Primary and Junior Secondary, 3 years of Senior Secondary and 4 years of higher education. During the first 3 years of Primary Education, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is the prescribed medium of instruction while English remains a subject in the curriculum. However, the languages change roles at the upper primary (primary 4). English becomes the medium of instruction and the indigenous languages remain as subject to be taught like any other in the curriculum. This persists through out the remaining years of formal schooling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: The study involved a total of 124 primary 4 children randomly selected from four primary schools in Lagos State. All the subjects belong to the Yoruba

ethnic group. Their ages ranged between 8-10 years. The researcher recognized that a research design that proposes to study cross-language transfer of skill in a meaningful way must meet certain criteria. She therefore controlled for differences in children's learning backgrounds and home learning environment by collecting history from parents, pupils and teachers' records.

Measuring instruments: In this study, researcher constructed tests were used to measure reading comprehension in English and Yoruba. They are:

- Test of Comprehension in English (TOCE)
- Test of Comprehension in Yoruba (TOCY)

The reading passage for TOCE was titled A Present written by the researcher. TOCY is the translated version of TOCE into Yoruba titled Eburn. Each passage was accompanied with 10 comprehension questions, which included the following:

- Test of knowledge-answers to be found in the passage e.g., what was the present?
- Test of translation (re-ordering of ideas in one's own word) e.g., what is the other word for present?
- Test of interpretation (reading between the line, extra surface meaning) e.g., why do I need a bicycle?
- Test of extrapolation (making projection into the future, appreciating and passing judgement) e.g., do you think I like the present? Why?

The instruments were validated by experts in language education at Lagos State University. A test-retest reliability using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient yielded a score of 0.74.

Design and procedure: A pretest-posttest control group design was used for the study. The experimental group had 62 primary four pupils in two schools in Lagos State Nigeria. There were 30 boys and 32 girls in the experimental sample. The control subjects (N = 62; 29 boys and 33 girls) were drawn from two other schools. The experimental group were exposed to bilingual reading (reading in English and Yoruba) while the control group were exposed to reading in English only.

The experimental group were given the English version of the passage to read aloud one after the other. The control group read the English version of the passage aloud also in the same way as did the

experimental group. The content was discussed in English but they had no access to the Yoruba version.

RESULTS

Data for the study were analysed by finding the means and Standard Deviation (SD). The main effect due to bilingual reading was significant in favour of experimental group (means 9.95 and 6.22). However no significant difference was observed in the reading comprehension scores of Male and Female pupils in the sample who were exposed to bilingual reading and those who were not (means-9.55 and 8.45).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have shown that when biliteracy is fostered, literacy skills used in one language transfer to the other. The better performance of the experimental group might have resulted from the opportunity provided to develop major conceptual understanding of what they were trying to learn thereby enhancing comprehension.

The findings find support in Ernst and Richard (1995) who found that when children learning a 2nd language have opportunities to read materials in their first language, it can serve to affirm that they are good readers, even though they may struggle when they read English. They also found that it enhances enthusiasm and comprehension in students.

Also Thomas and Collier (1997) found that maintaining L1 literacy is associated with better overall academic performance, mastery of English and diminished dropout rates for ESL students who speak minority languages. Although native language reading development may not be a prerequisite to learning to read in a new language as noted by Hedgcock and Atkinson (1993) it may very well be useful in comprehending texts which are within the reading level of learners. Thus, supporting the development of biliteracy is crucial in preparing pupils in bilingual environments to succeed in educational settings.

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