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Students Attending a Bilingual Primary School: A Record of a Language Biography

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to conduct a needs analysis project for students attending the bilingual primary school (Greek-Albanian) of Korca in Albania. In this school, a minimum of 8 years of bilingual instruction is provided, starting at kindergarten. A number of 120 bilingual students attending the 5th and 6th grade, aged 11-12 years participated in the study. A ‘plurilingual biography’ instrument, which consisted of 30 questions, was designed and administered to these primary school students. The findings indicated that the students’ major reason for attending the bilingual school was the development of L2 competencies needed for training, employment, cultural exchange and personal fulfillment.

Keywords: Bilingualism, L2 acquisition, students’ needs, primary school;

1. Introduction

Bilingual and multilingual education are referred to as the use of two or more languages as media of instruction (UNESCO, 2008). They have never been treated exclusively as a linguistic issue while they have emerged to address profound educational, cultural, and political injustices (Akkari, 1998) and are concerned with issues of heritage, culture, assimilation, and quality of life (Moses, 2000).

It is considered that in regions where the language of the learners is not the official or national language, bilingual and multilingual education can promote mother tongue instruction while allowing for the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country or the world at the same time. This additive approach to bilingualism is different from the so called subtractive bilingualism which aims to move children on to a second language as a language of instruction (Moses, 2000). Nevertheless, it is critical to distinguish among children who are members of a minority ethno linguistic group (minority language children) and a majority ethno linguistic group (majority language children) and among those within each group who are learning bilingually from infancy versus those who have learned a single mother tongue and are learning a second or additional language later in childhood.

Moreover, since language is such a part of culture, the use or loss of a native language in favor of a dominant language represents an aspect of self-identity for individuals that may have affective and psychological implications.

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for them as they acculturate to their new society. Additive bilingual and dual language education programs have the potential to adjust this process so that students do not end up suffering from “that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds and, perhaps more significantly, of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced incorporation” (Flores & Yudice, 1997)

Bilingual education is considered an essential part in fostering students’ authentic cultural identities and expanding their social “contexts of choice” (Kymlicka, 1991), while they also support the development of students’ self-determination and facilitate the students to gain access to what Delpit (1993) calls the “culture of power” without harming their personal and cultural identities.

1.1. Approaches to bilingual education

Bilingual and multilingual programs are being implemented in various countries around the globe while theoretical understandings about bi/multilingual acquisition, along with different goals for children’s language development, have provided the rationales to develop and test a range of language-in-education models (Ball, 2010 p.18). However, according to Benson (2009) not all approaches are considered as bilingual education which is the case of submersion and immersion since the former completely ignores the children’s first languages, and the latter which may be monolingual, and involves using a language which the children do not speak at home.

In particular among the prominent bilingual education models are: Two-way bilingual education, that employs two languages as media of instruction, in which minority and majority language children are taught in both minority and majority languages; This two-way immersion program (TWI), presents an instructional approach integrating the languages of both the minority and majority students for most of the day. Within TWI programs, native speakers tend to outperform second-language learners (Howard, et al., 2003). Additionally, students rated as balanced bilinguals with high levels of proficiency in both languages tend to outperform other students, perhaps lending support to Cummins’ threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 1991), which states that high levels of bilingualism are required before cognitive benefits can be attained (Lindholm-Leary, 2008). Areas of great interest identified include academic achievement, language and literacy outcomes of TWI students while a fair amount of research has been dedicated to these topics (Howard et al., 2003). Mother tongue-based bilingual education, in which L1 is used as the primary medium of instruction for the whole of primary school, while L2 is introduced as a subject of study in itself to prepare students for eventual transition to some academic subjects in L2. Transitional bilingual education in which the objective set involves a planned transition from one language of instruction to another. Maintenance bilingual education in which after L2 has been introduced, both (or all) chosen languages are media of instruction. L1 instruction continues, often as a subject of study, to ensure ongoing support for children to become academically proficient in L1. Language maintenance bilingual education, strives to achieve fluent bilingualism and biliteracy as well as academic excellence.

Recent studies, dealing with language maintenance and bilingual students, have examined specific aspects of language proficiency and usage for Spanish-speaking children attending a bilingual preschool (MacGregor-Mendoza, 1999; Rodríguez, Díaz, Duran, & Espinosa, 1995). On his part, Krashen (1996) pointed out several components of successful bilingual education: (1) comprehensible input in L2; (2) subject matter knowledge from classes taught in the first language; (3) continued development of the first language, for job-related and cognitive advantages; and (4) reading in both languages.

2. The study

The purpose of the present study was to conduct a needs analysis project for students attending the bilingual primary school (Greek-Albanian) of Korca in Albania. In this school, a minimum of 8 years of bilingual instruction is provided, starting at kindergarten. It aimed at:

a. exploring the students’ motives for attending the bilingual school;

b. recording their stances towards the Greek as a second language (L2) and Greek culture;

c. eliciting their preferences for aspects of language learning;
d. recording the language difficulties they encountered;
e. revealing their needs for language skills development in Greek (L2).

2.1. The research context

The primary school of Korçe “Homer” is a bilingual school in which the majority language is Albanian while the second language is Greek. It could be classified into Transitional bilingual education with the Greek language being present on conditions in the school program since, it is used as a language for teaching subjects which are of minor significance. In particular, the following subjects are taught in the Greek language: the Greek Language, Environmental Education, Arts, Music and Physical Education while the teaching of English starts from the third grade onwards. On the contrary, the subjects taught in Albanian include: Mathematics, Science, Chemistry, Biology, History and Geography. More specifically at the private school ‘Homer’ in Korça, the curriculum for first grade of primary education includes 14 hours of tuition of school subjects in the Albanian language and 8 hours in Greek. From the third to the fifth grade the tuition in Albanian takes place for 16 hours while in the sixth grade for 19 hours, seventh grade for 21 hours, eighth grade for 22 hours and ninth grade for 23 hours. On the same line, from the third to the seventh grade, the classes taught in Greek take place for 9 hours per week, while at the eighth and ninth grade for 8 and 7 hours respectively. As a consequence, the subjects taught in Greek reflect 26 per cent of the courses. The teaching staff comprises 23 Albanian-speaking teachers and 18 Greek teachers, including the director of the school, all of which are on detachment.

2.2. The sample

A number of 122 bilingual students (61 boys and 62 girls) attending the 5th and 6th grade of primary school, aged 11-12 years participated in the study. All children spoke Albanian and Greek, with 91% of the children speaking Albanian at home (mother language) and 31.1% speaking both Albanian and Greek, since they are members of a minority ethnolinguistic group with Greek as a minority language. Regarding birthplace 55.7% were born in Albania while the remaining were born in Greece from immigrant parents and returned back to Albania.

3. The findings

A ‘plurilingual biography’ instrument, which consisted of 30 questions, was designed and administered to these primary school students, which was organized into five major areas: a) students’ bilingual and bicultural profile, b) students’ reasons for attending the bilingual school, c) students’ difficulties in learning Greek, d) preferences for aspects of language learning.

For the analysis of the data we used SPSS 19.0. For each individual question descriptive analysis was perform calculating the frequency (in percentage) of the students’ responses. Moreover, cross-tabulation and chi-squares were calculated for gender, birthplace and language spoken at home.

Regarding the first question reasons for learning Greek, the majority of the students’ declared that it was their desire to learn Greek because either they like it (82.8%) or they regard Greek as a ‘useful’ language (82%). On the second set of questions related to students’ difficulties in learning Greek as a second language, more than half the children encountered minimal difficulties in listening comprehension and speaking, since only 11.7% of them declared they encounter difficulties in those areas and more than half of the students (65%) encountered great difficulties in writing and vocabulary acquisition. In this set of questions most difficulties as reported by the students involved ‘listening and understanding the lyrics of Greek songs’ (14.3%) and the least difficulties were reported in ‘learning Greek grammar’ (4.1%). On the third set of questions regarding students’ difficulties in reading in Greek, the children reported difficulties in all aspects of reading including reading comprehension (63.4%), scanning (61.3%), vocabulary (61.3%), pronunciation (63.4%), collaboration with peers on reading assignments. The forth set of questions investigated students’ possible difficulties in writing, 68%-77% of the students reported
difficulties in writing, including the process of writing, grammar, syntax, finding correct vocabulary and collaborating with peers on assignments that require writing. The least difficulties were recorded in the final editing of a text (13.2%).

Concerning their preferences for aspects of Greek language learning, the most popular answers were related to ‘team working’ (61.5%) and the ‘usage of visual teaching aids’ (59.8%). Moreover the least frequent response was to attend ‘extra grammar classes’ (48.4%).

Finally regarding bilingual students’ background knowledge on the Greek culture, most of the students reported ‘knowing about Greek monuments’ (80.3%), ‘history’ (77.9%), ‘mythology’ (85.2%), ‘national celebrations’ (79.5%), ‘songs’ (93.4) and ‘food’ (85.2%). In addition 97.5% of the students expressed their desire to ‘visit a Greek school’ for different reasons with the most popular choice being to ‘visit museums and monuments’ (86.1%) and the least popular choice but still highly reported to ‘make new Greek friends’ (69.8%).

To compare frequencies on the sets of questions in relation to gender, birthplace and spoken language at home we run chi-squares. There were no differences in the students’ responses in relation to birthplace and spoken language at home. The following differences in relation to gender were recorded: Girls reported a higher degree of preference for learning Greek, as they like the Greek language, compared to boys $[\chi^2=4.659, df=1, p<.05]$. In addition, boys reported more often that listening and understanding the lyrics of Greek songs was more challenging $[\chi^2=8.640, df=3, p<.05]$ and that they would like to have more team-work in the Greek language teaching classes $[\chi^2=4.534, df=1, p<.05]$. However, girls reported higher preference for the use of audio-visual aids in Greek language classroom $[\chi^2=10.479, df=1, p<.01]$.  

Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicated that the students’ major reason for attending the bilingual school was the development of L2 competencies needed for training, employment, cultural exchange and personal fulfillment. Regardless of the children's being members of a minority or majority ethnolinguistic group, their social or cultural background, their migrant background, their language aptitude, a positive attitude towards the Greek language and culture was identified. Moreover, it was indicated that providing early opportunities for contact and interaction in L2 results in improved opportunities for language learning. In other words, second language practices require greater attention and place more demands upon language teachers. L2 should aid communication and students are encouraged to express themselves in a variety of ways to a variety of audiences using the skills acquired. In addition, it was reported that the students faced difficulties in the productive skills, particularly in ‘writing texts in Greek’ and ‘interacting with native speakers’ while they opted for naturalistic learning, authentic communication and multisensory and multimodal learning environment. In a bilingual context, where the basic objective is a planned transition from one language (L1) of instruction to another (L2), teachers should: a) provide a learning environment for learning L2, as well as for learning different contents, b) provide rich input, c) foster multisensory learning by using a a variety of different materials and visual aids, such as pictures, flash cards, books, videos and, above all, authentic objects, d) raise bicultural awareness, e) offer a wide variety of meaningful activities for children using a wide variety of language.

References


