

The Role of Bilingualism and Monolingualism in Listening Comprehension of Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: Bilingualism has always been a subject for scholars since societies contain people from different backgrounds. In Khuzestan Province, Iran, teachers usually deal with classes which at least contain a few bilinguals (i. e., Arab-Persian speakers). Since teaching in pure monolingual (i. e., Persian speakers) classes is undoubtedly different from instructing in classes in which the students are a mixture of bilinguals and monolinguals, teachers need a sufficient knowledge about different strategies and processes that these two groups apply in language learning. The main aim of the present study is to examine the effects of monolingualism and bilingualism on listening. The design of the research is experimental in terms of pre and post-test method. The participants of this study were 30 bilingual (Arabic-Persian) students and 30 monolingual students (Persian) majoring in English as a foreign language at Abadan University. Different testing instruments were utilized in the process of the development of the present research. After taking a pre-test on listening test, the participants attended the classes of listening comprehension strategies while working on listening tasks throughout the treatment period. The results showed that the use of such strategies by bilinguals and monolinguals had significant effect on their better performance on listening comprehension; however, bilinguals outperformed the monolinguals in the post-test phase. Statistical analysis of *t*-test depicted that there was a significant difference between the bilinguals and monolinguals regarding their performances on listening comprehension as well as their strategy use.

Key words: Bilingualism; Monolingualism; Listening Comprehension; English Language.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the investigation of the strategies used by successful monolingual and bilingual listeners has been the core of many studies (Garcia, 1999; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Steinberg, Blinder & Chan, 1984). Garcia (1999, p. 63) states that balanced bilinguals read more slowly and showed a higher error rate in the recall of two-digit numbers compared with monolingual subjects. But, to the researcher's knowledge, none of these studies have been carried out in terms of power and speed tests. Since a bilingual acquires two languages simultaneously, s/he seems to have a better understanding of a text in another language compared to a monolingual (Bacon, 1989). Most of the studies in this area have focused on the comparison between bilinguals and monolinguals in different views (Raney, Obeidallah & Miura, 2002). Therefore, the major goal of this study is to compare listening comprehension of these two groups in terms of power and speed tests. A power test is a type of test where every test taker is given sufficient time to complete the test. The difficulty level of some items on the test is beyond the ability of test takers so that no test taker is expected to get every item right (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), whereas a speed test is the one where not every test taker is expected to finish the test because the time allowed to complete is limited. The difficulty level of the items on the test is usually easy so that any test

taker is expected to get every item right given sufficient time (Richard & Rodgers, 1986).

In short, the majority of the aforementioned descriptive and experimental works have been conducted on different aspects of bilingualism and speed and power tests but none of them has specifically focused on a comparative study of Arab bilingual and monolingual EFL learners in power and speed tests on listening comprehension. This is one of the initial reasons to carry out the present study.

In Khuzestan, teachers usually deal with classes which at least contain a few bilinguals. Since teaching in pure monolingual classes is undoubtedly different from instructing in classes in which the students are a mixture of bilinguals and monolinguals, teachers need a sufficient knowledge about different strategies and processes that these two groups apply in language learning. Therefore, the present study intends to compare the listening comprehension of these two groups based on a speed and power test. Also this study aims to elicit the strategies and processes which these language learners apply in listening comprehension. The following Research Questions are put into the focus this research: (1) Is there any difference between the performance of Arab bilingual and Persian monolingual students in listening comprehension? , (2) Do bilinguals and monolinguals use the strategies in listening comprehension tests?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Monolinguals and Bilinguals

Bilingualism, defined as possessing two languages, has always been a controversial issue in society. During the early 1900s, bilingualism was considered an unwelcome topic among American professionals and politicians. Educators rendered bilingualism responsible for immigrant children's failure in school subject matter. Employers believed that immigrants, due to their low competence in English, did not fit the requirements needed to become part of the United States workforce. Psychologists regarded bilingualism as a handicap to cognitive development; it was assumed that bilingualism was a barrier affecting verbal intelligence (Vygotsky, 1978). Policy makers who accorded great importance to psychologists' works declared that bilingual education should be banned in schools and at the workplace since it did not benefit learning growth and productivity in industry and business. Foes of bilingualism and bilingual education elicited support for their assumption; they wanted to demonstrate that bilingualism was a handicap to the functioning of society and turned to social science research (Rivers, 1981). The results of such a research were accepted with little attention given to how the results were attained.

Lambert (1997) conducted a study in which they controlled for age and socio-economic factors, found evidence that bilingualism had positive effects on cognition, contrary to the results of the study. Lambert (1997) found that the "balanced bilingual" enjoyed a "mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities" (p. 3). Peal and Lambert, however, failed to demonstrate in their study the cognitive consequences of different levels of bilingualism.

Greater range of language proficiency would depend on the extent to which a bilingual person can transfer his thoughts from one language to the other. Cohen (2003) asserts a strong command in two languages would lead an individual to more linguistic information, greater storage and retrieval of information abilities, and the abilities to contrast linguistic systems in developing conceptual thought processes. However, Brown (2000) recognizes the cognitive limitations of bilingualism when a bilingual person does not develop yet the minimal level of language proficiency in either his first language or the second language. In the same vein, Cohen (1990) hypothesized that individuals who develop high linguistic proficiency in both first and second language (called balanced bilinguals) are capable to enjoy the positive cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Needless to say, bilingualism can have a positive influence on problem solving since it is considered as the highest form of cognition (Cohen, 1990). Several studies explored the relationship between bilingualism and arithmetic problem solving (Rubin, 1994).

2.3. Listening Comprehension

A major goal of listening comprehension instruction is to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and strategies they must possess to become proficient and independent listeners. However, although decades of research have revealed a great deal of information about how listeners get meaning from what they read and about the kinds of explicit instruction and activities that are most successful in helping students to become good listeners, recent classroom observation studies indicate that students in typical elementary school classrooms still receive little in the way of effective comprehension instruction (e.g., Fry, 1970).

2.4. (Meta) cognitive listening comprehension strategies

In addition to identifying what comprehension strategies should be included in instruction, the research review also provides guidelines for how strategy-based instruction should be conducted (Brown & Yule, 1983). This present research showed that instruction was most effective when teachers explicitly teach strategies, following an explanation/model/scaffold-practice-apply model (Brown, 1990). In this model of explicit strategy instruction, the teacher chooses for instruction only those strategies that align closely with the task students are listening. The teacher begins instruction by identifying a strategy and explaining what it is and why it is important to comprehension. As the teacher reads, he or she may think aloud about how and when to use the strategy. After this listening and modeling, the teacher works with students to guide them in determining how and when to use the strategy on their own. As students read, the teacher provides feedback and engages them in discussion. In subsequent lessons, the teacher asks students to apply the strategy on their own to other tasks (Brown, 2000). Research-based practices in early listening scaffolding is one of the most important features of this model of instruction, with the teacher gradually releasing to students the responsibility for strategy use (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). However, teachers do not ask students to work on their own until the students have demonstrated that they understand a strategy and know how and when to use it (Diaz, 1983).

Studies conducted over the last decade provide evidence that linguistically diverse children continue to lag behind monolingual English-speaking children in listening performance (Hasan, 2000). Pardon, Knight, and Waxman (1986) found out that bilingual Spanish dominant students use fewer cognitive strategies than children who communicate through the use of only one communication system. The bilingual Spanish dominant students in this experimental study were taught to use meta-cognitive listening strategies while listening in Spanish. Primary findings indicated that, following training in meta-cognitive Spanish listening strategies, Spanish dominant bilingual children improved in the area of listening performance on the Spanish listening test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills English listening test. Post interview results of the Burke Listening Interview, translated into Spanish, showed increases in the frequency of Spanish listening strategies following meta-cognitive intervention. Directionality was also found in

the area of transfer of meta-cognitive strategies across. Bilingual Spanish dominant children often experience problems in understanding the printed word. At the same time, research yields findings that indicate bilingual Spanish dominant children are most often required to produce lower levels of thinking through simple recall and recitation of basic information instead of more cognitively demanding processes (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Training the same children to utilize meta-cognitive listening strategies may assist learners in achieving higher levels of listening performance in the primary language while listening in Spanish. Furthermore, based on Brown's (1990) Interdependence Hypothesis, meta-cognitive theory, Spanish listening strategy training may increase English listening performance, as well.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 60 bilingual (Arabic-Persian) students and 30 monolingual students (Persian) majoring in English as a foreign language at Abadan University. These participants were selected out of 120 mono and bilingual volunteers who majored in English Translation studying EFL in Islamic Azad University of Abadan, Iran in Fall semester, 2011. Since the intended level of students was intermediate, they were given a Nelson English Language Proficiency Tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976). After conducting the test, 30 bilinguals including (20 females and 10 males) and 35 monolinguals (including 25 females and 5 males) whose scores were one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were qualified for this project. The age of these students ranged from 19 to 36 years old in both groups.

3.2 Instrumentation

Several different testing instruments were utilized in the process of the development of the present research. The first instrument used in this study was a Nelson proficiency test to determine the students' level of language proficiency which was intended to be intermediate. The reason for choosing this level was to have a homogeneous group that is potentially ready to be taught listening strategies. Thirty items of Nelson proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) were applied to determine the homogeneity of the groups regarding their levels of proficiency as intermediate level. The reliability of this homogeneity test was computed through the application of Cronbach Alpha method as ($\alpha = .93$). The rationale behind adopting this test for the purpose of the study was that it is one of the available standardized tests compatible with Iranian students.

The second instrument was a couple of listening tests, one to measure participants' listening comprehension. Since the purpose of this study is to discover the effect of bilingualism and monolingualism on the performance of students in listening comprehension, Baron's (Sharpe, 2011) listening comprehension test was used as pre and

post-tests and each including 50 items. Both were the same in content but different in the format. The test consists of three listening tasks taken from the Baron's and each part included five listening tasks at the pre-intermediate level. For both of the tests 50 minutes were given. This amount of time seem to be enough for the test since it includes 50 items, which means for each item of the listening comprehension question one minute is given. The reliability value of the pre- and post-test were ($\alpha = .87$) and ($\alpha = .89$) respectively. The same amount of time was given for the post-test, since in this test the rapidity is considered as the significant factor; they listened once to the CD in both tests. After each test, the participants were asked to write the types of listening strategies that they have employed to facilitate their comprehension.

3.3 Procedure

First, the researcher invited 120 volunteers who were interested to participate in this research. To control the students' level of proficiency which was intermediate, they were given a Nelson proficiency test with 86 coefficient of reliability measured by Cronbach Alpha formula. Then after giving a proficiency test to the volunteers, 60 out of 120 whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean score were selected as the participants of the study. They included 30 bilinguals consisting of 20 female and 10 male students who knew Persian and Arabic; and 30 monolingual students including 25 females and 5 males speaking Persian. Then the selected students were taught the listening strategies.

These strategies were taught in 12 sessions. Because there are too many strategies supposed to be taught in a term following Oxford and Ehrman (1988) and in each session 4 strategies were taught to the participants.

In each session after strategies, a listening task was given to the students and they were asked to answer the listening comprehension questions. By doing this the researcher aimed to make students apply the already learned strategies, they were also required to mention the strategies that they had used to reach their answers. At the end of the term, both groups were given the post-test. The data were collected to be analyzed in terms of descriptive and inferential statistics to answer the research questions. A set of *t*-tests was performed. The first *t*-test was applied to analyze the results obtained from the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals in pre-test listening comprehension. Another *t*-test was performed to highlight the mean differences between bilingual and monolingual learners' scores of their performance on listening comprehension pre-and post-tests.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The first step the researchers intend to analyze the performance of bilingual and monolingual students in listening comprehension tasks taking the pre and post-tests. Table 1 shows the results of mean scores in the pre-test for the both groups of bilinguals and monolinguals.

Groups	Tests	Mean	SD	T-test	df	Level of significance	Critical <i>t</i>
Monolingual group	Pre-test	22.70	9.84	-.111	58	.912	2.000
	Post-test	25.56	11.53				
Bilingual group	Pre-test	23.00	10.98	-3.393	58	.001	
	Post-test	34.86	9.60				

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of within groups' performances on the pre-test and post-test

In Table 1, the observed t ($t_0 = -.111$) is less than the critical t ($t_c = 2.000$). Thus the difference between the means on both groups is not significant ($p < 0.5$). This result indicates that our first null hypothesis is confirmed. In other words, there is no significant difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals in listening comprehension. The observed t ($t_0 = -3.393$) is greater than the critical t ($t_c = 2.000$). Thus the difference between the means on both groups is significant ($p < 0.5$). This result indicates that our second null hypothesis is rejected. In other words, there is a significant difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals in listening comprehension.

5. Discussion and conclusion

It was confirmed that there was a significant difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals regarding their performances on listening comprehension. Though, the mean scores showed general differences between the two groups' performances. In fact, the mean score of bilinguals was higher than that of monolinguals. This implies the partial superiority of bilinguals over monolinguals. Also studies conducted over the last two decades provide evidence that linguistically diverse children continue to lag behind monolingual English-speaking children in listening performance. The meaningful difference between the two groups' performance on the post-test could be due to a number of reasons. Firstly, it could be due to the fact that Arab-bilingualism may have direct effect on better comprehending of English tasks because of their experiences in listening to the variety of sounds in two languages. Since these two languages (Arabic and English) have different phonemes, they are likely to have direct mutual effect on one another as they are able to recognize different sounds and symbols interactions. Another impotent point about bilingual subjects is that they have control over their spoken language and they may know about the pronunciation of similar sounds (e.g., /w/, /θ/, etc.) of their language. This may help them to distinguish the pronunciation of the listening tasks better. Thus, the comparison which is performed in this study is not actually comparing the effect of a completely acquired language on listening comprehension of English. In fact, it somehow showed the influence of the spoken form of one language on listening comprehension of another language.

One of the reasons for better performance of Arab bilinguals over monolinguals is that bilinguals in general have control over the system of two different languages

simultaneously and this could help them to make use of the listening strategies more effectively than monolinguals. However, Pardon, Knight, and Waxman (1986) found that bilingual students use fewer strategies and different types of listening strategies than English monolingual students listening in their mother tongue. Another reason could be due to the fact that bilinguals could have had the experience of using strategies previously to learn their second language. So this experience could have helped them to facilitate learning the third language. In contrast, monolinguals who do not use the right language learning strategies are less successful in understanding/comprehending the listening tasks because they do not process and analyze the information of the tasks through different techniques (e.g. Analyzing, Translation, Concentration, Question raising, Group listening, Summarizing, inferencing, etc.).

This study was only interested in examination of the effect of mono and bilingualism and the strategy use of the successful group in listening comprehension; other studies can go even further and investigate this issue in other areas of English.

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