

The effects of bilingualism in the development of pre-reading skills

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Abstract

Learning to read is fundamental in the education of each and every child. This process has become increasingly more complex in recent years because many schools have decided to introduce bilingualism into the classroom. This article discusses the effects of cross-language transfer between a learner's mother tongue and a second language, in particular between Spanish and English, and how such effects may affect the reading development process in young learners.

Keywords: reading skills, bilingual learning

Título: Los efectos del bilingüismo en el desarrollo de las habilidades pre-lectoras.

Resumen

El aprendizaje de la lectura es fundamental en la educación de todos los niños. Hoy en día este proceso se ha complicado por la incorporación de la educación bilingüe en el aula. Este artículo trata de los efectos de la transferencia lingüística entre la lengua materna y una segunda lengua, en concreto entre castellano e inglés, y cómo estos efectos pueden afectar al proceso del desarrollo de la lectura en niños.

Palabras clave: habilidades lectoras, bilingüismo.

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The trend towards providing a bilingual education means teaching professionals face a challenge to ensure children receive a quality education both in their mother tongue (L1) and a second language (L2). As a result of this move towards bilingualism, teachers are faced with a whole new array of questions that need to be addressed adequately in the classroom.

Reading is an essential skill; considered to be one of the pillars of a learner's education. In the case of bilinguals, they must learn to read in two languages. Does bilingualism affect reading development? If so, does it enhance or adversely affect it? Is the reading process the same in young bilinguals and monolinguals, or are there significant differences?

CROSS-LANGUAGE TRANSFER

Historically, it was believed that L1 heavily influenced L2. This initial approach to cross-language transfer, called Contrastive Analysis, compared L1 and L2 in detail; similarities in both languages were thought to aid acquisition whereas differences produced the opposite effect. This approach was based on behaviourist theory; L1 influences were considered to be habits, which affected the acquisition of L2 structures. However, when researchers observed the typical errors made by L2 learners, they discovered that they followed a similar pattern to that of L1 learners; hence, they began to reject the existence of a cross-language transfer. Instead, it was assumed that a universal language development sequence existed in which L2 learners learnt the target language like L1 learners. These findings were also later questioned as investigators had only focused their research on morphological and syntactical aspects. When further research was conducted into other areas, such as vocabulary development, phonology and metalinguistic strategies, they showed L1 influences, reigniting curiosity in cross-language transfer once again (Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992).

Current thinking considers phonological awareness as a powerful predictor of later reading acquisition for L1 speakers. Furthermore, a growing body of research suggests that phonological awareness is transferable, that is, bilinguals do use their L1 knowledge, strategies and processes when they read in L2 (Chiappe, Siegal and Gottardo, 2002; Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992). This is useful because an understanding of the nature of cross-language transfer allows predictions to be made as to *"the conditions under which a bilingual will have difficulty when processing L2 (i.e. negative transfer) but also*

the conditions under which a bilingual will show facilitation (i.e. positive transfer). This information can help to structure instruction so it can build upon the strengths bilinguals already have in their L1" (Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992:3).

In order to gain further insight into what skills and knowledge are transferred, the following section examines some of the sub-components of the reading process (Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992).

Orthographic and phonological processing

In languages, like Spanish, with shallow orthographies, spelling patterns are pronounced in a constant way. When these patterns are read, the indirect route to accessing meaning is activated through the use of spelling-to-sound correspondence rules. There are some regular spelling patterns in English, too, for example the rime -est, best and rest, but many inconsistent patterns also exist, such as -int, pint and mint. In these situations, readers must be able to access meaning by using visual-orthographic information, or the direct route, without using any phonological information. Its pronunciation is then found by looking it up in the lexicon, which is basically a type of internal dictionary each person has. It would seem to be the case that the need to be able to effectively use both routes is greater in English than in Spanish; this therefore raises questions as to whether a pure phonics approach to teaching beginning reading skills in English is the most appropriate, or a mixture of phonics and visual skills is better for young Spanish/English bilinguals.

It has been suggested that word recognition varies according to the different orthographic systems - the deeper the orthography, the longer it takes for a reader to recognise the word, but Seidenburg (as cited by Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992:5) argues that this might not be the case with high frequency words. These words should be recognised rapidly because the level of exposure is such that it makes the process automatic. Any differences in recognition times should therefore only be detected in low frequency words. This point raises some interesting questions, such as, what would therefore be considered the minimum level of language exposure needed to ensure that these word recognition processing skills develop effectively in young bilinguals?

Morphological processing

Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt (1992) suggest that the morphemic complexity of words may affect cross-language transfer. There is a systematic relationship in English and Spanish between corresponding morphological suffixes, for example 'organisation' and 'organización'. They argue that with no or minimum instruction "*proficient L1 readers can map these suffixes with their corresponding forms in L2*" (Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992:9). Research is needed to see if this happens in the case for young children whose linguistic knowledge of L1 is still developing and, if so, to what extent.

Syntactic processing

According to Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt (1992) this aspect requires further research to discover to what extent the influence of L1 syntactic structures on L2 processing affect reading comprehension. They do point out that the effects of cross-language transfer of this sub-component are likely to be much less relevant in young bilingual emergent readers than in beginner adult L2 learners.

ENGLISH AND SPANISH

Languages are highly complex systems; each one is made up of sounds, patterns and rules, which govern the use of these sounds and patterns. English and Spanish are no exception. Studies conducted into the development of phonological awareness in languages other than English have consistently shown that "*the specifics of phonological awareness skills vary depending on the more salient phonological aspects of a language*" (Stewart, 2004:34). This means both native English and Spanish speakers will show strengths in certain phonological awareness skills relating to their L1 characteristics. As McKay (2012) confirms, there are phonological differences between English and Spanish with regards to stress and rhythm, syllable shape, quantity of phonemes, and the acoustical quality of some shared phonemes.

Spanish is a syllable-timed language, meaning it has equally-timed syllables and a less complex syllable structure, whereas English is a stress-timed language, which has equally timed interstress intervals. Speech rhythm does not normally require explicit instruction rather it is passively acquired by listening to the target language in context. The most frequently occurring canonical syllable shape in English is consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC), for example 'dog'. The concept of onset-rime assumes this type of syllable shape, hence English speakers show a sensitivity to onset and rime, which speakers of other languages may not have (McKay, 2012). Spanish words, on the other hand, tend to have more syllables in them and the canonical syllable shape is consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (CVCV). Furthermore, most

syllables in Spanish end in a vowel sound whereas English uses a variety of final consonant sounds. Given that Spanish is syllable-timed, its syllables are more uniform and, hence, Spanish speakers can identify them more easily. This would therefore suggest that it is a more important linguistic unit for Spanish speakers than English natives (McKay, 2012).

Despite these differences due to the salient features of each L1 language, McKay (2012) argues that, even though research into phonological awareness in young bilingual learners is still in its infancy, it appears to support a similar pattern of phonological awareness acquisition for English/Spanish learners along the continuum proposed by Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan (2008) whereby development progresses from large to successively smaller units of sound (word awareness, syllable awareness, onset-rime awareness and phonemic awareness).

Brice and Brice (2009:10) believe *"a relationship between Spanish and English phonological or phonemic awareness seems to play a vital role in beginning reading development in English. As a result, differences between Spanish and English may cause difficulties for young children in the perception and discrimination of phonemes necessary for phonological awareness and beginning reading. Therefore a Spanish speaker learning English will often fail to identify [a] phoneme and may encounter difficulty pronouncing the sound."* These authors tested phoneme and grapheme identification abilities in 5 and 6 year olds attending a school in Florida, United States; some were native English speakers whereas others spoke Spanish as their L1. Their findings indicated an achievement gap between monolingual and bilingual students' ability to identify phonemes and graphemes in English. They argue that *"it is still imperative that early reading intervention target phoneme and grapheme identification at this grade level in an attempt to diminish the apparent early gap"* (Brice and Brice, 2009:21) especially given the fact that as bilingual students' language levels increase, the possibility for greater phonemic and language interference will also increase as a result.

Research conducted by Durgunoglu, Nagy and Hancin-Bhatt (as cited by Lesaux and Siegel, 2003:1005) supports Brice and Brice's (2009) findings as to the presence of cross-language transfer even when phonological skills are still developing due to the fact that they *"found that Spanish word recognition and Spanish phonological awareness were better predictors of performance on English pseudoword and word reading tests than were English and Spanish oral proficiency and English word recognition."* Furthermore, Cisero and Royer (as cited by Lesaux and Siegel, 2003:1005) concluded in their research *"that accuracy on phoneme detection in Spanish was a significant predictor of performance on a similar task in English."*

In order to fully understand the impact of cross-language transfer on young bilingual learners' L2 development more research is required (Stewart, 2004). *"Topics that require further investigation include the age, the conditions, and the extent to which young bilingual children are conscious of cross-linguistic transfer and can skilfully and purposefully transfer knowledge and skills from reading in one language to another"* (Earnest, 2001: 233).

A READING OR A LANGUAGE PROBLEM?

The reading development process is not without its problems. In the case of bilinguals, teachers need to be clear as to whether the difficulties are due to language or reading problems. If reading abilities are transferable, a proficient L1 reader will most likely become a proficient L2 reader. However, if L2 reading problems occur due to lack of L2 knowledge, this would indicate a language problem. Nowadays, it is believed L2 learners need to achieve a threshold level of L2 linguistic knowledge before a transfer of L1 skills and knowledge takes place, and, in turn, the amount transferred depends upon L1 reading proficiency level (Durgunoglu and Hancin-Bhatt, 1992).

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