DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 657 FL 012 570

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TITLE English Proficiency and the Bilingual University Student.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Bilingual Bicultural Education Conference (10th, Boston, MA, May 23-30, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Age Differences; Attitude Measures; Bilingual Education; *Bilingual Students; Cubans; Educational Research; *English (Second Language); Grade Point Average; Hispanic Americans; Language Attitudes; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; Postsecondary Education; Predictive Measurement; Program Development; Second Language Learning; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Social Environment; Student Attitudes; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency

ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to predict the relationship between English proficiency and subsequent academic success. Forty-two Cuban American students enrolled in a bilingual teacher education program were administered the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency and a questionnaire. The results of the study indicate that: (1) the younger one is when learning a second language, the better the language will be learned; (2) in order for adults to acquire a second language in the second language environment, they should socialize regularly in the second language; (3) there is no apparent relationship between attitude towards Anglo-speaking Americans and how well English (the second language) was learned for this group; (4) self report as a method for measuring such attitudinal variables as feelings towards one's educational program is unsuitable--especially if students' responses cannot be anonymous; (5) a relationship exists between students' level of English proficiency and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the bilingual program; and (6) although score on the Michigan Test was not a strong predictor of academic success, there was a significant relationship between this score and grade point average. Implications for bilingual education research and teacher education based on these conclusions are explored. (Author/JK)

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND THE BILINGUAL UNIVERSITY STUDENT

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Presented at the Tenth Annual International
Bilingual Bicultural Education Conference
(Boston, May 23 to 30, 1981)

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BACKGROUND

Many factors may influence how well a person learns a second language. Lenneberg (1967), for example, claims that age is an important factor. He explains that there is a lateralization of the brain that occurs at around puberty which causes the atrophy of the so-called Language Acquisition Device. In other words, preadolescent children are specially equipped to learn language and this capacity becomes unavailable after puberty, forcing post-adolescents to use other methods or strategies to acquire a second language.

Related to the question of age is a distinction made between formal and informal language instruction. Krashen (1977) suggests that children "acquire" or informally "pick up" language and adults learn formally through study, as well as informally picking it up. In a study of adult language learning, Krashen (1976) found that: 1) in order for an adult to "pick up" a language, the adult has to use it regularly and use it in meaningful situations, 2) formal language classes are more effective than mere informal exposure (i.e., living in the second language environment but making no real attempt to communicate in the second language regularly), and 3) formal language classes and having a meaningful informal exposure to the second language both contribute to language learning.

Another variable which is often related to second language acquisition is attitude. Studies by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and others indicate that attitude towards a second language and culture influences how well a learner will learn the second language. A study

by Savignon (1972), however, showed that it was the degree of language proficiency which influenced attitude.

Unlike discussions of language proficiency and attitude, the direction of causation is not an issue with regard to the relationship between English proficiency and subsequent academic success. The degree of correlation, however, has been questioned. Guidelines for the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, the instrument used in this study to measure English language proficiency, suggest that the scores predict probable success in a variety of academic disciplines. Recently, however, there has been a good deal of research which suggests that proficiency exams like the Michigan Test are not as reliable a predictor of academic success as previously expected (Sharon 1972, Gue and Holdaway 1973, Shay 1975, and Monshi-Tousi et al 1980).

Predicting the success of students is an important although both difficult and delicate element to consider in designing a university-level program in bilingual teacher education. Although no two learners are alike in every respect, and individual factors should certainly be taken into consideration, having a profile of the successful bilingual university student (i.e. the student who can complete the program with satisfactory grades, in addition to having a positive attitude towards her/himself and the field) would be a tremendous asset to the screening process, if not to the development of a curriculum which will better the chances for this success.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 42 Cuban-American students enrolled in the Competency-Based Bilingual Teacher Education Program at Florida International University in Miami. Thirty of the students were enrolled as part-time graduate students and twelve were enrolled as full-time undergraduates. All but one of the students were women. A Title VII grant provided all students with free tuition and books.

Testing Instruments

English proficiency was measured by scores on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). Measures of the independent variables (i.e. age at emigration, language spoken in social situations, etc.) were secured by questionnaire. Some data which provided interesting information were gathered informally and will be discussed in the Results section.

Procedure

Students in the Competency-Based Bilingual Teacher Education Program were administered the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. The questionnaire was then administered in the class setting. Students were told that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were given the option of answering the questionnaire in either English or Spanish. MTELP scores were then compared with the responses on the questionnaire. The statistical techniques of Pearson Product Moment

Correlation and T-Test were used to analyze the relationship between Michigan score and age at emigration. Analysis of Variance was used to examine the relationship between MTELP and language of social interaction, attitude towards Anglo-speaking Americans, and satisfaction with the university bilingual program. Both correlation coefficient and Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Variance were used to examine the relationship between MTELP and academic standing as measured by grade-point average.

RESULTS

Age at Emigration

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient between students' English proficiency as measured by scores on the MTELP and how old they were when they emigrated to the U.S. was -.67 ($p = < .05$). Thus, the older the student was when s/he came to the U.S., the lower s/he scored on the test of English proficiency. A comparison of the means of the scores of students who emigrated before the age of 16 and those who emigrated at 16 years or older yielded findings consistent with the results above ($t = 3.07$, $p < .05$, $df = 40$). The mean scores of the two groups is seen in Table 1.

Formal ESL Instruction

Since the students who emigrated to the U.S. as young children did not for the most part need or receive any formal ESL instruction, those who came as adults were examined separately. Unfortunately, since only

one adult in the group had not received any formal ESL instruction, it was not possible to carry out this analysis adequately.

Language Spoken in Most Social Situations

The Michigan scores of students who reported that they spoke primarily Spanish with their friends were compared with the scores of students who reported that they spoke primarily in English with their friends. The mean score for the group that socialized in Spanish was 76.71 and the mean score for those who socialized mostly in English was 92.86.

Attitude Towards Anglo-Speaking Americans

When asked if the majority of Anglo-speaking Americans were sensitive to the needs of Cuban-Americans, 21 said never or rarely and 19 said always or usually. There was no significant difference between the two group's scores on the Michigan Test.

Satisfaction with the University Bilingual Program

Forty of the forty-one respondents to this question reported an overall satisfaction with the university's bilingual program. Thus, this question could not be addressed statistically. It is interesting to note, however, that 15 of these students who stated that they were satisfied with the program had in fact met formally with their advisor to express dissatisfaction with the program, with their biggest complaint being that most of their professors were not sensitive enough to them. The mean score for the students who voiced complaints to their advisor was 73. The mean score for those who chose not to voice any complaints was 91. (See Table 3)

Academic Standing

Finally, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Michigan test scores and grade point average was .41 ($p < .05$). A comparison of the means of the scores of students who had a satisfactory academic standing (3.0+) and those who were on academic warning was carried out employing the Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Variance. The mean for the first group was 82.6 and for the second group 76.5 ($p < .05$).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate several things. First, the younger one is when learning a second language, the better the language will be learned. This result is consistent with Lenneberg's work although it does not prove that the cause is biological instead of, say, psychological. Second, in order for adults to acquire a second language in the second language environment, they should socialize regularly in the second language. This is consistent with Krashen's studies. Third, there is no apparent relationship between attitude towards Anglo-speaking Americans and how well English (the second language) was learned for this group. This result was inconsistent with others' but it should be noted that the testing instrument (self-report) could have affected this result. Fourth, self report as a method for measuring such attitudinal variables as feelings towards one's educational program is unsuitable--especially if students' responses cannot be anonymous. Fifth, although not proven statistically, through informal procedures,

a relationship could be seen between students" level of English proficiency and their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the bilingual program. Finally, although score on the Michigan Test was not a strong predictor of academic success, there was nevertheless a significant relationship between this score and grade-point average.

Implications for Bilingual Education Research and Teacher Education

Since the size of this group was so small, all results reported are at the most tentative. A larger study is needed so that a random sample may be drawn. In addition, several measures of English language proficiency should be utilized and more reliable measures of the independent variables, especially those dealing with sensitive questions must be employed. Also, although there is probably no way to control this, whenever grades are utilized in a study, the researcher must keep in mind the degree of subjectivity which often goes into grading.

The results of this study raise issues for bilingual teacher education which are difficult to address. These questions include:

1. Is it desireable to prevent a student from entering a bilingual teacher education program who is bright, interested but who only is proficient in one language?
2. Should university courses be offered in two languages?
3. Should we allow students who are only proficient in one language to begin the program, but impose an exit requirement of proficiency in two languages?
4. Should we offer....or require second language instruction during the course of the program?
5. If so, who should foot the bill for this instruction?

The results reported in this study are too tentative to address these questions well. However, a few recommendations will be provided. First, students who have an extremely low proficiency in English are likely to be frustrated in a university program which offers courses in English, as would an English-speaking student with an extremely low proficiency in Spanish be frustrated in a program requiring coursework in Spanish. Therefore, students without a proficiency level of at least three (on a scale of 1-5) in either English or the other language should take a pre-program summer session of intensive language training before beginning coursework. Since meaningful social interaction contributes to second language acquisition, an immersion approach is recommended. This instruction should be paid for by public monies. Second, it may not be desireable to allow students to enter a program with little or no proficiency in one of the two languages, allow them to complete their coursework, and then not allow them to graduate because of that low language proficiency. This would not seem fair to students who may not have been properly screened upon entering the program and who perhaps were encouraged to continue by inflated grades. Third, it is desireable to provide students with the opportunity to carry out university coursework in two languages. Although it is understandable that students may not feel as comfortable learning in one language over the other, having the opportunity to better one's abilities in a language through content is not only enriching, but the only way to truly produce a bilingual educator. Fourth, students who begin their studies with a language proficiency level below four for either of the two languages should be

required to continue language instruction throughout the course of the program. Fifth, although it is expected that a bilingual program would offer special courses, students should have the opportunity to take courses with other students - not in the bilingual program. This will increase cross cultural interaction and decrease any stigma attached to having only special classes.

As the demand for equitable educational opportunities increases and as monies to insure this equality decrease, universities will be faced with more and greater challenges. It is imperative that we find the best ways to educate all students so that all of us will have an equal break in this ever-complex and ever-demanding society.

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RESULTS

Table 1

Comparison of the Mean Scores on the MTELP for Students who Emigrated before the Age of Sixteen and the Mean Scores for Students who Emigrated at Sixteen Years or Older.

Age at Emigration	MTELP	N	F
≤ 15 yrs.	90.91	23	3.07*
≥ 16 yrs.	77.37	19	

*p < .05

Table 2

Comparison of MTELP with Language of Social Interaction.

	MTELP	N	F
Socialize in Spanish	76.71	21	29.816*
Socialize in English	92.85	21	

*p < .01

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RESULTS (Cont.)

Table 3

Comparison of MTELP Scores with Students Voicing Complaints

	MTELP	N	F
Students Voicing Complaints	73.40	15	35.77*
Students NOT Voicing Complaints	91.11	27	

*p < .01