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Do Bilingual Foreign Language Learners have a Unique Learning Profile? An Examination of their Learning Strategies, Motivation, and Achievement

Introduction

The work of educational researchers looking at foreign language learning takes into account many different factors that affect learners' motivation, learning strategies and achievement. One such factor is previous language experience, which may provide a unique advantage to learners. Students who have grown up bilingual represent a particular group of learners who may not have had experience with the particular target language that they are pursuing presently, but have had extensive experience in working in at least two different languages. This paper aims to explore the nature of these bilingual foreign language learners and examine the research concerning their learning profile, i.e., their learning strategies, motivation, and achievement, and how it may differ from their monolingual foreign language learner counterparts. Wharton (2000) expressed that this area of research is particularly important "because such a large percentage of the world's population is bilingual…. Experienced language learners (and "acquirers") probably have different attitudes to and beliefs about language learning and likely process a new language somewhat differently than monolinguals" (p. 236). Complications in examining this population are discussed and further research is proposed to examine these questions in more detail and gain a better understanding of the process of foreign language learning as a bilingual. Finally, instructional implications of this research are addressed.

Language Learning Strategy Use in Bilinguals – Is there a difference?

Language learning strategies have been examined as a source of information about how students go about learning in a certain discipline and how these strategies relate to their motivation and their achievement. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) highlighted

the importance of studying learning strategies because they represent one characteristic of the foreign language learner that may be teachable. Therefore, studying the factors that affect choice of language learning strategies and examining which learning strategies that successful learners use may inform teaching practices.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989) conducted a study looking at the language learning strategies that university students use as well as some of the factors that might affect learning strategy choice. The researchers used the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning, or SILL, and asked undergraduate students, who were studying a variety of foreign languages, to report how frequently they used a particular strategy. The language learning strategies examined on the SILL fall into six primary subgroups: (1) memory strategies, such as rhyming, grouping and using imagery, which help learners store and retrieve information; (2) cognitive strategies, such as summarizing, rehearsing and analyzing, which involve manipulating mental models of the information; (3) compensation strategies, such as improvising and using context to understand new words, which help learners in troubleshooting when something is not known; (4) metacognitive strategies, such as planning, goal-setting and monitoring errors, which aid learners in monitoring their progress; (5) affective strategies, such as self-encouragement, relaxation, and self-rewards, which allow learners to control emotions that result from language learning; and (6) social strategies, such as seeking out native speakers, asking questions and becoming culturally aware, which help learners interact with others in the target language (Wharton, 2000; Rhee, Fiori, Cortina, & Smith-Darden, 2004).

In the Oxford and Nyikos (1989) study, the results of a factor analysis suggested that the most used strategies by these university students were “formal rule-related

practice strategies," such as using rules and analyzing words, and the least used strategies were "functional practice strategies," such as attending foreign films and initiating conversation with native speakers (p. 293). The former are more cognitive strategies and the latter are more social strategies according to the initially SILL divisions. These results are particularly interesting in relation to this sample's prior experience with language learning. The make-up of the sample was ninety-five percent native English speakers and sixty-six percent had studied no foreign language prior other than the one they were currently studying at the university. Looking at these demographics, the sample seems to be especially inexperienced with dealing with languages other than English.

In contrast to the Oxford and Nyikos (1989) study, Wharton (2000) looked at language learning strategies used by bilingual foreign language learners. His sample consisted of university students in Singapore learning Japanese and French as foreign languages. The students in Wharton's study were all "natural" bilinguals, in that they had learned at least two languages during their childhood in Singapore, a country which has four official languages (p. 230). Wharton used the SILL as a measure of language learning strategy use, but also included a questionnaire asking about the students' language backgrounds and their self-rated proficiency in the language they were currently learning. Wharton considered previous language learning experience as one of the factors that might affect the choice and frequency of use of learning strategies.

One of the results of the Wharton (2000) study was that students used the different categories of strategies in the following order (most frequent to least frequent): social, compensation, metacognitive, cognitive, memory and affective. Therefore, these

bilingual students were most using the strategy that lends itself to interacting with native speakers and becoming more aware of the target language and culture. Wharton suggests that these students' increased use of social strategies might have resulted from their previous experience, and success, at learning a second language (p. 230). They might have already experienced how knowing two languages allows one to be a part of two different cultures; therefore, they may be more open to using social strategies as a way to gain access to both a third language and a third culture.

A comparison between the Oxford and Nyikos (1989) study and the Wharton (2000) study suggests that bilingual students are much more likely to use social strategies that stress cultural awareness than monolingual students, who use more cognitive learning strategies. However, this conclusion cannot be properly drawn across these two very different samples. One small study conducted by Thomas (1992) asked monolingual and bilingual foreign language learners to rank ten different language learning activities/strategies from most to least useful for developing communicative competence. The activity of "conversations" was ranked first by the bilingual students and eighth by the monolingual students, who ranked "error correction" as first (p. 540). Thomas also discussed this result in terms of the prior experience that bilinguals may have had acquiring, or learning, their second language in a bilingual home where conversations with relatives may have taught them a great deal about communicating in a second language; in contrast, monolingual foreign language learners have probably only experienced classroom-learning where error correction is much more common than conversation (p. 540).

Thus far, the research suggests that bilingual foreign language learners are placing more emphasis on social strategies. Wharton (2000) discusses the characteristics of a "good language learner," including being actively involved in learning and trying to find ways to practice the language and engage in conversation (p. 206). Thus far, bilingual learners seem to be following these lines; however, Wharton (2000) stresses that although learning strategies can influence achievement in language, there is not a single pattern of strategy use that defines a successful learner. Therefore, bilingual learners may represent a distinct population within foreign language learners, but not necessarily superior in their choice of strategies.

Language Learning Motivation in Bilinguals– Is there a difference?

The question of motivation in bilingual foreign language learners has not been extensively researched; however, there are some interesting relationships between motivation and learning strategy choice that may relate to bilingualism. Rhee et al. (2004) discuss the nature of integrative motivation and how it may represent a motivational construct that is unique to foreign language learning. The hypothesis of this study was that an integrative motivation, as determined by measures such as the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), would best predict the use of extracurricular activities and compensation as learning strategies, as determined by measures such as the SILL. The results suggested that having an integrative motivation, defined as an interest in learning a language as a way of immersing oneself in and identifying with the target culture, was best able to predict when students would use compensatory strategies (Rhee et al., pp. 5, 13). Intrinsic motivation, defined as a student's willingness and desire to take on academic challenges, and explore in order to

learn, was found to be the best predictor of students' use of extracurricular activities as a way to learn (pp. 3, 13).

While the nature of bilingual foreign language learners motivation has not been directly examined, it would be interesting to see whether it would fall in line with either the intrinsic or integrative motivations, considering that the bilingual learners in the Wharton (2000) sample were found to use social strategies, similar to the extracurricular activities, and compensation strategies the most. Further, the Oxford and Nyikos (1989) primarily monolingual sample were least likely to use "functional practice strategies" such as attending a film made in the target language. Therefore, there may be a dissociation between the two populations, bilingual and monolingual, and their primary motivations for foreign language study.

Finally, motivation has been discussed in terms of its predictive power for choice of learning strategies. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that motivation was one of the strongest predictors of increased strategy use. In relation to motivation, they argued, is the issue of whether students elected to take the foreign language course or were required to. In this sample, only thirty percent of the students had chosen to study the language as an elective. Those who had chosen to take the course used significantly more "functional practice strategies" than those who were taking it as a requirement (p. 296). These strategies, akin to social strategies, were used most by the sample in the Wharton (2000) study where every student was taking the course as an elective. Therefore, the apparent differences in the two populations in learning strategy choice may be more a function of whether they chose to take the course, or how motivated they were, as opposed to their being monolingual or bilingual. In turn, their motivation to take the course as an elective

might also have been affected by their previous language experience. Clearly, more research is necessary to determine the motivational profile for these two populations of foreign language learners.

Language Learning Achievement in Bilinguals: Is there an advantage?

There have been several studies looking at the actual language learning ability of bi- or multilingual foreign language learners as opposed to monolingual learners. Klein (1995) looked at the question of syntax acquisition from a Universal Grammar parameter-setting model of language acquisition. In this view, because all language learners are endowed with the same language acquisition device (LAD), multilinguals should not have an advantage over monolinguals. Nonetheless, the study, which looked at lexical acquisition and syntax acquisition in second language learners, found that multilingual participants showed greater knowledge than the monolinguals for both lexical verbs and their complementary prepositional constructions (Klein, p. 450). The author suggested that metalinguistic awareness might have contributed to the apparent multilingual advantage.

Metalinguistic awareness has been studied a great deal in bilingual children. Bialystok (1988) quotes Vygotsky who wrote in 1934, “Because bilingual children have the experience of two linguistic systems that label the same conceptual system, the arbitrary connection between forms and meanings is more readily apparent” (p. 561). The primary test of metalinguistic ability came from Piaget’s work in 1929; his sun/moon task attempted to assess exactly this understanding of the arbitrary mapping between word and referent that Vygotsky writes of (Bialystok, p. 562). In this task, the researcher first asks the child, “Suppose you were making up names for things, could you then call

the sun 'the moon' and the moon 'the sun'?" and then follows with "Now suppose that happened and everybody decided to call the sun 'the moon' and the moon 'the sun.' What would you call the thing in the sky when you go to bed at night?" (Bialystok, 1988, p. 562). Bialystok (1988) used this task to compare the responses of 6 ½ and 7-year-old children who were either monolingual or bilingual. The results clearly showed a bilingual advantage in that the bilingual group scored higher than the monolingual group for the sun/moon problem. One of the key questions in the research looking at achievement in foreign language learning is whether the advantages that bilinguals exhibit in childhood extend to acquisition of foreign languages when they are adults (Klein, 1995).

Thomas (1988) conducted a study comparing monolingual and bilingual college students in the United States who were learning French as a second and third language, respectively. She found that bilinguals performed significantly better than monolinguals on vocabulary and grammar tests. Further, when the students, who were in an elementary French class, wrote short compositions, the compositions written by the bilingual students were judged to be more comprehensible by native speakers than those written by monolingual students. These results suggest a strong advantage for bilingual students, which Thomas describes as "a sensitivity to language as a system which helps them perform better on those activities usually associated with formal language learning than monolinguals learning a foreign language for the first time" (p. 240).

While Thomas (1988) found an advantage for bilingual students, other researchers have not always found such a difference. One group of researchers, who were examining the question from an information-processing perspective, examined monolinguals' and multilinguals' ability to acquire an artificial grammar (Klein, 1995) They ultimately

found that multilinguals did not have a clear advantage in language learning. However, this research does not provide a very strong case for researchers concerned with actual learning that occurs within an educational setting. Examining bi- or multilinguals' ability at acquiring an artificial language is certainly an interesting theoretical question, but it ignores the context within which most learning, including their initial acquisition of two or more languages, occurs. Nonetheless, studies that take into account different learners' contexts also show varying evidence for a bilingual advantage in learning.

Magiste (1984) looked at English proficiency in immigrant 8th grade students in Sweden who were bilingual in Swedish and another language compared to monolingual Swedish-speaking students. She further divided the bilingual group into those students who always used Swedish at home, but who knew their first language passively and those students who actively used their first language everyday (p. 416). A comparison of scores on a standardized English test showed that those students in this sample who had passive knowledge of their first language performed better than both the monolingual Swedish students and the active bilingual students. Magiste explained these results in terms of the potential interference of using more than one language actively on the acquisition of a third language (p. 420). If students know a second language passively, then they may be optimizing their foreign language learning ability in the sense that they have the advantage of the enhanced metalinguistic without the disadvantage of two active languages interfering.

These results are particularly interesting in comparison to the Thomas (1988) study discussed above which also made a further distinction between bilinguals; she compared those who were instructed in their second language and those who were not.

The biliterate bilinguals, or those who had had at least two years of formal instruction in Spanish, performed better on a grammar test and produced fewer errors in their written compositions than monoliterate bilinguals, or those who had never had formal training in Spanish, and monolingual English speakers. Thomas argued that this distinction in whether the bilingual students were instructed in Spanish is important to their developing metalinguistic awareness and subsequently to their showing any advantage in foreign language achievement over monolingual students. Therefore, the "natural" bilingual who may have "acquired" two languages in the home would not develop this metalinguistic awareness to the same degree as the instructed bilinguals. The distinction that Magiste (1984) discusses which stresses that second language knowledge is most useful when it is passive and implicit contradicts the claims that Thomas (1988) makes regarding explicit training in the second language and its usefulness in learning a third language. The nature of metalinguistic awareness, or knowledge about a language, can be both explicit and implicit, which complicates the question of whether metalinguistic awareness is helpful in foreign language learning (Bialystok, 1979). These nuances for each set of learners make drawing a definitive conclusion about a bilingual advantage in achievement very difficult. Klein (1995) poses the ultimate question, "how much prior knowledge is necessary in order for any multilingual advantage to be manifest and under what conditions is such prior knowledge usually accessed?" (p. 428).

Future Research and Instructional Implications

The issues presented in this paper are clearly under-researched and need to be examined more closely to develop a complete theory of bilingual foreign language acquisition. Wharton (2000) suggests that future research that is conducted on foreign

language learning should not only report the previous language learning experience of participants, but also try to compare bilingual and monolingual students as separate groups in order to determine whether differences exist with regard to various aspects of learning (p. 236). Further, one limitation of the Wharton (2000) study was that scores from actual proficiency measures were not available; instead, researchers used self-rated proficiency levels to relate to the use of learning strategies. Actual achievement data would provide information about whether bilinguals' choice of learning strategies led to higher achievement.

As Oxford and Nyikos (1989) discussed, learning strategies are especially important to educational researchers because they may be "teachable" (p. 291). Therefore, if the bilingual language learners' choice of strategies is associated with higher achievement, perhaps this profile can inform teaching practices for all students. Similarly, the achievement advantage that has been discussed in terms of enhanced metalinguistic awareness in bilingual students could be passed on to all foreign language learners. This type of strategy-based instruction could be integrated into the classroom in different ways; one of the metacognitive strategies that Oxford purports is "finding out about language learning" (Brown, 2000, p. 133). Thus, the idea of analyzing language as a system might be integrated into a foreign language curriculum through a mini-linguistics lesson which teaches how languages are similar and dissimilar to each other and what properties can be compared across the learners' L1 and L2. Such a lesson might provide monolingual students with some experience in viewing English words as merely one way of expressing an idea so that they will feel more comfortable manipulating the new language that they learn.

Teachers can also use a bilingual students' explicit knowledge of L2 to aid in L3 acquisition when the languages are related; Thomas (1988) commented that this strategy would be particularly useful in her sample of English/Spanish bilingual students who were learning French. Therefore, there are many ways of incorporating these characteristics of the bilingual language learners experience into the standard language curriculum that might be useful to all learners. In order to establish what the benefits might be, further research is necessary to characterize the bilingual foreign language learner.

Conclusion

The nature of the bilingual foreign language learner is most likely as complicated and nuanced as each individual learner. However, just as educational researchers take into account other important factors that affect learning, such as age, sex, and motivation, previous language experience seems to be a particularly important factor in determining a language learner's profile. While each characteristic of the learner affects the other, with motivation affecting choice of learning strategies and these choices affecting achievement, each student has a cycle of learning (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). However, if an entire population of students, namely bilinguals, has a different cycle than monolingual students, it stands to be very important for their language learning success.

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