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## **Bilinguals have more highly developed literacy skills than monolinguals**

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### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini berusaha membandingkan kemampuan membaca dan menulis siswa bilingual dan siswa monolingual dari berbagai Negara seperti Spanyol, Inggris, Rusia, dan China. Walaupun keduanya mempunyai kekurangan dan kelebihan dalam membaca dan menulis, akan tetapi banyak dijumpai dari berbagai referensi bahwa bilingual cenderung mempunyai lebih banyak keuntungan daripada monolingual. Implikasi pengajaran menulis dan membaca bagi siswa bilingual dan monolingual juga disertakan di akhir makalah untuk memperjelas bagaimana seharusnya pengajaran di kelas dilakukan.

Key words: bilingual, monolingual, literacy, meta-linguistic awareness, concept of print.

## **Introduction**

The terms bilinguals, bilingualism and biliteracy seems to gain more popularity recently as there are several benefits attached such as cognitive advantage and social advantage. It is also a way of engagement of minority group to dominant group (Garcia, 2009). It is also described that bilinguals have benefited more than monolinguals from the light of meta-linguistic awareness, mental flexibility, selective attention, linguistic relativity (Pearson, 2008). Thus, becoming bilingual, biliterate and bicultural is desirable for students wanting to experience more than one language and culture (Brisk & Harrington, 2000).

However, it is not an easy task. The students' individual characteristics in interaction with the environment help or hinder the process (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). Hence, bilingualism provides, accordingly positive and negative impact. Consequently, there are two opposing views highlighting that whether bilingualism provides advantage or disadvantage in the process of acquiring a second language.

In this paper it is described that in some aspect and contexts, bilinguals have more developed literacy skills compared to monolinguals but there are some areas in which being bilinguals merely the same as monolinguals or may be worse. As Bialystok (2007) said that "bilingualism clearly affects children development of literacy but its effects is neither simple nor unitary"(p.159)

## **Definitions of terms**

With regard to the topic of this argumentative paper on “bilinguals have more highly developed literacy skills than monolinguals”, three key words; ‘bilingual’, ‘literacy skill’, and ‘monolingual’ are explained to provide a clearer insight.

Skutnabb-Kangas, (1990b cited in Skutnabb-Kangas 1981) defined that a *bilingual speaker* is “someone who is able to function in two (or more) languages, either in monolingual or bilingual communities, in accordance with the socio cultural demands made of communicative and cognitive competence by these communities or by the individual herself, at the same level as native speakers, and who is able positively to identify with both (or all) language groups (and cultures), or part of them”. This definition arises with regard to the fact that bilingualism is articulated in terms of competence, function and attitude.

Very strict definition was given by Bloomfield. He said that a bilingual should acquire “native-like control of two-more languages” Bloomfield (1935, cited in Beadsmore, 1982). More flexible definition about bilingual is described as someone “has some second language skills in one of four modalities (speaking, listening, writing, reading), in addition to having first language skills” Macnamara (1967a, cited in Hamers and Blanch, 1989). A fluid definition given by Saunders (1983).He described that “bilinguals can be ranged along a continuum from the rare equilingual who is indistinguishable from a native speaker in both languages at one end to the person who has just begun to acquire a second language at the other end. They are all bilinguals, but possessing different degrees of bilingualism” (p.9).Monolingual on the other hand, the one who only knows one language.

Discussing bilingualism, bilingual are inevitably attached to the concept of literacy, the ability to read and write(Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008). Discussing Bilingualism inevitably relate to *Biliteracy*, the ability to read and to write in two languages. Corson (1999, cited in Horenberger 2000) describes biliteracy in terms of continua, from the

least competent in one end to the most competent. . Furthermore he elaborated biliteracy in four aspects such as *contexts of biliteracy* (oral to literate, bilingual to monolingual, micro to macro), *development of biliteracy* (reception to production, oral to written, L1 to L2), *content of biliteracy* (minority to majority, vernacular to literary, contextualised to decontextualised) and *media of biliteracy* (simultaneous exposure to successive exposure, dissimilar structure to similar structure, divergent scripts to convergent scripts).

In this paper, *bilingualism* is defined in terms of continuum as I believe that as there is no extreme ends of both (Saunders 1983; Carson, 1993 in Horenberger, 2000), as Romaine (1995) has described that *bilingualism* is relative notion. Relating to the above stance, I merely focus this paper on reading (and its related aspect such as phonological awareness, concept of print, metalinguistic awareness) and writing. The ideas on which literacy is based.

## **Discussion**

Referring to my stance above that bilinguals develop more literacy skills than monolinguals in some aspects, I will elaborate factors articulating bilingual advantages as the argument for and those area in which bilinguals do not bring benefit or less benefit than monolinguals as the argument against together. As literacy skills deal with the ability to read and write, each aspect related to them is discussed. Those areas include *phonological awareness, metalinguistic awareness, and the concept of print and reading*.

## **Bilinguals and monolinguals from the perspectives of phonological awareness, metalinguistic awareness, concept of print and reading.**

### Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is regarded as the most prominent component of metalinguistic awareness as its predictive relation with learning to read in an alphabetic script (Bialystok, 2004). This notion also goes inline with majority of researchers believing that phonological awareness is the prerequisite in reading (Tarone, Bigelow and Hansen, 2009). This because in reading, the beginning readers need to make use of the alphabetic principle such as the ability to hear individual speech sound in words, i.e., phonemic awareness and learn the symbols that represent those sounds, i.e. phonics or graphophonics (Peregoy et al, 2000).

When children learn two languages, there is possibility of phonological transfer from first language to second language. This might be because in this age, children have *common underlying proficiency* (CUP) about those languages enabling the transfer (Cummins, 1992). The example of this phonological transfer is from Spanish to English (Cisero and Royer 1995; Durgunoglu et al 1993 cited in Bialystok 2007). Where as this transfer does not occur between Chinese to English (Bialystok 2007). The similarity between English to Spanish rather than to Chinese may be the reason of this facilitative transfer. This underline the positive relationship between English and Spanish as they both *alphabetic language*. In the case of Chinese and English it is on the way around, *problematic* as it has different writing systems so that the transfer might not occur. Furthermore Bialystok (2004) said that “the easy transfer of skills across languages, especially languages that use different writing systems, may not be automatic” (p.593). From this example it is clear that phonological transfer does not universally apply among bilinguals.

### Metalinguistic awareness

Another important aspect that relates to literacy skill is metalinguistic awareness. It is the ability to think about and reflect the nature of language. Bialystok (1987) exemplified that bilingual children were less affected by 'cat' than monolinguals in judging grammatical correctness of the sentence "why is the cat barking so loudly?". Similar findings (Bialystok 2001; Cummins 1978, cited in Cenoz 2003) describe that "bilinguals have a greater ability to reflect on language and to manipulate it". This indicates that bilinguals benefit from cognitive ability or perhaps they have a wider linguistic repertoire over their monolingual counterpart (Cenoz, 2003).

Galambos and Hakutas (1988, cited in Bialystok 2004) compared bilingual and monolingual children's ability to two sorts of meta-linguistic tasks. In the first task, the children were asked to judge and rectify the structure of the sentences. In the second task, they were asked to decide the ambiguous part of the sentence and then to draw various interpretations. Based on this longitudinal research, bilingual had a consistent benefit over monolingual in the first task (syntax) whereas the bilingual advantage on the second task appeared only in the second testing session when the children get older. This shows that proficiency factors and other factors play role (e.g. age) in constraining the development of bilingualism (Bialystok, 2004).

In his review, Cenoz (2003) found that the additive affect bilingualism, the context where one learn second or third language but this does not effect the previous language mastery. He examined the effect of bilingualism on cognitive development, metalinguistic awareness and communicative skills. The result of the review tends to confirm the benefit of bilinguals is over monolingual in language learning. It is explained that most studies indicate that for *general aspect of language proficiency*, "bilingualism has a positive effect on third language acquisition in additive context and bilinguals have acquired literacy skills in both their languages" (p.83). This according to him, can be related to learning strategies, metalinguistic

awareness, communicative ability or the fact that bilinguals have a 'wider linguistic repertoire' as the basis of third language acquisition. While for specific aspect of proficiency, it is less consistent. This might relate to the idea that bilinguals do not demonstrate advantages on all aspects of metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001).

### Concept of print

Regarding to the concept of print, Bialystok (1997) described that children who are familiar with print and story books in two languages understand more quickly that words are symbols corresponding to specific meaning compared to monolinguals. In her experiment, she gave two pictures to 4 to 5 year old bilingual children. One picture is dog and the other is tree. Then she shows cards with the words "dog" and "tree" on them respectively under both pictures. Both bilinguals and monolinguals correctly guessed that. Then she moved the word "tree" underneath the picture of dog. The children were asked what the card said with the word on it. Only a third of monolingual children got it correct, whereas all bilingual children got it correct. This seems to confirm that bilinguals can catch *symbolic representation* of the pictures and the words "dog" and "tree", so that they can match the meaning of a word and the object that it is assigned. This representation is one of the important components in early reading (Bialystok, 1997).

### Reading

Lots of studies show that reading acquisition is confined, a very large extent, to the development of metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities (Titone, 1989). The conscious control of perception and cognition in one end and formal aspects of language in the other play central role in reading. Donaldson 1978 & Bialystok, 1997 (cited in Baker, 2001) said that metalinguistic awareness is a determining factor in the development of reading in young

children. This because they can employ the forms of metalinguistic awareness such as phonological, syntactic knowledge, etc to help them comprehend the text.

Another example is case study on bilinguals and monolingual strategic reading from Jimenez et al (1995). They compare marginally proficient bilingual reader and proficient monolingual reader from the aspect of reading process and reading strategies. Data collection included prompted and unprompted think-alouds, interviews, text retellings, prior knowledge measure, and a questionnaire. Furthermore, they elaborated that two bilingual students read comparable set of Spanish text, and all students read one narrative and two expository texts in English. Qualitative analysis shows that four dimensions: how she navigated unknown vocabulary in languages, how she viewed the purpose of reading, how she interacted with the text, and how she took advantage of her bilingualism. The result shows that explicit knowledge of the relationship between Spanish and English facilitate bilingual student reading comprehension, and that unknown vocabulary was an obstacle for the two bilingual.

Another study on reading was done by Shawrtz, Leikin and Share (2005). They conducted longitudinal study on reading acquisition in Hebrew (L2) among Rusian (L1) speaking children. In this study they investigated three groups. Biliterate Rusian-Hebrew speakers, monoliterate Rusian-Hebrew speakers and monolingual Hebrew speakers. In the study a variety of linguistic, metalinguistic and cognitive tasks were administered in the first start of the grade and in the end of the year Hebrew reading and spelling were assessed. The results showed that biliterate bilinguals developed much better in all reading measures compared to monoliterate (Hebrew-Rusian) speakers and monolingual Hebrew speakers. Moreover, biliterate bilingual groups also gained a considerable benefit over the other two groups in

terms of in terms of phonological awareness. It is also worthy of note that monoliterate bilinguals gained 'some modest' advantage over their monolingual peer in reading accuracy in Grade 1. The three groups performed similarly on L2 linguistic task. Looking at bilingual literate and monolingual literate on reading task, this seems to underline the notion that they are accustomed to different linguistic system (Cenoz, 2003), so that cognitively and meta-cognitively they can make the use of these to do reading test better than monolinguals which might not have a similar experience.

Bialystok, Luk and Kwan (2005) investigated three variables; bilingualism, biliteracy and learning to read. They were observing four groups of students in the first grade in which three groups were the group of bilinguals with different combination of language and writing systems and one group was monolingual speakers of English. All the groups were required to do decoding and phonological awareness task. The bilinguals groups were instructed to do that in two languages. Using analysis of covariance, the result showed that bilinguals increased reading ability but a larger advantage primarily for the students learning two alphabetic systems. Moreover, bilinguals transfer literacy skills to other languages solely when two languages are written in the same systems. This may be due to the fact that when literacy is encouraged in children, there is a *common underlying proficiency* enabling the transfer occur (Cummins, 1992).

Despite the above advantages that bilinguals have over monolinguals, there is also evidence that bilinguals read slowly than monolinguals especially when they read in a weaker language (Bialystok, 2001).

### **Bilinguals and monolinguals from writing perspective**

In contrast to mounting evidence of the relationship of bilingualism and reading skills, the study on bilingualism and writing is very limited. The following studies represent those few findings.

Francis (1999) was researching bilingualism, writing and metalinguistic awareness. The participants were Spanish and Nahuatl from Central Mexico. The context of study was high level of bilingualism among school aged children with particular contact situation an indigenous language. The focus of the study was to measure metalinguistic awareness in relation to difference aspects of children's consciousness of the language they spoke or understood compared to a series of assessment of reading comprehension, writing and oral narratives in both languages. The results showed that metalinguistic awareness is related to different aspects of literacy development in different ways with the key variables were the degree of decontextualisation and expressive versus receptive language task.

Carlisle (1989) observed the Anglo and Hispanic elementary school students for their writing in bilingual (Hispanic), submersion (Hispanic) and regular program (Anglo). There were five variables investigated namely; rhetorical effectiveness, overall quality of writing, productivity, syntactic maturity, and error frequency. The results of analysis of variance showed that the students in regular program had considerably better scores on rhetorical effectiveness and the overall quality of writing compared to those submersion and bilinguals. The Anglo students also made fewer errors than bilingual students. While bilingual students had significantly higher score on syntactic maturity and productivity than submersion students. Further Carlisle argued that students learning to write in L1 before learning to write in L2 will write as effectively in L2 as those students learning to write in L2.

A striking finding was presented by Winsler et al (1999). They were looking at bilingual development of low income family of Spanish children. In the study there were 26 children

attended bilingual pre-school for one year compared to 20 children who remained at home. In the investigation, children proficiency are measured. The examined variables were productive language, receptive language and language complexity. The result of this longitudinal study shows that the children attending bilingual pre-school showed significant and equal development in Spanish as well as significant and greater use of English over time. As the replica of the previous study, this strengthens the hypothesis believing that learning second language does not mean losing the first. From the above example, it might be inferred that their writing (productive language), reading (receptive language) developed together in both languages. This, as already discussed, due to the fact that Spanish and English are both alphabetic language and both have the same writing system enabling literacy skills transfer from L1 to L2 (Bialystok, Luk and Kwan, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

From the above explanations it can be seen that some studies show that bilinguals have developed more literacy skills over monolinguals in several aspects such as reading skills especially when two languages have the same writing system e.g. Spanish and English (in Jimenez et al, 1995; Winsler et al, 1999; Bialystok, 2007) Hebrew and Russia (in Shawrtz, Leikin and Share, 2005), phonological awareness, some meta-linguistic aspects, concept of print etc. and on the other hand there are area such as rhetorical effectiveness in writing, overall quality of writing, (Carlisle, 1989), reading in weaker language (Bialystok, 2001) etc bilinguals were worse than monolinguals.

The above explanation and studies support the belief that bilinguals tend to have more developed literacy skills than monolinguals even though with some worthy notes. These what encourage majority of researchers to continually research bilingualism areas (Bialystok,

2001; Baker, 2006). Therefore, it is also suggested that bilingualism is best studied through interdisciplinary phenomenon (Romaine, 1995).

### **Application to teaching to second language literacy.**

Regarding to the discussion of bilinguals and monolinguals and the phenomena that their literacy development that they have either as majority or minority group, it is obvious that there are quite complex teaching implication that should be put into practice.

In writing aspect, teachers should be sensitive to the skills that bilinguals may develop in different languages, and students need to be taught diverse strategies with the same expectation. Moreover, teachers should be aware of bilinguals' learning styles and linguistic abilities in applying the strategy (Serna, 2004). Furthermore, the bilinguals are encouraged both using their native language and the language of instruction to encourage the development of much richer and interesting written composition so that their rhetorical structure also improved. For monolingual learners, it seems that the writing might be focused more on the organisation of ideas as they may have no serious problems with rhetorical structure as they might have no linguistic constraint.

In reading aspect, in order to assure reading achievement for both bilinguals and monolinguals, 'teachers are encouraged to do research based strategies and best practices'(Allington, 2002 cited in Silliman & Wilkinson, 2004, p.141). Further the student's preparedness for reading is shaped by home, school, personal life experience and teacher's highly quality reading instruction(Ivey, 2002, 2003; Pressley, 2001 cited in Silliman & Wilkinson, 2004).

Allen and Landaker (2005) mentioned several effective practices for teaching reading; such as using supplemental resources (fiction, non fiction, newspaper etc), use of student's

question to inform curriculum and instruction, use of student choice of material for learning, use of student exploration and inquiry to find the meaning from different sources, use of creative and in-depth word study, use of thematic approach to reading history, use of graphic organisers and webbing to visual abstract concept, student talk etc (p.92-93).

The above practices to teaching reading may equally apply to both bilingual and monolingual children as the practices focus on learner-centred while the sole major difference that they don't share is the fact that bilinguals are exposed to more linguistic systems of different languages, while monolinguals are not. However, the practices are highly influenced by home, school, student's personal experience and teacher's skill in providing the instruction as Ivey, 2002, 2003; Pressley, 2001 (cited in Silliman & Wilkinson, 2004), mentioned.

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