

Effects of Bilingualism and Monolingualism on EFL Learners' Performance on Reading Comprehension Test

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Abstract-Bilingualism has always been a subject for scholars since societies contain people from different backgrounds. 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. The participants of this study were 26 bilingual (Arabic-Persian) students and 35 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. A Nelson proficiency test was used to determine the students' level of language proficiency, during the term reading strategies were taught to the students. The results showed that first, the use of strategies by bilinguals had significant effect on their better performance on reading comprehension, second; there was not a significant difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals regarding their performances on reading comprehension.

Keywords-Bilingualism; monolingualism; learners' performance; reading comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

One important issue in studying bilingualism is that bilinguals have better meta-linguistic awareness (Fromkin, Rodinan, & Hymes, 2003). According to Fromkin, et al. (2003), meta-linguistic awareness refers to a speaker's conscious awareness about language and the use of language. This is in contrast with linguistic knowledge, which is knowledge of language and is unconscious. Moreover, bilingual children have an earlier understanding of the arbitrary relationship between an object and its name. Also, they have sufficient meta-linguistic awareness to speak the contextually appropriate language. Whether they enjoy some cognitive or educational benefit from being bilingual seems to depend a great deal on extralinguistic factors such as social and economic situation and the relative prestige of the two languages (Fromkin, et al. 2003, p. 378).

In recent decades, the investigation of the strategies used by successful monolingual and bilingual readers has been the core of many studies (Garcia, 1999; Steinberg, Blinder & Chan, 1984). 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 (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1995, p. 90). Most of the studies in this area have focused on the comparison between bilinguals and monolinguals in

different views. Therefore the major goal of this study is to compare reading 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, & Schmidt, 2002, p. 410).

The importance of first learning strategy in first language for the purpose of transference has been documented by Robledo and Cortez (1983). They indicated that one reason why bilingual students reading achievement is lower than English-speaking monolinguals on standardized measures is due to lack of first language reading skills development prior to placement in and English academic setting. Much research points to the mitigating effect that reading strategies have on low level of second language oral proficiency. Good second-language readers use strategies (Block, 1986) even when they demonstrate equal levels of L2 language proficiency as less successful readers (Devine, 1988). Good readers, also display higher awareness of and monitoring abilities than less effective L2 readers (Carrel, 1989). These results have led to an opposing view that strategy use compensates for the lack of familiarity of linguistic structures, and that reading comprehension is more

loosely related to the student's reading ability in the first language (Devine, 1988).

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 learners in power and speed tests on reading comprehension. This is one of the initial reasons to carry out the present study. Accordingly, this study was to discover any difference between the male and female performance of Arab bilingual and monolingual students in reading comprehension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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).

Language plays a major role in thinking. It serves as a mediator for the connection of thoughts and ideas. The higher-order thought that results from the merge of these several individual thoughts allows a thinker to explore new areas of ideas (Anderson, 1995). The role of language is more than a passive host for the enhancement of thinking. It plays an active role in the production of metacognitive thinking. It creates a state of alertness for the thinker to check his or her productive thoughts. Thus, a lack of language proficiency can limit a thinker's awareness of contemplating new ideas that can emanate from his previous thoughts or monitor his thinking process. Pearson and Cummins (1981) also entertain the cognitive advantages of bi-lingual proficiency. He asserts that bilingual individuals who reach a minimum level of language proficiency in both first and second languages are capable to demonstrate great thinking skills.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 26 bilingual (Arabic-Persian) students and 35 monolingual students (Persian) majoring in English as a foreign language at Abadan University. These participants were selected out of 102 volunteers who majored in English. Since the intended level of students was intermediate, they were given a Nelson English Language Proficiency Tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976). After conducting the test, 26 bilinguals including (16 females and 10 males) and 35 monolinguals (including 20 females and 15 males) monolinguals whose scores were one standard deviation

above and one standard deviation below the mean were qualified for this project. The rationale behind this type of selection was that most poor readers could not use reading strategies. Furthermore; research findings have demonstrated that poor readers, unlike good readers, do not acquire reading strategies by themselves. Most of the advanced readers may not use reading strategies or have had mastered many of these strategies so far. Thus they may not need extra strategy training in reading comprehension (Carrel, 1998, pp. 2-3). The age of these students ranged from 19 to 36 years old in both genders.

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 reading 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 Kudar and Richardson (KR-21) method as ($r = .75$). 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 reading tests, one to measure participants' power and the other to measure their speed. Since the purpose of this study was to discover the effect of bilingualism and gender on the performance of students in reading comprehension, two modes of tests (power and speed) were used to avoid the side effect of time on the participants' performance. The power test consists of three reading texts taken from the book *Select Readings*, the intermediate level by Linda Lee and Errick Gunderson (2001).

3.3. Procedure

First, the researcher invited 102 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 chronbach alpha formula. Then after giving a proficiency test to the volunteers, 61 out of 102 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 26 bilinguals consisting of 16 female and 10 male students and 35 monolingual students including 25 femonolinguals and 10 monolinguals speaking Persian. Then the selected students (26 bilinguals and 35 monolinguals) were taught the reading strategies developed by the author with 72.5 coefficient of reliability.

In each session after strategies, a text was given to the students and they were asked to answer the reading comprehension questions. By doing this the researchers 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. The chosen texts did not need to be difficult, since the goal was to use strategies and saw the result of the given strategies on their reading comprehension. Due to the shortage of time these texts were also quite short so that students could finish them in the given time. During the term the students were practicing their reading strategies while doing their reading comprehension tasks.

Two types of reading tasks were given to students, one as an extensive reading task to prepare them for speed test; the other intensive reading task to prepare them for power test. At the end of the term both groups were given two tests; one elicited the students' power, the other determined the students speed in dealing with reading task which in turn is a sign of students' mental power in quick

analysis of reading task. Independent Samples *t*-test was applied to analyze the results obtained from the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals in reading comprehension.

4. RESULTS

As stated before, this study attempted to investigate whether there is any difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals in reading comprehension. The results obtained from analyzing the students' performance in terms of gender. Table 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics among both monolinguals and femonolinguals.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	1	Mean	SD	St d. Error Mean
Monolinguals	25	2	14.181	2.396
Bilinguals	26	81	16.675	3.859
Total	51	83		

In addition, another goal of this research was to see the significant difference between monolinguals and femonolinguals in reading comprehension

Table 2. Independent Samples *t*-test of mono and bilinguals in reading comprehension

Groups	Test	Mean	SD	Observed t	df	Level of significance	Critical t
Monolinguals	Reading	19.13	4.948	1.604	59	.114	2.074
Bilinguals	Comprehension						

According to Table 2, the mean of bilinguals' performance in speed test is again higher than that of monolinguals; however, this difference is not significant.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the results obtained from the two *t*-tests which were applied separately for the performance of Arab-bilinguals and monolinguals in power and speed tests, the first hypothesis was confirmed that means there is no significant difference between the performance of bilinguals and monolinguals regarding their performances on reading comprehension. Though, the mean scores show 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 reading performance (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, 1989-90). The lack of meaningful difference between the two groups' performance could be

due to a number of reasons. Firstly, it could be due to the fact that Arab-bilingualism may not have any direct effect on better comprehending of English texts. Since these two languages (Arabic and English) seem to have different structures and vocabularies, they are unlikely to have any direct mutual effect on one another. Another impotent point about our bilingual subjects is that they have only control over their spoken language and they may know only a little about the written form of their language. Thus, the comparison which is performed in this study is not actually comparing the effect of a completely acquired language on reading comprehension of English. In fact, it somehow shows the influence of the spoken form of one language on reading comprehension of another language. Besides, the type of Arabic enquired by our bilingual group is not considered a standard Arabic and it's full of Persian expressions, vocabularies, and even, some idioms and structures are mingled with their spoken language. Therefore, these bilinguals cannot be defined as real bilinguals who know two separate languages simultaneously.

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 reading strategies more effectively than monolinguals. However Pardon, Knight, and Waxman (1986) found that bilingual students use fewer strategies and different types of reading strategies than English monolingual students reading 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. Also, research on reading strategies indicates that monolingual English-speaking children have benefited from meta-cognitive strategy training. Mature readers (Plains, Car, & Brown, 1994) and female students (Knight, Pardon, & Waxman, 1986), for example, are more likely to use a variety of cognitive strategies.

This study investigated the role of all strategies in just one term in male and female students' reading comprehension and does not consider the other language skills (speaking, writing, and listening). The researchers can investigate the above mentioned statements in the future research. Future researches may be required to engage the language methodologies and language testing as the other pedagogical factors in the instruction and use of reading strategies and their influence on the promotion of reading comprehension.

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Vitae

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