

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL VARIABLES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG YORUBA-ENGLISH BILINGUAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation where hundreds of indigenous languages are spoken. In practice, however, the nation is largely bilingual, as many Nigerians—especially educated ones—speak only their mother tongue and English. While every child typically acquires a first language with relative ease, learning a second language successfully is not guaranteed. Achieving proficiency, defined as mastery of communicative competence, remains a challenge for many Nigerian learners of English as a second language. Existing studies on bilingualism in Nigeria have largely focused on the effects of bilingualism on education or the influence of the first language on second language learning, with little attention to socio-psychological variables. This study investigates whether environmental and parental factors, individually or in combination, determine the English proficiency of Yoruba-English bilingual students. A survey design was adopted, using bilingual proficiency tests and participant observation as instruments. Data from the tests were analyzed using the t-test, while observational data were explained qualitatively. Findings indicate a significant difference in English proficiency between urban and semi-urban respondents, but no significant difference between students from literate and non-literate homes. The study concludes that second language proficiency is influenced by the interplay of socio-psychological variables rather than isolated factors. It recommends that stakeholders design targeted strategies to enhance English proficiency among Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students.

Keywords: *Interplay, Proficiency, Socio-psychological Variables, Yoruba-English Sequential Bilinguals*

Introduction

Nigeria, a multi-lingual and multi-cultural nation, has hundreds of indigenous languages being spoken by her people. English, which used to be seen as a foreign language, has since become the second language of most Nigerians just as it is Nigeria's official language. The language has also become the first language of some Nigerian children. Although Nigeria is multilingual, the nation is, in practice, bilingual since many Nigerians, especially educated ones, are speakers of two languages only; speaking their various mother tongues and English language just as Adegbite (2003: 153) believes that "Sometimes a multilingual person or society may be said to be bilingual in a technical sense if the numerous languages in the repertoire of such an individual or society... perform social roles as mother tongue and second language."

Usually, any child without learning difficulties succeeds in acquiring his/her first language (L₁) with relative ease. On the other hand, however, it is not all children that are successful in learning a second

language (L₂). Most Nigerian children start learning English language formally in school after they must have relatively mastered their mother tongues. There are, however, some children who are introduced to the language at home informally by their parents.

Children can become bilingual through *simultaneous* or *sequential* acquisition of the two languages. The two ways are examined briefly below.

(i) Simultaneous Bilingualism: Simultaneous bilingualism occurs when a child starts learning the two languages right from birth, or when the second language is introduced before the age of three (Paradis, Genesee and Crago, 2011). Children learning two languages simultaneously go through the same developmental stages as children that are learning one language. According to De Houwer (1996), simultaneous bilingualism takes place in “children who are regularly addressed in two spoken languages from before the age of three and who continue to be regularly addressed in those languages up until the final stage” of language development. The two languages are acquired as first languages by the children. Paradis, et al, (2011) argue that right from the onset of the process of language learning, simultaneous bilinguals seem to acquire two separate languages because they are able to differentiate their two languages from the beginning. It has equally been discovered that they change their languages, depending on the interlocutor. For example, they speak French to a French-speaking parent, and then switch to English with an English-speaking parent (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2006; Genesee, 2009).

(ii) Sequential Bilingualism: Sequential acquisition occurs when a second language is introduced after the first language is already well-established. Although sequential bilingualism also occurs before the child is 3 years old, the child can, however, draw on the knowledge and experience of the first language while learning the second language. Children may experience sequential acquisition if they immigrate to a country where a different language is spoken. Sequential learning may also occur if the child exclusively speaks his heritage language at home until he begins school, where instruction is offered in a different language. This is the situation for most Nigerian children today. In sequential bilingualism, the second language is learnt not as a native language but as a foreign language.

According to Paradis, et al (2011), a child that acquires a second language in this way may encounter the following:

- (i) At the beginning, the child may use his/her home language for a short period of time.
- (ii) The child may go through a “*Silent*” or “*Non-verbal*” period when he is first exposed to a second language. This can last from a few weeks to several months. This is most likely to happen at a time when the child is building his understanding of the language (Tabors, 1997).
- (iii) The child will begin to *use short or imitative sentences*. The child may use one-word labels or memorized phrases like “*What’s this?*” instead of “*What is this?*”? This sentence is an example of phrases he/she has heard and memorized (from older speakers), and not a construction from his/her own vocabulary or knowledge of the language.

(iv) The child will ultimately *begin to produce his own sentences*. These sentences are not entirely memorized, but are made up of some of the child's own newly-learned vocabulary.

Scholars have identified a number of variables as factors in the proficiency of bilingual children in their second language. For example, some scholars believe early exposure to the language will aid proficiency (Lenneberg, 1967, Paradis, et al, 2011); others say parental status affects proficiency in the second language (Bernstein, 1971, 1973; Atherton, 2002); some others identified motivation as being key (Lai, 2000, Masgoret & Gardner, 2003, Hasan, 2010); etc.

Purpose of the Study

There is growing concern over the present not so impressive performance of secondary school students in English language examinations. These children demonstrate incompetence in the language both in speaking and in writing. As said earlier, scholars have identified different factors as being capable of influencing proficiency in a second language without these factors necessarily interplaying. This work investigated the variables of environment and parental status in order to determine whether each of them in isolation was capable of determining the proficiency of Yoruba-English bilingual students in the English language or they had to interplay with other variables to achieve this.

Significance of the Study

This work is significant as its findings helped to establish whether a variable of second language proficiency can singularly determine proficiency in the L2 as claimed by some scholars or it has to interplay with other variables, social and psychological. This will help students, parents, teachers, language policy planners, and the government in fashioning out appropriate strategies that will ensure that Nigerian bilingual students in English achieve the desirable level of proficiency in the language so that they can reap the immense linguistic, academic and social benefits which proficiency in the language can avail them.

Statement of the Problem

Language proficiency, the mastery of communicative competence in a language, is affected by socio-psychological variables. Attaining proficiency, which is the mastery of communicative competence in a language, has, however, become a problem for many learners of English as a second language in Nigeria. Existing works on bilingualism in Nigeria have studied the effects of first language (L₁) on second language (L₂) learning with little attention paid to the inter-play of socio-psychological variables on second language proficiency. This work, therefore, studied the variables of parental status and environment to determine whether each of them alone could determine the proficiency of Yoruba-English sequential bilingual secondary school students in Ibadan and Ibarapa areas of Oyo State in English, or they had to interplay with other variables. This was with a view to determining the pedagogical implications of the interplay of socio-psychological variables for proficiency in the English language.

Research Hypotheses

Two null hypotheses were set for the study. They are:

Ho1. There is no significant difference between the over-all proficiency of urban and semiurban Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students in English.

Ho2. There is no significant difference between the over-all proficiency of Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students from literate and non-literate homes in English.

Theoretical Framework

The Socio-cultural Theory and the Deficit Hypothesis offered this study the needed theoretical underpinning. The Socio-cultural Theory of second language learning holds that the assistance that a second language learner gets from other persons around him/her (such as teachers, relatives or mates) is what helps him/her in learning the language (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). The Deficit Hypothesis on its own postulates that the type of home a learner of English comes from impacts on his/her proficiency in the language. The theory holds that the parental status of children affects their proficiency in English and thus claims that children from middle class homes are more proficient than their counterparts from working class homes in English because the former possess a form of English with elaborated (extensive) vocabulary while the latter possess a form of English with restricted (limited) vocabulary (Bernstein, 1971, 1973).

Methodology

This study employed the survey design. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting six secondary schools, three apiece, from Ibadan and Ibarapa. Ibadan was chosen because it is urban and cosmopolitan while Ibarapa was chosen because the area is semiurban. However, literate and non-literate parents could be found in both areas. The schools studied are:

- (1).** Government College, Apata, Ibadan (School A); representing the Southern part of Ibadan;
- (2).** Methodist Grammar School, Bodija, Ibadan (School B); representing the Northern part of Ibadan;
- (3).** Our Lady of Apostle Grammar School, Oluyoro, Ibadan (School C); representing the Eastern part of Ibadan.
- (4).** Obaseku High School, Eruwa (School D); representing the Eastern part of Ibarapa;
- (5).** Igboora High School, Igboora (School E); representing the Central part of Ibarapa;
- (6).** Igangan High School, Igangan (School F); representing the Northern part of Ibarapa.

The schools were studied because they are public schools making them open to children from literate and non-literate homes. They are also relatively old schools of above 25 years of existence. Schools in Ibadan were taken as urban schools and those in Ibarapa as semi-urban schools. 15 students were purposively sampled from each of the schools thus giving us a total of 90 respondents. All the respondents were assigned personal numbers on school basis for easy tracking of their records and to allow for objectivity in the analysis of the data. Respondents from schools in Ibadan were taken as urban respondents while those from Ibarapa were taken as semi-urban respondents.

The instruments used were bilingual proficiency tests and participant observation. Data generated from the bilingual proficiency tests were analysed using t-test while findings from the observation were explanatorily presented.

Hypothesis Testing and Discussion of Findings

Findings from the data generated from the bilingual proficiency tests administered to the respondents are first presented and discussed to test the null hypotheses. Thereafter, findings from the observation are examined in relation to the findings made from the tested hypotheses.

H₀₁. There is no significant difference between the over-all proficiency of urban and semiurban Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students in English.

Table 1: Summary of the Analysis of the Over-all Proficiency of Urban and Semi-urban Respondents in English

Skill	Environment	N	Mean	Mean Diff.	Standard Deviation	Co-efficient of variation	Cal-t.	Df	P
Proficiency in English	Urban	45	66.11	6.20	8.89	0.134	2.634	88	0.010
	Semi-urban	45	59.91		13.05	0.218			

The analysis of the data as presented in Table 1 above shows that there was significant mean difference between the overall proficiency of urban respondents and semiurban respondents in English at ($\bar{x} = 66.11$) and ($\bar{x} = 59.91$) respectively; ($t = 2.634$). The mean difference was 6.20. The co-efficient of variation of the scores of urban respondents in English was 0.134 while it was 0.218 for semi-urban respondents. The co-efficient of variation of the proficiency of the respondents in English shows that urban respondents had marks that were closer to their mean scores in the skills of the language than the scores of semi-urban respondents were to their own mean scores in the skills of English. This is an indication that while the levels of proficiency of urban respondents in English were close to one another, those of semi-urban respondents were relatively un-related or dispersed. The urban respondents, therefore, had better over-all proficiency than the semi-urban respondents in English language. This study then concludes that; “There is significant difference between the over-all proficiency of Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students from urban and semi-urban areas in English.”

Ordinarily, it is expected that students of urban schools should be more proficient in the English language than their counterparts from semi-urban areas because of some factors. Factors such as (linguistic) heterogeneity, availability of better media facilities, and relatively better staffing of urban schools, among others, should work in favour of students of urban schools.

H₀₂. There is no significant difference between the over-all proficiency of Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students from literate and non-literate homes in English.

Table 2: Summary of the Analysis of the Over-all Proficiency of Respondents from Literate and Non-literate Homes in English

Skill	Parental Status	N	Mean	Mean Diff.	Standard Deviation	Co-efficient of variation	Cal-t.	Df	P
Proficiency in English	Literate	78	63.51	3.76	10.96	0.173	1.052	88	0.295
	Non-literate	12	59.75		14.91	0.250			

The analysis of the data in Table 2 above indicates that there was no significant mean difference between the over-all proficiency of respondents from literate and non-literate homes in English at ($\bar{x}$ = 63.51) and ($\bar{x}$ = 59.75) respectively; (t = 1.052). The mean difference was 3.76. The co-efficient of variation of their scores in the English proficiency test was 0.173 and 0.250 respectively. This means that the over-all scores of respondents from literate homes were more close to their mean scores in the skills of the language than the scores of respondents from non-literate homes were to their own mean score. It is an indication that respondents from literate homes had nearly the same level of proficiency in English while the proficiency levels of respondents from non-literate homes were relatively unrelated. In spite of this, the over-all proficiency of respondents from literate and non-literate homes in English language was virtually the same.

Normally, children from literate homes should be more proficient than their counterparts from non-literate homes in English language. This should be so because the former, apart from having earlier exposure to the English language at home, should also have more opportunities of using English at home with their literate parents and siblings. Children from non-literate homes on their own part should be at a disadvantage in their use of English as their vocabulary in the language is expected to be very limited as claimed by the Deficit Hypothesis. This was, however, not the case in this study. For instance, respondents A6, B6, and B9 whose parents were non-literate demonstrated higher proficiency in all the skills of the language, even than many of the respondents from literate homes.

The finding above does not agree with the position of the Deficit Hypothesis. The hypothesis had claimed that children from working class homes are hampered in their usage of English by their possession of the “restricted” code of English whose vocabulary is limited. Children from middle class homes on the other hand will ordinarily do well because they are in possession of “the elaborated” code of English with relatively very large vocabulary. However, it must be said here that it might be difficult to describe the Nigerian society in terms of the British class system because the Nigerian society is not as stratified as the British society. The state of Nigeria’s economy has virtually wiped off the middle class. So, we have used

literacy instead of class as the social parameter; hence the use of literate home and non-literate home for middle class (home) and working class (home) respectively.

Reports of Observation

In my interactions with the respondents, it was found that other variables came into play in the determination of the proficiency of each of the respondents in the English language. For instance, although respondents from urban schools were found to have better over-all proficiency in English, our interaction with the respondents showed that beyond the factors of environment and parental status, variables such as motivation, attitude, aptitude and availability of opportunities for communication in the L₂ played significant roles in the achievement of linguistic milestones in English by the respondents.

Motivation was found to have impacted positively on the proficiency of the respondents from both urban and semi-urban areas. According to Falk (1978) and Hudson (2000), there are two forms of motivation; *integrative* motivation and *instrumental* motivation. It is assumed by Falk (1978) that language acquisition is most successful when one learns a language because one truly likes the language and the culture of its owners, and possesses a desire to integrate into the culture in which the language is used. This type of motivation for the learner is *integrative* motivation. *Integrative* motivation makes the learner to be well proficient in the second language (L₂). Scholars such as Clement, Gardner, & Smythe (1980); Lai (2000) and Masgoret & Gardner (2003) have found that motivation enhances second/foreign language acquisition such that learners of second language, who rank high on integrative motivation, work harder and learn faster than those who rank low on integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation on its own is when a person learns a foreign/second language for utilitarian objectives; such as getting a job, trading purposes or obtaining admission in a particular course (Hasan, 2010).

My interactions with the respondents showed that many of the respondents were being instrumentally motivated to learn the English language. For example, because of the linguistic diversity of Ibadan, the respondents from Ibadan whom we interacted with stated that they needed to be proficient in the English language for them to be able to relate adequately well enough with their neighbours and classmates who might have different mother tongues. The educational value of the English language was also identified by respondents from both urban and semi-urban areas as a source of motivation for them to do well in English. In Nigeria, it is a policy that for any student to secure admission into any tertiary institution, he/she must have at least a credit pass in the English language in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (SSCE). Thus, the respondents were instrumentally motivated in this regard. Therefore, irrespective of the type of environment a Yoruba-English sequential bilingual student comes from, he/she may attain proficiency in English if he/she is well motivated, and vice-versa.

Attitude was another psychological variable which my interaction with the respondents revealed as having had effect on the proficiency of the respondents in English. Eagly and Chaiken (1998) define attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour." Jung, cited in Main (2004), defines attitude as "readiness of the psyche to act or react in a certain

way." Psyche, as used here, refers to the human mind. Vogel, Bohner & Wanke, (2014) are of the opinion that "Attitude may influence the attention to attitude objects, the use of categories for encoding information and the interpretation, judgement and recall of attitude-relevant information."

It is often believed that an attitude contains *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioural* components. The cognitive component of attitudes refers to the beliefs, thoughts, and attributes that we would associate with an object. This component explains why some students fail certain subjects because of their beliefs that such subjects are too difficult, and so they cannot learn them. The affective component of attitudes refers to those human feelings or emotions that are linked to an attitude object. Affective responses affect attitudes in a number of ways. For example, there are students that are fearful of Mathematics. So, this negative affective response is likely to make them have a negative attitude towards Mathematics.

The behavioural component of attitudes refers to past behaviours or experiences regarding or concerning an attitude object. This implies that the present attitudes of people to some attitude objects resulted from certain unpleasant experiences they might have had about the attitude objects in the past. For example, there may be students who have negative attitudes towards the English language as a subject because their teachers had sometimes told them that they could not learn the language/subject because it was not for lazy students. Many a time, a person's attitude might be based on the negative and positive attributes they associate with an object.

Research has suggested that students' attitudes towards academic subjects and their overall achievement are closely related (cf. Erdogan, Bayram, & Deniz, 2008). Similarly, Awang, Jindal-Snape & Barber (2013) believe that there is a strong connection between individuals' attitudes towards education and their academic performance and commitment as students whose attitudes towards education activities are negative have been found to demonstrate challenging behaviours including anti-social and off-task behaviours.

Attitude is a powerful psychological factor in language learning. The disposition of the respondents in this study towards their second language had been found to be a crucial factor in their proficiency or otherwise in language. Where the attitude is positive and good, language learning is greatly facilitated, but hindered if otherwise. Some of the respondents I interacted with betrayed their attitude towards English language. A number of the respondents from both urban and semi-urban areas had a negative disposition towards the language. This negative attitude of some of them had even almost developed into a phobia for the language.

Though the respondents knew how important the English language was for their academic success, some of them believed that the language was too difficult, and that they could not learn it no matter how hard they tried. The mindset of these respondents about English was aptly expressed by one of the respondents who said in Yoruba; *Òyìnbó korò*, literally translated to mean; "The English (language) is bitter." So, whatever is bitter is unpleasant. Therefore, learning English language had become an unpleasant experience for most of the respondents. This belief had transformed into a sort of hatred for the language

such that even when they were in the English language class, their minds were not there. They had lost interest in the subject, and by that, any hope of them excelling in the language. Their proficiency in the language thus automatically suffered. This is the situation with a good number of learners of English as a second language in Nigerian secondary schools today.

On the other hand, the positive attitude of some of the respondents to the English language reflected on their proficiency in the language. This was the case with some of the respondents from non-literate homes who, in spite of their parental status, did very well in the bilingual proficiency tests, and even better than many of the respondents from literate homes. One of the respondents even confessed that the English language was his best school subject.

Furthermore, during interaction with the respondents, some of them confessed that the amount of opportunities available to them to communicate in their L₂ also impacted on their proficiency in the L₂. While some of the respondents from the urban schools agreed that they had opportunities of communicating more in the L₂ with their friends at home and in school as well as other neighbours of theirs who did not speak Yoruba, respondents from the semiurban schools lamented the limited opportunities that they had to communicate in the L₂ outside the school. The relatively more and better opportunities that the urban respondents had to communicate in English must have helped a lot in building their proficiency in the language.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be seen that the levels of proficiency of the respondents in the English language were determined by a consortium of variables instead of a single variable. For instance, although respondents from the urban schools were found to be more proficient than those from semi-urban schools in English, interactions with respondents from the two areas revealed that apart from environment, factors such as availability of opportunities for communicating in the language and the attitude of the respondents to the language played key roles in the proficiency of the respondents in their second language. So, it is concluded that the proficiency of Yoruba-English sequential bilingual students in the English language is a product of the inter-play of socio-psychological variables.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to address some issues found to be connected with Yoruba-English sequential bilingual children's proficiency in English. First, parents, teachers, school authorities, language policy planners, and the government should fashion out appropriate pedagogical strategies that will ensure that Nigerian English sequential bilingual children achieve the desirable level of proficiency in English so that they can reap the immense benefits which proficiency in the language can avail them linguistically, academically and even socially.

Again, Yoruba-English sequential bilingual children should change their negative attitude towards the English language. The English language should be taken as a school subject or a language that is learnable by them. They should note that it is not impossible for them to be proficient in the language because there

are many scholars of English today whose parents were stark illiterates. A positive disposition towards the language, and its learning, will increase their love and interest for the language thereby helping them attain the desired level of proficiency in the language.

Teachers of English language in Nigeria were once known for being role models to their students. It, however, appears that teachers of English language today, especially those in rural/semi-urban public schools are not serving as good models to their pupils or students as far as the use of English is concerned. These teachers speak to their pupils or students in the language of immediate environment all through the day. Their pupils or students do the same thing among themselves. The near monolithic nature of rural/semi-urban areas encourages this. This practice is, however, killing the abilities of these rural/semi-urban children in English. We witnessed this in the semi-urban schools used for the study in the course of carrying out this study. Head-teachers/principals of schools in rural/semi-urban areas should put in place measures that will encourage the speaking of English by teachers to their pupils/students; pupils/students to their teachers; and pupils/students among themselves, both within the classrooms and in the school compounds.

Parents should, as a matter of necessity, provide their children with all the needed learning materials on English. In schools today, there are many children who do not have note-books or pens let alone the recommended textbooks and dictionaries. When children do not have these learning materials, their knowledge of the language is limited because they do not have anything to fall back on apart from what they are taught in class by their teachers. Government should employ enough English language teachers in our schools, especially those in rural or semi-urban areas. As things stand presently, many of the schools in rural areas do not have teachers of English language. In such schools, non-experts are engaged to teach the subject.

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