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The Relationship between Language Proficiency, Language Dominance and Performance in Language Studies.

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between language proficiency, language dominance and performance in language studies. The aim of the study is to investigate student's poor performance in English language. Participants were seventy-seven (77) comprising (20) male and (57) female students of D S Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic, Itori-Eruku, Ogun State; who were randomly selected among the population of students. Their ages ranged between 18 to 32 years. A cross sectional design was adopted. Two instruments were used for data collection. Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) (Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushanskaya, 2007) and Bilingual Dominance scale (Dunn & Fox Tree, 2009). Finding on language dominance indicated that majority of students use Yoruba language more than English language in their daily communications and interactions. The implication of this that their linguistic competence in L2 would be affected significantly. This could be a plausible explanation for poor performance of students in English language. It is recommended that student be encourage to use English language at home and varied settings in order to improve their mastery of the language.

Keywords: *English language, language dominance, language proficiency, performance*

Introduction

Admittedly, the mastery of any known human language particularly the second language (L2) is influenced by many factors- social, cognitive and learning environment. Acquisition of language and language use is complex and dynamic given that it involves information processing, learning of the basic rules that govern the use of the language, forming and/or organisation words in sentences and many more. English as a second language is viewed by many learners most especially bilinguals as a necessary devil one need to cope with. Bilinguals are individuals who use two languages in everyday communication. De Bot and Kroll (2002) as cited in Lim, Liow, and Chan (2008) states "that a bilingual is anyone who can communicate in two languages by speaking, writing, listening, or reading,

regardless of whether proficiency is nativelike". Certainly, bilinguals often use their indigenous language/ mother tongue (L1) in everyday communication more than the second language (L2). Of course, English language is the lingua franca of Nigeria, that is, the official language for communication in this multi-cultural, ethnic and religious nation. A lot of importance is attached to English language when juxtaposed with other languages in this part of the world. It is a prerequisite for admission into virtually all tertiary institutions in the country. However, a cursory look at students' overall performance in language studies suggests that a lot need to be understood regarding the level of proficiency of English language learners. Some of the problems associated with the use of English in Nigerian schools stems from linguistic interference which is the conflict between the learner's mother tongue and second language. Lack of motivation is another factor among many more.

The Meeting Points Between Language Acquisition, Language Dominance and Language Proficiency

Children acquire their first language when they consistently interact and explore their environment especially with the older ones. It is needful to communicate and interact with members of the same socio-cultural background in order to acquire linguistic competence in one's mother tongue. Socio-cultural interaction and communication is needful since it evidently clear fluent language is connected to culture. Several theories have been put forward in the course of understanding language acquisition in children. One of such theories is the innate theory which reinforces Universal Grammar (UG) by Chomsky. Pinker 1994 as cited in Aljoundi, 2014, p.1) asserts that language is an innate capacity and that a child's brain contains a special language mechanism and is referred to as the language acquisition device (LAD). The theory argues that children are able to learn language without stress since there exists a mechanism that aids such in them from birth.

Acquiring language in early childhood is with little or no stress for children from the above view explained. It is either the community through the older generation triggers the mechanism in the child with the linguistic item or the child observes his environment and engages in gestures, facial express and so on. This does not take the case whom acquiring second language which is the foreign language L2. When learning a foreign language, students do not often get to experience the same conducive environment they had during the acquisition of their mother tongue especially when they are within their socio-cultural environment. Students who are not exposed to second language learning environment have

the challenge of active engagement and rich interactive communication that is able to aid quick learning. When a learning environment does not provide the student with the ability to interact and relate with linguistic items in the foreign language, acquisition in such a situation would not be completed. Classroom learning environment may differ from everyday use of language on the street.

According to Lim et al (2008 p. 2) language dominance is easily confused with language proficiency. Treffers-Daller (2019) opines that language dominance can be seen in terms of language use which concerns, the frequency in the use of the languages by bilinguals and how these are spread across domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Birdsong(2006b) suggests that dominance, in psycholinguistic terms, usually indicates a difference in processing ability between L1 and L2, whereas proficiency is viewed in terms of the mastery of syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation of a language. Even though “levels of proficiency and degrees of dominance tend to correlate” (Birdsong, 2006b, p. 47), bilinguals can have almost nativelylike proficiency in both languages but still consider one language to be better than the other. Alternatively, they may be dominant in one language (L1 or L2) but not necessarily be highly proficient in that language.

Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in Relation to Linguistic Competence

Aikabeli (2014 p. 34) refers to code as language or a set of rules of a language. He states that code-mixing is when language mixes at word level and code-switching is the shift from one language to another. Generally, students code-switch and code-mix at different levels of communication and for different reasons. For any individual to code-switch or code-mix, such individual must have the capacity to communicate with the language with which he communicates. Code-mixing occurs when the speaker introduces another language (preferably his mother tongue) to the language of communication, and when he code-switches, he completely changes the language of communication from one to another. The implication of this is that students often time code-mix when speaking and /or interacting but find it challenging to do same in writing. Obviously, this suggest that either they are not proficient in the second language (L2) or the mother tongue (L1) is the dominant language. Several reasons can be attributed to the use of code-switching or code-mixing in the course of communication. Some of these are justifiable while some are seen as not too good for students. When students code-switch, it is said to be as a result of the gap in their linguistic competence. When students lack proficiency in a particular language or not adequately

equipped linguistically, their overall performance in the language would be impaired. Be that as it may, Meyerhoff (2006 p. 115-116) writes that people who speak more than one language or who command over more than one variety of any language are generally very sensitive to the differences in the (varieties of the) language(s) they use and they are equally aware that in some contexts, one variety would serve their needs better than the another.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- a) Determine the relationship between language dominance and language proficiency among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State, Nigeria;
- b) Determine the relationship between age of acquisition of language and language proficiency among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State, Nigeria

Students' academic performance in language studies call for concern. Despite all efforts by stakeholders in the educational sector (teachers, parents and even learners), it appears education generally is on the decline particularly among learners of English language. To the best knowledge of the researchers, the relationship between language dominance, language proficiency and performance in language studies is not well understood among a population of Nigerian students. Studies conducted in Nigeria did not investigate this. Hence, there is a need to build on existing literature and fill this gap in knowledge in this current study. It was hypothesized that age of acquisition of language would be related to language proficiency in L2 among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State, Nigeria. Given the evidence that suggests that language dominance is a reflection of language use and proficiency, it was expected that students whose language of dominance is L1 would differ from those whose is L2 in language proficiency.

Hypotheses

1. L1 dominance would differ from L2 in relation to proficiency in L2 among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State
2. Proficiency in L2 would differ from L1 in relation to age of acquisition of the language among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State

Method

Participants

Seventy-seven participants comprising (20) males and (57) females participated in the study. The participants were drawn from a population of students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State, Nigeria. The students were randomly selected. The participants were selected using convenient sampling technique. The research which has its core aim at the relationship between language proficiency, language dominance and performance in language studies had the age of the participants ranging from 18 to 35 years.

Instruments

The measures employed in this study are: 1). the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) is a self-reported scores on the speaking dimension represented L1 and L2 proficiency levels. The measure utilized a Likert-type scale which ranged from 0-10 (none- perfect), however only scores between '2' (low) and '10' (perfect) were used to differentiate bilingual individuals with 'high' and 'low' L2 proficiency. These respondents were dichotomized into two 'proficient' and 'non-proficient' groups using a cut-off score of '6' (slightly more than adequate). The second measure adopted is the twelve Bilingual Dominance Scale. It is a 12 item scale that yields a language dominance score. Items on the scale includes: At what age did you feel comfortable speaking this language? , Which language do you predominately use at home?

Procedure

All students who were able to provide responses in English language within the sampled scope participated in the survey, while those that didn't agree to sign the consent form were excluded from the study. Respondents were informed that their answers to the questions would be kept confidential. The study measures were administered to the participants who consented to participate in the study. The majority of the participants were able to complete the measures without the help of the researchers but some were assisted with reading out and explaining the instructions of the measures before they completed the measures.

Design

This study is a cross-sectional design in which students who consented to be part of the study underwent a single phase assessment. Measures employed in the study were

completed by participants. Given that the current research is exploratory in nature, the design still allowed for quantitative analyses necessary to inform more hypothetico-deductive in future research.

Results

Result of the descriptive statistic indicated that 26% were male and 74% were female. 61 participants age ranged between 18-22 were; 15 for 23-27 years and only 1 participant age ranged between 28-32 years. Regarding the level of education, eighty-three percent (83%) of the sample were in Ordinary National Diploma (OND) and seventeen percent (17%) were in Higher National Diploma (HND). The participants were predominantly Christians that is 62 in total yielding (81%), and 15 respondents i.e. 19% were Islam. Ninety-nine percent 99% were single while only 1 participant indicated married. Descriptive result also indicated that majority of the participants did not feel comfortable speaking English language. 14% had English language as their dominance language while 86% reported Yoruba as their language of dominance. Furthermore, participants who reported age of acquisition were between 0-5 years in L1 use were low in proficiency in the L2.

Discussion

The hypothesis that L1 dominance would differ from L2 in relation to proficiency in L2 among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State was supported as majority of respondents indicated Yoruba as their dominant language. This result indicates that participants use their L1 predominantly at home and varied setting including academic environment.

Regarding the second hypothesis that states that proficiency in L2 would differ from L1 in relation to age of acquisition of the language among students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State. Result indicated that proficiency (in speaking, reading, and writing in L2) was low for those whose language of dominance was Yoruba and those whose language of dominance was English had high proficiency scores. This implies that those with high proficiency in L2 interacted more with friends and family, watched TV programmes, listened more to radio/music etc. using English language than those with low proficiency score (Yoruba dominant). The findings of this study need to be replicated before any firm conclusions can be made about the results. In addition, the small sample size and non-randomization of the sample limit the generalizations that could be made from the study.

Conclusion

This study has been able to examine the relationship between language dominance, and language proficiency among the students of DS Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic Itori-Eruku, Ogun State. It is evidently clear that students' performance in language studies is nothing to write home about. Of course, more need to be understood regarding the acquisition and processing of language, its use and number of year/time of exposure to the language in relation to dominance and proficiency. It is recommended that students be encouraged to use English language at home and varied settings in order to improve their mastery of the language particularly in reading, speaking and writing. Future research need be conducted to investigate if results will be consistent with other participants from different institutions of higher learning (colleges of education and universities) who have their L1 quite different from the one used in this study.

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