Being a Bi/Multilingual Has Advantages for Further Language Acquisition? A Comparison Between Monolingual and Bi/Multilingual Students in the EFL Classroom in Norway.

Research question

How does being a bi/multilingual student affect EFL classroom performance?

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Abstract

Bi/multilingualism is on the rise. This resulted in an increase in research that focused on bi/multilingual students in recent years. Many researchers claim that being bi/multilingual gives bi/multilingual students certain linguistic advantages over their monolingual peers (Jessner, 2008; Keshavarz & Astaneh, 2010, Clyne et al., 2004; Cummins, 2001). This paper examines the relevant literature and studies some of the effects of being a bi/multilingual student in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom. Through the lens of the available literature, and qualitatively analyzing data collected in a Norwegian school with one of the highest numbers of multinational students in its district, this paper tries to tackle the question “how does being a bi/multilingual student affect EFL classroom performance?”. The findings show that bi/multilingual students do have an advantage on their peers when it comes to further language acquisition. Bi/multilingual students outperform their monolingual peers in several areas in the EFL classroom, while some are faced with certain challenges.

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Introduction

In the world of today, many are born to parents who hold different nationalities and speak different native languages. This has led to a boom in the numbers of students who start school already capable of speaking two languages, sometimes even more. Many researchers have taken a special interest in these students. In many cases, the researchers concludes that bi/multilingual students have an edge over their monolingual peers when it comes to acquiring new languages (Jessner, 2008; Peal & Lambert, 1962). Keshavarz & Astaneh (2010) go as far as to claim that bi/multilingual students have "superior metalinguistic skills" (Keshavarz & Astaneh, 2010, p.296). Meier (2014) justifies their superiority by proposing that bi/multilingual "learners have linguistic knowledge and experiences that can be activated for language learning and that learners can draw on their wider linguistic repertoires for learning" (Meier, 2014, p. 134).

Norway has also experienced an increase in the number of bi/multilingual students in its schooling system. By the end of 2016, 16% of students in the age group of 6 to 15 years old had immigration backgrounds, a jump of about 7% since the year of 2008 (ssb.no, 2017). In other words, there is a large number of students who start going through the Norwegian schooling system already capable of speaking *at least* one additional language compared to their monolingual peers who only speak one, Norwegian. Typically, the children who speak a different language at home, acquire the Norwegian language by attending Norwegian schools, making them bi/multilinguals in the process. This provides the opportunity to test whether these claims of heightened linguistic skills have any truth behind them. By comparing the EFL classroom performance of the bi/multilingual students to their monolingual peers, this paper will try to answer the question:

How does being a bi/multilingual student affect EFL classroom performance?

Literature review

The following section is dedicated to exploring whether bi/multilinguals have an advantage and some of the possible reasons behind this supposed advantage.

The bi/multilingual advantage?

The claim that bi/multilinguals are somehow advantaged by virtue of knowing more languages is nothing new. A study from 1962 found that "bilinguals performed significantly better than monolinguals on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests" (Peal & Lambert, 1962, p. 22).

In fact, study after study on bi/multilingual students arrive at a similar conclusion (Clyne et al., 2004; Cummins, 2001; Jessner, 2008, 1962; Keshavarz & Astaneh, 2010). The bi/multilingual students seem to have a wider perspective on language by virtue of knowing more than just one, giving them an edge over their monolingual peers. On the other hand, Bialystok (2001) takes a deep dive into the available literature on the subject and finds several instances where, although the bi/multilingual students were found to outperform their monolingual peers in some aspects, "there was no unconditional advantage for bilinguals on all tasks" (Bialystok, 2001, p.173). Bialystok (2001) claims that publications are generally skewed in favor of the bi/multilingual students because of the influence of earlier studies on bi/multilingualism and the fears of possible negative consequences of bi/multilingualism for young children's intellectual development. Bialystok (2001) blames the lack of research that show no differences between monolingual and bi/multilingual students on difficulties publishing such results in research journals as they "prefer significant p values and dramatic conclusions" (Bialystok, 2001, p.170). Bialystok (2001) posits that perhaps "learning two languages leads to uncertainty about linguistic structure because contradictory rules are encountered in the two languages" (Bialystok, 2001, p.170). This phenomenon, known as negative language transfer, is a result of the interaction between two learned languages and will be explored further in the following section.

Language transfer

Typically, by the time a monolingual child is old enough to go to school, he/she already has some level of mastery over their mother tongue. When monolingual students are old enough to start learning their second language, the two languages meet and start interacting. This interaction, also known as language transfer, is defined as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin, 1989, as cited in De Angelis, p. 19). This phenomenon is a major component of the foreign language acquisition process, and it comes in two flavors. The first is known as positive transfer. Positive transfer refers to a type of interaction that results from the mother tongue (L1) aiding in and facilitating the target language (L2) acquisition process. The second, negative transfer, is where the interaction between the two languages impedes the acquisition of the L2. In other words, transfer can either delay or accelerate the acquisition process. Transfer occurs either consciously, as an intentional strategy used to fill in the gaps of the user's knowledge, or it occurs unconsciously. It can occur

across phonology, syntax, lexis, pragmatics and/or morphology. The likelihood of these occurrences is more common when the languages are perceived as close and tends to decline with increased levels of proficiency (Benson, 2002, p. 68-69). Murphy (2003) recognizes several, learner-based variables that affect transfer. These include proficiency, amount of target language exposure and use, linguistic awareness, educational background, context, and age.

However, when a bi/multilingual student starts learning a new language, this phenomenon instantly becomes more layered and complex. De Angelis (2007) attributes this to the existence of one or more additional sources of interference in the mind of the bi/multilingual students compared to their monolingual peers. De Angelis (2007) goes on to recognize two possible types of language transfer that affect the L3 learner: a one-to-one type of association, where either L1 or L2 affects L3, and a many-to-one type of association, where two or more languages interact and affect the target language. The latter manifests itself in two different ways. The first is when two or more languages concur in influencing the target language. The second is when one language had already influenced the other, and the already influenced language in turn influences the language being acquired. Or as Jessner (2008) puts it, "in a multilingual system crosslinguistic influence not only takes place between the L1 and the L2 but also between the L2 and the L3, and the L1 and the L3, not forgetting the fact that the influence can also work vice versa in all cases" (Jessner, 2008, p. 25). Jessner (2008) maintains that at a certain point in the acquisition process, the bi/multilingual student constructs a "multilingual inter-system" (Jessner, 2008, p. 24). Here, both successful and unsuccessful interlingual transfer processes are stored. This system provides the bi/multilingual student with a general framework for understanding and deciphering the new language. The system is flexible, and could be changed, revised, and extended. This also applies when introducing a new language system (Jessner, 2008, p. 25).

One of the biggest difference between the monolingual and bi/multilingual students, is that the latter learn their additional languages at home through their family. Therefore, the next section will explore the family's influence on both student groups.

Family's influence

It is very well known that direct parental involvement positively impacts learning outcomes in students (Fan & Chen, 2001; Cooper, 2001). These effects extend to the areas of motivation, emotion, and the social and cognitive levels of learning (Emerson et. al., 2012). All this points

to how critical the parents' role is for learning. Language learning is affected in a similar fashion. Castillo & Camelo (2013) observed that parental engagement facilitated students' literacy development. This is echoed in He et. al. (2015) who found that parents' involvement in activities related to language literacy resulted in increased learning motivation, expanded the student's lexicon, and enhanced the student's ability to articulate. It is important to note that the literature reviewed hitherto does not make a distinction between monolingual families and bi/multilingual families.

In families where the parents have different nationalities, the children are normally exposed to at least one additional language at home, sometimes more. The most common reasons for this, as listed in Paradowski & Bator (2016), are the need for a more genuine connection with the child, to equip the child to communicate with the extended family on both sides, and the parents' desire to preserve and impart their cultural heritage on their child and encourage their children to remember their roots. Paradowski & Bator (2016) also find that in the cases where both parents speak different languages to the native language of the community they live in, the child is brought up in a way that enables the child to communicate with their parents, and the parents' families in the parents' native languages, but also with the local community. They point out that this form of multilingual upbringings is both effective and beneficial for the multilingual student's further language learning.

But it is not only the involvement of the parents that influences the child's language count and level of achievement. Their attitudes towards learning a foreign language are equally crucial to the process (Paradowski & Bator, 2016, p.661). Bartram (2007) finds an association between the attitude of the parents and their children when it comes to foreign language learning and claims that the parents affect their children as role models for positive and negative behaviors, as well as shape their children's understanding of the importance of language and its status. An example of negative parent attitude appears in Haman et. al., where a subset of immigrant parents thought that their children do not have enough time to learn two languages at school and should instead only focus on acquire the majority's language (Haman et. al., 2015, as cited in Paradowski & Bator, 2016, p. 651). This negative attitude could easily be adopted by their child and limit their prospect of future achievement in the FEL classroom. On the other hand, having a positive attitude towards foreign language learning, can increase the children's level of achievement in the foreign language classroom (Hosseinpour et. al., 2015, p. 182).

Parents are not the only factor that should be considered here. Siblings are also a part of the family, and they play a role in the language acquisition process as well. In the case of learning English as a second language, Bridges & Hoff (2014) find that, in bilingual homes, toddlers who had older siblings were more advanced for their age in English than toddles who didn't have older siblings. Similarly, Sorenson Duncan & Paradise (2020) found a significant positive correlation between the amount of L2 input from older siblings and L2 performance, accuracy, and receptive vocabulary in the younger siblings. They argue that having older siblings who attend school in the L2, can be an effective and important resource for L2-learning in children from migrant backgrounds.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no research on the effects of having bi/multilingual siblings on linguistic development and outcomes at the time of this writing. However, in both of the studies presented in the above paragraph, the factor that has contributed to better L2 outcomes in the younger siblings was the increased language input in the target language through interaction and play. Therefore, it would stand to reason that having older bi/multilingual siblings should yield similar results on L3 should the children choose to interact in it frequently enough for the input to have the described effect.

Emotions also play a significant role in the performance of the students (Pekrun, 2014). The following section will explore this theme to illustrate a better picture of how bi/multilingual students fare compared their monolingual peers in the foreign language classroom in this regard.

Emotions

No one can deny the role emotions play in life. They are a part of one's identity and affect all aspects of the self and its development on the physical, mental, and social planes. From an educational vantagepoint, the emotional experience of the students is of utmost importance as "emotions control the students' attention, influence their motivation to learn, modify the choice of learning strategies, and affect their self-regulation of learning." (Pekrun, 2014, p.6). It follows then, that the student's emotional state is a crucial factor in the foreign language classroom. In fact, the effects of negative emotions have been a major point of interest for the researchers. Learning a language is a colossal task and an integral part of the process is making mistakes and receiving feedback. Some students may fear making mistakes and the negative impressions that would leave on others (Gregersen, 2003, p. 31). This phenomenon is dubbed 'foreign language classroom anxiety' and is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions,

beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et. al., 1986, p. 128). Those who suffer from foreign language classroom anxiety could struggle with one or all of the following: experience a fear of speaking in the classroom or in groups, difficulties discriminating the sounds and structures of the target language, difficulties in listening to or learning a spoken message, experience fear of negative evaluation, a fear of making mistakes in the foreign language, and might even believe that nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly. The effects of foreign language classroom anxiety are only aggravated by its cyclical nature, or as Gregersen (2003) puts it: "As errors are made, learners become more anxious, and the more anxious they are, the more errors they make," (Gregersen, 2003, 31) leaving the students forever suspended in the eternal limbo of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, Gregersen (2003) notes that that non-anxious foreign language students tend to almost always do better than their anxious peers.

While negative emotional experiences do create difficulties for foreign language acquisition and learning in general, positive emotions aid and facilitate learning. Fredrickson's broaden-and-learn theory of positive emotion testifies to this claim. It states that "certain discrete positive emotions—including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love—although phenomenologically distinct positive emotions all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). What Fredrickson is saying here is that being in a positive emotional state allows access to a broader array of thoughts and actions and expands the scope of attention, creativity, cognition, and action. This idea matters for learning in general, but it is also important for foreign language acquisition. In fact, Dewaele & Macintyre (2014) read Fredrickson's (2001) work as an indication that experiencing foreign language enjoyment might be an especially facilitating experience for language learners and the key to unlocking the language learning potential of adults and children alike.

The relationship between foreign classroom anxiety and foreign language enjoyment is far from being a straightforward one, however. On the surface, the two feelings might seem to be opposing ends of the same spectrum. But Dewaele & Macintyre (2014) make their case that foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment are, in fact, independent of one another. In other words, some students might feel enjoyment while in the foreign language

classroom, but a level of anxiety is still present in their experience. At the same time, an absence of enjoyment is not a direct indicator of elevated levels of foreign language anxiety.

In the case of bi/multilingual students, Dewaele & Macintyre (2014) observed that the number of languages previously learned tends to be associated with lower levels of foreign language anxiety, though whether this relationship is a causation, or a mere correlation is not stated in the study. They claim here that enjoyment increases linearly the more languages the students speak. This both confirms and justifies Clyne et al. (2004) results who find "a general tendency for L3 learners to perform better than L2 learners in the language programmes" (Clyne et al., 2004, p. 44)

Dewaele & Macintyre (2014) perspective, along with Gregersen (2003) testament to better performance on the behalf of the students with lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety, seems to put the bi/multilingual student at the heart of a positive feedback loop. By experiencing reduced levels of foreign language classroom anxiety compared to their monolingual peers, the bi/multilingual students are less afraid, and less likely to make mistakes. This could result in more efficient learning in bi/multilingual students. This could in turn lead to feelings of enjoyment associated with mastery and feed into experiencing even lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety because of knowing more of the target language. The compounded effects resulting from this positive feedback loop could be understood by looking at Brown & Freidman (2013) where they plainly stated that "there is nothing inherently implausible about the idea that people with a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions might experience better outcomes than those with a lower ratio". (Brown & Freidman, 2013, p. 812).

Method

To answer the research question, five English teachers from a primary public school in Norway were interviewed. The school they worked at boasts one of the highest numbers of multinational students in its district, making it an excellent candidate for the subject of this study. Each of the five teachers taught their own unique class. They had a total of 157 students, 65 of whom come from bi/multilingual homes. The participants were asked a series of relevant questions regarding perceived differences between their monolingual and bi/multilingual students in terms of English learning ability, the emotional states of the members of each group, and the parental attitudes towards the English language. The data sample was analyzed by applying the qualitative data analysis method. Guided by the interview questions, an inductive approach was

applied to the discourse provided by the teacher interveiws. The next section details the findings.

Findings

After looking through the data and analyzing it considering the available literature, the following results have been found:

- There does seem to be an advantage in favor of the bi/multilingual students in the EFL classroom in Norway. Although no difference have been found in writing and reading skills, the bi/multilingual students outperformed their monolingual peers in the area of oral skills (wider English vocabulary, better conversational skills and articulation, and higher participation rates in oral tasks) and grammatical and morphological understanding of English.
- A group of the bi/multilingual students are at a disadvantage when it comes to learning and understanding the meaning of new words.
- Negative transfer seems to affect both the monolingual and the bi/multilingual students equally. No reports of positive transfer were made due to the reasons detailed in the data analysis and discussion section. This could either mean that the two student groups are on equal footing, or that the bi/multilinguals are at an advantage due to having at least one more language to transfer positively from. However, this does not exclude the possibility of the bi/multilinguals being at a disadvantage due to the presence of an additional source of transfer. The data remains inconclusive in this regard.
- Positive parental attitudes on the English language does affect their children's attitude, with the age of the parents being a factor in how positive they were towards the English language.
- The question as to whether the emotional state of the students during English class affects their performance in class remains unresolved. This is due to the limitations detailed under the limitations and conclusion section.

Data analysis and discussion

One teacher reported no marked difference in English language ability between the monolingual students and their bi/multilingual peers. However, it is worth noting that this teacher taught the youngest class of all the five teachers and admitted that even the monolingual students still

show issues articulating some Norwegian words. Another, completely dismissed the notion of bi/multilinguals having any advantage, stating that "the more languages the student speaks, the harder it becomes for them to learn English." This might very well be the case for the bi/multilingual students that attended this class. In fact, Paradowski & Bator (2016) have identified several aspects where some bi/multilinguals might fall behind their monolingual peers, such as being slower at vocabulary recall. However, according to the same study, bi/multilinguals do eventually manage to eventually close the gap, often outshining their monolingual peers (Paradowski & Bator, 2016, p. 651). Meaning, the bi/multilingual students in this class will most probably catch up to their monolingual peers as time goes by. The three remaining teachers agreed that although they see no difference between bi/multilingual students and their monolingual peers in terms of reading and writing, the former is definitively better in other aspects of the language. They indicated that while some of their bi/multilingual students possess quite average English skills for their age, bi/multilingual students still make up the larger overall subset of those who display better command of oral skills, having access to a larger English lexis, better conversational skills, and better articulation, in addition to being the more vocal group of the two in class. They also noted a better understanding of grammar and morphological structures amongst the bi/multilingual students. These differences could be the result of Meier's (2014) suggestion, namely that bi/multilingual students have earlier experiences with learning languages and could rely on their larger linguistic repertoires to achieve more efficient learning. The higher rates of grammatical and morphological understanding could be a manifestation of positive transfer that the teachers simply are unaware of. Additionally, the increased participation in the EFL classroom could indicate lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety in the experience of the bi/multilingual students.

All five teachers commented that some of their bi/multilingual students are, in fact, at a disadvantage compared to their monolingual peers. They elaborated that these students encounter a difficulty when trying to understand and learn the meaning of new words. The simple reason behind this is that the teachers relied heavily on translation in the EFL classroom which leaves those with limited Norwegian lexis out of reach, according to the teachers. The practice of translation is commonplace amongst Norwegian teachers of English. In fact, some Norwegian teachers have been found to employ English in less than 50% of EFL classroom communication (Krulatz et. al., 2016, p. 147). It is important to remember that implementing translation in the EFL classroom is not bad in and of itself. In fact, Krultaz et. al. (2016)

endorses the judicious use of translation in the EFL classroom, citing increased language awareness and enhanced comparison between it and the target language as some of the known benefits. Neokleous et. al. (2020) also claim translation helps the students activate their linguistic resources, move seamlessly within their linguistic repertoires and fosters literacy skills. However, Mertin et. al (2018) acknowledges the problem the teacher referred to, stating that sometime the student's previous knowledge and experience, their mother tongue and their culture are rendered irrelevant merely due to the limited communication possibilities between the teachers and their students with a different mother tongue. In this regard, Krulatz et. al. (2016) emphasizes the importance of utilizing all students' linguistic repertoires as valuable learning resources for language learning.

Pertaining to language transfer, the teachers reported similar amounts of negative transfer happening between the two student groups, emphasizing that most of their students are not proficient enough yet, and that these incidents tend to happen less frequently as the students get older and gain more experience with the English language, in their experience. This falls in line with Murphy's (2003) claim of a general consensus amongst the researchers that language transfer is more likely to occur at lower levels of proficiency. It should be pointed out here that no cases of positive transfer were reported. This is likely because of the nature of positive transfer as the resulting linguistic structures it produces adhere and agree with the linguistic structures available in the target language, making it near impossible to detect by an external observer.

Two of the teachers reported a small number of incidents of negative parental attitudes coloring their child's school experience, but none of those incidents were related to the English language. All five teachers also noted several factors that affected the parents' attitudes, including their age. According to them, the younger the parents, the more positive their attitude was towards the English language and its curriculum. This conforms to the research presented by Oladejo (2006) who denoted a similar correlation where the younger parents showed a more positive attitude towards learning a foreign language. The teachers reported no discrepancy in this trend regardless of whether the parents were monolinguals or bi/multilinguals. When asked whether they believed this positivity was reflected in the attitudes of the son/daughter, the teachers responded in agreement. This confirms the results yielded in Castillo & Camelo (2013) and He et. al. (2015) as was detailed earlier in this paper.

On the matter of emotions, the teachers commented that anxiety in the classroom is a regular occurrence regardless of the subject. Three of the teachers expanded further, stating that in the EFL classroom, their monolingual students are more likely to experience emotions of anxiety and inadequacy, and that avoidance behavior, such as diverting their look away from the teacher when the class is asked a question, is more prevalent in this group. They elaborated that a larger number of monolinguals are hesitant to participate orally, especially if they must speak or present for the whole class. This, according to Horwitz et. al. (1986), is the most common form of fear experienced by the anxious foreign language student and mirrors Zheng (2008) who found that "learners can experience increases in anxiety when they are required to complete oral tasks" (Zheng, 2008, p. 6). The fact that teachers recount lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety present in the bi/multilingual group, agrees with the work of Dewaele & Macintyre (2014) on the correlation between language count and lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety. However, it is important to remember that the teachers account does not give a complete picture as to the true emotional states of the students in either the monolingual or the bi/multilingual student group and does not offer a reliable resource to derive an accurate conclusion from.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study has a limitation resulting from circumstances halting the collection of a second dataset halfway through the process. The dataset was supposed to provide insight into different aspects of the learning experiences of bi/multilingual students and compare it with similar data collected from monolingual students. To do this, an attempt to collect data from the most diverse class in the school was made. The students who come from bilingual and multilingual households took an anonymous survey where they answered several carefully designed questions regarding their language count, families' linguistic practices and attitudes, English language use frequency and context, and their emotions both on the English language itself, and the EFL classroom. However, due to complications related to the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Norway at the time, going back to collect a similar data sample from the group of students who come from monolingual households proved rather unfeasible. Without its counterpart, the data from the bi/multilingual students is rendered insufficient to make a true comparison and arrive at a proper conclusion regarding emotions. Student emotions are a highly subjective and unique experience. The teachers' assessment of it alone, does not reflect an accurate

representation as to true emotional states of the individual students. Without input from the students themselves, the teacher's input in this regard remains unreliable.

The claim that bi/multilingual learners have an advantage over their monolingual peers seems to hold true for the bi/multilingual students in the EFL classroom in Norway as well. Looking through the lens of the available literature, the cases of five English teachers who work closely with both monolingual and bi/multilingual students were examined. The results support the findings of other bilingual studies that demonstrate that being bi/multilingual results in more efficient further language learning with. However, there was a caveat. Some of the students who lack sufficient knowledge in the community's native language struggle to learn and understand meaning of new words.

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