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French–English Bilingualism as a Determinant of Learners’ General Language Competence In Some Selected Secondary Schools In Ibadan

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Abstract

The poor performance in English and French language in public examinations has called for concern among stakeholders in the field of language education in Nigeria. While students recorded low performance in English across the years, there is low turn-out of students in French language. Researchers have looked into the viability of bilingualism in English and French as a symbiotic measure to finding lasting solution to the problem of general language deficiency among Nigerian learners’ of English and French language respectively. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the complimentary role of English and French language in the attainment of general language competence of some bilingual students in Ibadan, Oyo state. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 156 students in four junior secondary schools in Ibadan. Three research questions were raised. Two instruments were used to collect data i.e. English language achievement test (ELAT) and French language achievement test (FLAT). The result shows that there was significant difference in the bilingualism in French and English language among the selected students in the secondary school in Ibadan ($t = 7.922$, $df = 155$, $P < 0.05$). There was no Gender difference in the attainment of Bilingualism in English and French from the selected secondary schools. ($t\text{-cal} = -279$ lesser than $t\text{-crit} = 1.95$, $P > 0.05$) There are significant relationships between students’ performance in English and French Language ($r = 0.363$, $P < 0.05$). It is therefore recommended that French and English should be taught concurrently to the students as their performance in French will aid their performance in English language.

Key-words: Bilingualism, English language, French language, General language competence.

Introduction

David Crystal (1997) estimates that two third of the world’s children grow up in a bilingual environment. Random house Kernerman College dictionary defines bilingualism as the ability to speak two languages or the use of two languages in a community. It has been established that a bilingual can communicate in two languages but with greater skills in one language, even people who are bilingual at birth. There are three categories of bilingualism i.e. simultaneous bilingual who acquires the two languages as first languages at birth. Receptive bilingual understands the two languages but could only express himself in one.

Sequential bilingual learns the second language after he or she has already acquired the first one.

There are three pertinent questions that are directly linked with the degree of bilingualism in an individual:

- i. When did the person learn the languages?
- ii. Do they have opportunities to listen, speak, read, and/or write in their languages?
- iii. In what contexts do they use their languages?

The number of people who use more than one language is greater than the number of people who use only one language world over. Bilingualism can exist in an individual or a community and in some instances; it could vary in an individual. The contact of two languages in an individual or community automatically results to bilingualism. Bilingualism is discernible in two categorical contexts i.e. the individual and the society. There is varying degree of competence in an individual that is bilingual.

Bilingual and trilingual are terms used to describe the situation whereby two or three languages are involved. The bilingual person should be able to communicate actively i.e. in speaking, writing, and signing or passively through listening and reading. The competence of the bilingual person cut across the four major language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The level of competence or proficiency required of an individual before he or she could be referred to as bilingual is still a subject of debate among language experts and linguists in general. There are two schools of thought on the subject of the level of competence required of a bilingual or multilingual. The first school of thought believes that bilinguals must be proficient in one language as they are in the other language and have enough knowledge and control in an equal magnitude in the two languages. The second school of thought has a divergent view on the conceptual framework of a bilingual person. They base their definition of a bilingual person on a mere use of the two languages involved. The flexibility in the use of the world bilingual opens the door of opportunity for large intakes into the world of bilinguals as people who can utter some phrases in some notable languages can specifically be referred to as bilinguals.

The work of Chomsky (1965) lends credibility to the ability of a child to learn a foreign language most especially when he or she is exposed to foreign language learning early enough because of the presence of the so-called hypothetical language acquisition device in the child. The device becomes obsolete as the child advances in age and grows into the puberty age. Thus, early bilingualism is advisable in foreign language learning situation if desired results would be realized. The correlation between the age of the child and the language acquisition cannot be undermined. The bilingual shows superiority over the monolingual because the first language has a positive influence on the learning of the second language. The only area where the bilingual may encounter problem is in the area of thinking

in the first language while trying to communicate in the target language. This could emanate in both written and oral expressions and this poses difficulty some times in discerning the line of thought of the learners of the second language.

Bilinguals who are proficient in two languages cannot exhibit balanced proficiency in the two languages. Therefore, multilingual competence can be varied in learners and can be classified into different classes. For example compound bilinguals see phrases and words as referring to the same concept. They are fluent in the two languages. Coordinate bilinguals however; see words and phrases as meaning different things. They are more dominant in the first language than in the second one and they use the first language acquired to think through the second language. They assume different personalities while speaking the two languages and their intonation and pronunciation deviate from the native-like pronunciation.

Research findings have shown that students who receive bilingual instruction perform better academically than their counterparts in the conventional group (Ramirez, 1992, Collier, 1992). They tend to exhibit more cognitive elasticity and ability to analyze abstract visual pattern. The brain of a multilingual speaker is organized differently from a monolingual speaker. This assertion is evident in the work of Katrin Amunts, a neuroscientist who studied the brain of a polyglot named "Emil Krebs" who mastered sixty eight languages. The neuroscientist further affirmed that the area of the brain responsible for language learning is differently organized.

In the linguistic situation in Nigeria, Yuka (2002) in the survey carried out on the language situation in Nigeria describes Nigeria as one of the twenty second most linguistically diverse countries in the world in terms of the number of languages. This is contained in ethnologue 12th edition. This is to lay credence to the fact that larger percentage of the Nigerian population are bilinguals there are about 510 languages co- existing with one another according to the 15th edition of the Ethnologue report.

In Nigeria plural linguistic context, English is considered the official language while French is the second official language. Speaking two languages is a great asset to the cognitive process. The brain of bilingual operates differently from the monolingual and it is of benefit to the mental development of the child. There are so many advantages accruable to the speakers of more than one language.

The functionality of the brain of bilingual is highly enhanced in the sense that it gives them the opportunity to recognize and negotiate meaning and communicates in different language systems. Learning a foreign language draws attention to the mechanics of language, grammar, conjugations and sentence structure. They are effective communicator, editor and writer. The bilinguals have a number of cognitive advantages over the monolinguals. These advantages include linguistic development, perception and intentional and inhibitory control. Bilinguals show significance advantages over the monolinguals in verbal and non-verbal tests that required more mental flexibility.

Bilinguals are able to distinguish and use different grammatical and syntactical structures. This helps them to gain understanding into the language structure. Bilinguals are in better position to detect grammatical or syntactical errors. The use of two languages helps in shaping the perception of the bilingual about the world around them unlike the monolingual who functions only in one language.

In a multilingual state like Nigeria just like many African countries, multilingualism is a rule rather than an exemption, English has emerged as the privileged language without which the unity of Nigeria as a nation is mostly improbable if not rightly impossible. Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon which arises as a result of language contact. It is a situation whereby two or more languages operate within the same context (MahFOURA, 2013).

Bilingual education involves teaching academic content in two languages in a native and secondary language with varying amount of each language used in accordance with the program model. Language competence or linguistic proficiency is the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. Fluency and language competence are generally recognized as being related. Language competence is a broad term which includes linguistic or grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic or socio-cultural competence and what might be called textual competence. The specific learning outcome under language competence deals with knowledge of the language and the ability to use that knowledge to interpret and produce meaningful texts appropriate to the situation in which they are used. Language competence is best developed in the context of activities or tasks where the language is used for real purposes in other words, in practical application.

The category of bilingualism is very broad which include those who are sophisticated speakers, readers and writers of two or more languages as well as those who have limited knowledge of a second language (L2). Bilingualism extends to both the individuals and societies that use two languages for example Canada is a bilingual country but there are monolinguals in this country. English as a second language (ESL refers to the process of producing bilinguals by teaching English as an L2 to learners in an English speaking context. The consequence of early bilingualism was considered to be dangerous, leading to confusion and leading to language disorder or delay. Early bilingualism brings cognitive advantages in the sense that it helps learners to understand the arbitrary nature of language systems and literacy systems. Factors that are said to influence second language learning are cognitive influences, motivational influences, social influences, and instruction. (Catharine & Margaret, 2003).

The bilingual brain has task switching capacities in the sense it can inhibit one language while using the other one. Research findings have shown that when a bilingual uses a language, the other one is active at the same time. Bilingual is associated with improved metalinguistic awareness (the ability to recognize language as a system that can be manipulated and explored, better memory, visual – spatial skills and creativity). The benefits

accruable to bilingual are both cognitive and neuro-linguistic in nature and it extends from early childhood to old age. The age of the bilingual involves itself in the processing information. The social benefit could also be imbibed in being bilingual. The bilingual could imbibe culture of the native language speakers through the exposure to a foreign language (Viorica. A & Anthony, S 2012)

The bilingual has the opportunity to focus on new information or vocabularies in the new language and strive to inhibit interference from the language they are already competent in. It has been observed that bilingual or multilingual have the advantage of learning a new language than the monolinguals learning the second language. The monolinguals are not skillful in inhibiting competing information (inhibitory mechanism).

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are:

1. To examine the complimentary role of English in inculcating general language competence among the learners.
2. To examine the extent to which the age of the learners determines the acquisition of the second language.
3. To determine the superiority of the multilingual over the monolingual in language leaning situation.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. Does bilingualism in French/English determine the students' general language competence?
2. Is there any gender difference in the attainment of bilingualism in English and French?
3. Is there any correlation between students' performance in English and French language achievement test?

Significance of the study

Findings from this study will contribute in no small measure to the development of foreign language education not only in Nigeria but across the globe. The concept of bilingualism and general decline in the attainment of language competence among the students is a global phenomenon. There is an urgent need to look into bilingualism as a viable instrument in re-invigorating the general language competence among the students so as to accelerate their academic performance through the viability of language proficiency. Therefore, this study will be of immense benefit to teachers of foreign language such as English and French, foreign language curriculum developers and the students learning English or French as foreign languages. The interaction of the two acquired languages could make or mar the students' general language competence.

Methodology

This study adopted descriptive design of survey type. All the junior secondary school students in public secondary schools in Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo state constituted the population of this study (There are five local government areas in Ibadan Municipality). A sample size of 156 students was drawn from the population. Simple random sampling technique was used to select a local government area in the capital city of Ibadan, Oyo State. Four junior secondary schools were selected using purposive sampling technique. These are the schools where French and English are offered simultaneously by the students. Some schools are not eligible because only English is offered but not French. The junior secondary school is used for this study because of the assumption that they must have offered English and French simultaneously for two consecutive years.

For the purpose of the present study, two instruments were used. viz. French language achievement test (FLAT) which was designed by the investigator based on the curriculum content of the junior secondary school II French. The instrument contains 20 multiple choice items which covered specific areas of French grammar and vocabularies. Section B contains 10 essay-type questions where the learners are required to fill the missing gaps.

The second instrument used was English language achievement test (ELAT) which was designed by one of the investigators who is an expert in English language teaching at the junior secondary school. The test is divided into two sections i.e. A&B. section contains 20 multiple choice items while section B contains 10 essay type questions designed based on the curriculum of junior secondary school English. The two instruments used for this study were validated by French language teachers and English language teachers who are practicing language teachers in their respective schools. The instruments were subjected to face and content validity where accuracy, clarity of language and coverage were keenly considered. After thorough examination by the experts the instruments were considered valid for the study. Kuder-Richardson measure of internal consistency was used to establish the reliability of the two tests i.e. FLAT & ELAT and this yielded an index of 0.56 and 0.65 respectively.

The two instruments i.e. French language achievement test (FLAT) and English Language achievement test (ELAT) were administered concurrently on the selected subjects under a thorough supervision by the language teachers. The students were allowed a duration of 30 minutes to react to the questions in the two tests. The invigilators adhered strictly to the time allowed so as to ascertain the discriminative index of the tests.

Results

This section presents the result on English–French Bilingualism as a determinant of students' general language competence in some selected secondary schools in Ibadan. Three research questions were raised. The data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, T-test and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis.

Research Questions

Research Question I: Does bilingualism in French/English determine the students' general language competence?

This was analyzed using Paired Sample t-test and the result is presented in the Table 2.1

Table 1 Showing the Summary of A Paired Sample t-Test Showing Difference In Bilingualism In French/English

Bilingualism	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std Error	df	T	Sig.
French	156	48.68	13.818	1.106	155	7.922	P<0.05
English	156	39.13	12.810	1.026			

Summary of analysis in Table 1 shows that there was significant difference in bilingualism in French and English language among selected students in some secondary schools in Ibadan. Since ($t = 7.922$, $df = 155$, $P < 0.05$). Based on the mean score, it was observed that students had higher level of competence in French language ($\bar{x} = 48.68$) than English Language with ($\bar{x} = 39.13$). Therefore, it can be concluded that, there was significant difference in bilingualism in French and English language among the selected students in some secondary schools in Ibadan as performance of students in French proved to be higher than English Language.

Research Question II: Is there any Gender difference in the attainment of Bilingualism in English and French?

Table 2 shows the t-test of gender attainment in English/French

Factors	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std Error	t. Cal	t.Crit	df	Sig(2 tail)
Bilingualism	Male	69	87.26	21.88	2.634	-	1.95	154	0.781
	Female	87	88.25	22.19	2.379	0.27			
		2							

The Table 2 shows that there is no Gender difference in the attainment of Bilingualism in English and French. It was observed that t- Calculated value is lesser than t-Critical values ($t\text{-cal} = -279$ lesser than $t\text{-crit} = 1.95$, $P > 0.05$). It is not significant, and it was concluded that, there was no Gender difference in the attainments of Bilingualism in English/French from the selected secondary schools.

Research Question III: Is there any correlation between students' performance in English and French Language achievement tests?

Table 3 Shows correlation of English and French Language

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	R	P	Sig
English	156	48.68	13.818	-	-	-
French	156	39.13	12.810	.363**	0.000	Sig.*

(Sig.*) Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows that there is a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. It reveals there are significant relationships between students' performance in English and French Language. French Language was significantly correlated with English Language at ($r= 0.363$, $P<.05$). Therefore, the table reveals that, performance in French Language positively correlate with performance in English Language; it implies that an increase in performance of students in French Language would definitely have impact on the increase in performance in English Language.

Discussion

The findings from research question two revealed that there was no Gender difference in the attainments of Bilingualism in English and French from the selected secondary schools. This submission contradicts the findings of Granewell (2000) who observed that there is a clear –cut difference in the brain function between male and female learners which has a bearing on the individual learning style which ranges from active learning style or reflective, visual or auditory, practical or theoretical. According to the researcher, she is of the view that women could learn through different means but men tend to be active learners, extremely visual and hardly lend themselves to learning through visual channels

The findings from research three revealed that there are significant relationships between students' performance in English and French Language. French Language was significantly correlated with English Language which implies that an increase in performance of students in French Language would definitely impact an increase in performance in English Language. The findings is in line with the submission of Ellen, (2008) who affirmed that the acquisition of literacy skills in the children depends on the relationship between the two languages and the level of proficiency in the second language The researcher further stated that children learning to read in two languages that share the same writing system i.e. (English and French) show accelerated progress in learning to read, children whose two languages are written in different systems e.g. English and Chinese show no special advantage but neither do they demonstrate any deficit relative to monolinguals.

The findings of (Ramirez, 1992 and Collier, 1992) also corroborate the findings, they are of the opinion that students who receive bilingual instruction perform better academically than their counterparts in the conventional group. Therefore, students should be encouraged to take to foreign languages that are similar in structure, sound system and orthography because the knowledge of one of the languages would play a complimentary role in developing linguistic competence in the other. The concept of transfer of learning would come into play in this regard because the learners have the ample opportunity to compare and

contrast and utilize the knowledge in one language to improve on the other especially if the two languages involved evolved from the same source i.e. the Germanic and the Romantic languages.

Conclusion

The concept of bilingualism as a determinant of general language competence among learners of French and English language in Nigeria has been our major concern in this research work. Looking critically at the Nigeria language policy, English and French language cannot be categorized in the same group in terms of their statuses in Nigeria. While English serves as the official language in Nigeria, French is the de-facto second official language in Nigeria. However, a good knowledge of the two languages is a good quality a learner should imbibe. We can deduce from our findings that French and English language play complementary role in improving the general language competence of the learners. Therefore, foreign language teachers should work in concert in order to alleviate the observed language deficiency in the learners which may be as a result of ineffective coordination of foreign language programme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The state government should encourage the teaching and learning of French language in schools. The students recorded higher performance in French compared to English Language. This will go along a way in helping the students to attain language competence in English as the two languages share certain affinities in common.
2. The state government should orchestrate gender balance in formulation and implementation of language policies. The age long belief that girls perform better than boys in language related programmes cannot be absolutely upheld because it was found out in this study that there was no gender difference in attainment of bilingualism in English and French.
3. There should be a synergy or collaboration between English and French teachers in terms of intellectual discourse and exchange of professional ideas. This will help the language teachers to experience cross fertilization of ideas in their respective fields of study.

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