

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS SKILLS OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) LEARNERS: THE CASE OF FIRST- GRADE FILIPINO BILINGUALS

Marites M. Abdon¹, Judith M. Maghanoy², Ericson O. Alieto³, Junette B. Buslon⁴, Richard M. Rillo⁵, Bernardita G. Bacang⁶

College of Education, Batangas State University – Balayan Campus¹
Zamboanga City State Polytechnic College²

College of Teacher Education, Western Mindanao State University^{3,4,6}
Graduate School, Centro Escolar University⁵

R.T. Lim Street, Boulevard, Zamboanga City²
Caloocan, Balayan, Batangas City¹

Normal Road Baliwasan, Zamboanga City,7000 Philippines^{3,4,6}
9 Mendiola Street, San Miguel, Manila 1005 Philippines⁵

For correspondence: marites_abdon@dlsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates the degree of bilingualism and its corresponding effects on the metalinguistic skill of phonological awareness among Grade I ESL learners. It compares full and partial bilinguals' performance in the three tests: initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection, and deletion tasks. Forty students aged 6-7 carried out phonological awareness tests in English. The results of the study revealed that full bilinguals performed better than partial bilinguals on phonological tests except on initial phoneme detection where the group means of partial bilinguals are higher by 0.45 in comparison with full bilinguals. This paper signified the merits of looking into the competence of bilingual children on phonological awareness. Additionally, it defines future directions on the practice of teaching phonological awareness among primary bilingual children.*

Keywords: Phonological Awareness, ESL, Bilinguals, Metalinguistic skill, ESL

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular notions about the Philippines is that, as a country, it is one of the largest English-speaking countries [1]. However, one of the most disregarded truth is that a majority of the people all over the Philippines are exposed to not a few but many languages aside from their mother tongue. Hence, students must strive to boost their level of competencies in oral and in writing skills not only in their L1 but their L2 as well to achieve language proficiency [2]. The influence of media and speech community as the immediate environment has proven to have a significant role in bilingualism or multilingualism. Further, growing up a bilingual or a multilingual depends on the environment where the children are being brought up and the opportunities provided for them such as television, the latest gadgets, and technologies powered by the internet. Being a bilingual offers benefits as claimed by [3] where she showed evidence from studies that bilingualism plays an advantage in executive control abilities. Moreover, bilingual experience allows the individual to build up a cognitive reserve which helps delay the onset of dementia. This is consistent with what Costa and [4] reported on the bilingual advantage on cognition especially on executive control processes. He further cited that bilingualism seems to delay symptoms interlinked with dementia after 4-5 years among proficient bilinguals than monolinguals.

Several studies even lend support to the advantage of bilingualism on the phonological awareness. For instance, the study done by [5] revealed that phonological awareness appears to be positively influenced by bilingualism. Her study revealed that bilinguals have the advantage in metalinguistic awareness specifically on the task that requires conscious attention to language sound systems. She

further stated that phonological awareness is the most significant metalinguistic skills because it predicts the level of reading proficiency which extends to both languages in the case of bilingual children. Additionally, [6] reported in her study that full bilinguals exceed in performance compared to partial bilinguals on the test of phonological awareness such as initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection and, deletion task. In initial phoneme detection, the full bilinguals got a perfect mean of 15 whereas the partial bilinguals achieved 14.7 showing only a minimal discrepancy; compared to final phoneme detection where a matter of .01 was the advantage of full bilinguals over partial bilinguals; and the deletion task shows a noticeable difference between the two groups where full bilinguals outperform partial bilinguals. On the whole, the full bilinguals scored more than partial bilinguals on those three phonological awareness tests. Results seemingly demonstrate that the degree of bilingualism in children is related with the metalinguistic skill of phonological awareness.

Although the effects of bilingualism on phonological awareness have been a research focus among researchers and findings suggest the helpful contribution of phonological awareness among bilingual learners, other studies appear to yield different results. Early studies on the effects of bilingualism fail to produce a consistent view of bilingualism as either beneficial or damaging to child literacy development. According to [7] learning a language which is more phonologically complex than their mother language can harm the child on the development of phonological awareness in general. One recent study by [8] reported that bilingual Japanese children showed no advantage in phonological awareness compared with monolingual Japanese children. The author attributed this to the difference

in the phonological structure of L1 and L2 and limited exposure to both languages. Another study done by [9] revealed that sequential bilingual Turkish child outperformed monolingual child only in word awareness task. However, the phonological task revealed no advantage. In the three tasks to test if there were differences between the monolingual and bilingual children on phonological awareness task, there was no significant advantage of bilinguals over monolingual child where the scores in the rhyming task have the same equal score although they differ in occurrences of mistakes. In the phoneme deletion task and phoneme blending task, both groups performed similarly showing no advantage for a bilingual child on phonological awareness tasks.

The study of [10] cited that a child learning a second language allows him to improve his awareness of linguistic system viewing his language as one system among others. It is interesting to note that in his study, Russian-Hebrew bilinguals achieved scores above than monolinguals only on syllable deletion test but their reading scores were equally the same with monolinguals. They further explained that the smaller effect of phonological awareness among Arabic bilinguals may be due to the higher visual complexity of Arabic orthography. This concludes the limited effect of early bilingualism on phonological awareness.

With these contrasting and differing findings, it is evident that there is lack of consensus as to the extent of the effect of phonological awareness on the bilingual learners and this might suggest more research to be conducted on the concerning effects of phonological awareness among bilingual children. The present study is geared to provide insights on the phonological awareness of Grade I ESL learners enrolled in one of the public schools in Calaca.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEMS

The researchers sought to further investigate and determine how the degree of bilingualism affects partial and full bilingual learners on the task of phonological awareness. The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do partial and full bilinguals first-grade ESL learners perform in the test of phonological awareness in English?
2. Is there a difference between partial and full first-grade bilinguals on the metalinguistic task of phonological awareness across three categories such as initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection, and deletion tasks?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to [11] cited in [12], a study that does not involve using high form of statistics and is with the purpose of simply describing a phenomenon or a population is considered to be descriptive. Thus, the study is claimed to have utilized descriptive method research in determining the phonological awareness of first-grade bilinguals. Moreover, a quantitative approach was used to provide an objective and systematic way of examining and testing relationships among variables and so this approach has been chosen as an appropriate research method. In the study, it uses the results of the group mean on phonological awareness tests to test

whether the degree of bilingualism of the students is associated with phonological awareness.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

The research subjects were 40 first-grade ESL learners from one of the elementary public schools in Calaca who can either be classified as full bilingual or partial bilinguals. There were 20 males and 20 female participants for both full bilingual and partial bilingual groups. The participants' degree of bilingualism is determined from personal and academic evaluation of the subject teacher. In this study, partial bilinguals are 'those with a good grasp in Filipino than in English, and full bilinguals are 'those with good grasp of English than Filipino' [6]. The principal assigned two sections of Grade I based on the availability of the students. There were 38 students from I-Camia and 36 students from I-Rosal with a total of 74 students from the two sections where full and partial bilinguals were chosen from. There were 8 full bilinguals and 9 partial bilinguals from I-Rosal; while there were 12 full bilinguals and 11 partial bilinguals from I-Camia. Grade I ESL learners were considered as good samples for the study as preschoolers and early elementary are believed to have already recognized that words are distinct from each other and they already have developed phonological awareness [13]. Further, they are already in Grade I, hence, it is assumed that they have been exposed to phonological awareness skill during Kindergarten, from which it is said to be a compulsory among children to have completed kindergarten before they enter grade I. The subjects are all native speakers of Tagalog and English is considered as their second language. A majority of the participants are graduates of Kindergarten in the same school who came from neighboring barangay of Dacanlao such as San Rafael, Pantay, Quizumbing, and Sampaga.

2.3 THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The study employed Phonological Awareness Tests which were patterned after [6] study. There were three areas included in the phonological awareness test such as initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection, and deletion tasks. In the initial phoneme detection test, there were 15 items in which the pupils were asked to detect the initial sound in the given set of words. One to three sets of examples were given before the test proper to ensure that they will follow the given instruction. In the final phoneme detection test, another 15-item set was given to the learners. Again, they were given 1-3 examples on the item to ensure that directions were clear to the learners before they proceed to the test proper. Finally, the third set on deletion tasks has also 15 items where examples were also given prior to the test proper. The main goal of this task is to obtain scores from first-grade pupils on the three sets of phonological awareness test. Secondly, it aims to determine whether bilingual learners have a cognitive advantage in the metalinguistic skill of phonological awareness in particular. Further, it also provided a suitable assessment of the learners' performance in phonological awareness, thus allowing a more reliable estimate of the participants' competence.

2.4 PROCEDURE

Before the collection of data, the researchers obtained permission from the school principal through a written request to administer the phonological awareness test to their grade I pupils. Subsequently, the principal forwarded the letter to the concerned grade I teachers for the schedule of test administration. The phonological awareness tests were administered during the last week of July to both groups. The students were oriented, given instructions and examples to make sure that they know what they were going to do before the test proper. The initial phoneme detection test was given first to the grade I learners. Since the test was to be given to a class consisting of many students, the researchers used flashcards with the word and pictures on it for both initial phoneme and final phoneme detection. For the initial phoneme detection, the researchers sounded out each word and the learners had to detect its initial sound. They were asked to encircle their answer from the pool of choices given in the box. The researchers instructed to raise their hands when they were done answering each item to be able to proceed to the next number. This was done until the last number in the item. When all the students were finished with the first set of examination, all the test papers were collected. In the second set of the test, the researchers sounded out again the words shown on the flashcards. The students were advised to detect the final sound of the word and were asked to encircle their answers from the choices given in the box. For the third set of test on deletion tasks, the learners were shown cut-out illustration board with the words written in big letters. They were shown that some phonemes were to be deleted from the word and they were asked to produce the new word after the takeaway. One to three examples were given to ensure they know what they are going to do before the test proper. They were given 45 minutes to 1 hour for the three sets of phonological awareness test. After all the three phonological tests have been administered, the learners were given stickers and candies as a form of reward for their participation in the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed performance of partial and full bilinguals on measures of three phonological awareness tests such as initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection and deletion tasks using Cohen’ d effect size estimate. The approach was used so that the sample size (n=40) will not influence the comparisons. In interpreting effect size, a Cohen’s d value of 0.00 to 0.2 is a small size effect, 0.21 to 0.5 is the medium effect size and 0.51 and above is large effect size. Further, the study is primarily interested in finding out how the degree of bilingualism affects the phonological awareness of partial and full on the three tests of phonological awareness such as initial phoneme detection, final phoneme detection, and deletion tasks.

Initial Phoneme Detection

Table 1 shows the group means between full and partial bilinguals on the initial phoneme detection test. Of the 15 items, the full bilinguals (n=20) got a mean of 13.75 while the partial bilinguals n=20) got a mean of 14.20, respectively in the initial phoneme test in English. The table shows partial bilingual got the highest mean for initial

phoneme deletion which is manifested in their scores. Further, the table indicates that for both partial and full bilinguals, the lowest score is 11 while the highest is 15, which is a perfect score. However, in examining the correct and incorrect answers of the subjects, it can be deduced that the subjects were able to locate the initial sound of the word by just looking at the beginning letter, hence, most of them commit errors on the word ‘knee’ where their answer is the phoneme /k/ instead of phoneme /n/. Another example is the word ‘ice cream’ where their answer is /i/ instead of phoneme /a/.

Initial Phoneme Detection

Table 1.0 : Between Partial and Full Bilinguals and between Group Means on Initial Phoneme Detection

		N	Mean	SD.	Min.	Max.
Initial Phoneme	Full Bilinguals	20	13.75	1.118	11	15
	Partial Bilinguals	20	14.20	1.005	11	15
	Total	40	13.98	1.074	11	15
Effect size= .4233						

In the given test, both groups got a perfect score of 15 on initial phoneme detection. It is apparent that partial bilinguals outscored the full bilinguals with an effect size of .4233 and considered as medium effect size. A matter of .45 point was the lead of partial bilinguals over the full bilinguals, that is 13.75 vs. 14.20, respectively.

Table 2.0 : Frequency Distribution of Initial Phoneme Detection Test

Score	F	%	%	Cumulative Percent
15	14	35.0	35.0	35.0
14	17	42.5	42.5	77.5
13	5	12.5	12.5	90.0
12	2	5.0	5.0	95.0
11	2	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	40	100.0	100.0	

As can be gleaned from the table, 42.5% of students got the highest score of 14 out of 15 items and 35% of the students got a perfect score. Adding the total percentage of those students who got a perfect score of 15 and those students with only single error on the test, the result totaled to 77% which is 1/3 of test-takers considered as partial bilinguals. Such percentage indicates that the subjects find it relatively easy to detect initial phoneme of given sets of words. As cited by [14], it is easier to distinguish beginning sounds than medial or final sounds, hence for language teachers in the preschool and early elementary, the instruction should begin with initial sound, and the medial and final sound should only be introduced once the initial sound has been mastered by the students.

Final Phoneme Detection

Comparison of scores between partial and full bilinguals reveals that there is a large gap between the scores of full bilinguals from partial bilinguals. As can be seen from Table 3, the full bilinguals got a mean of 12.50 and partial bilinguals got 4.70. Partial bilinguals got a score of 0, being the lowest compared to full bilinguals with 5 as the lowest score.

Table 3.0 : Between Partial and Full Bilinguals and between Group Means on Final Phoneme Detection

		N	Mean	Sd	Min.	Max
Final Phoneme	Full bilinguals	20	12.50	2.947	5	15
	Partial bilinguals	20	4.70	4.256	0	14
	Total	40	8.60	5.353	0	15
		Effective size = 2.130				

Only the full bilinguals got a perfect score of 15 on final phoneme detection compared to partial bilinguals who scored only 14. The lowest score for full bilinguals is 5 whereas the partial bilinguals' lowest score is 0. It can be noted from the table that there is a large effect size between full and partial bilinguals. Among the three phonological tests, the subjects seemingly find confusion on final phoneme detection and the initial phoneme detection.

Their responses indicate most errors among the students in the final phoneme and this can be attributed to their choice of initial phoneme sound rather than the final sound. Instances of this type of error can be seen among the learners who selected the phoneme sound /t/ for telephone instead of phoneme sound /n/, phoneme sound /ch/ for child instead of phoneme /d/ or selected phoneme /p/ for 'picture' instead of 'r', and /b/ for 'bag' instead of /g/. These are some of the errors committed by the subjects in the final phoneme detection test.

Table 4.0: Frequency Distribution of Final Phoneme Detection Test

In table 4.0, it can be observed that the scores are distributed across all items. Twenty-five percent of the students got a score of 14 out of 15 items, 10 % got a score of 13 and among the test takers, 7.5% got a score of 0.

Deletion Tasks

f all the tasks, deletion tasks may be confusing among the learners along with final phoneme tasks. There is also a big difference in the scores between groups, where the full bilinguals got a mean of 12.25 and partial bilinguals got a mean of 7.65. Table 5 presents a comparison between full bilinguals and partial bilinguals.

Table 5.0 : Between Partial and Full Bilinguals and between Group Means on Deletion Tasks

		N	Mean	Sd	Min.	Max
Deletion Tasks	Full bilinguals	20	12.25	2.099	9	15
	Partial bilinguals	20	7.65	2.498	2	13
	Total	40	9.95	3.258	2	15
		Effective size = 1.99				

Table 5 shows that full bilinguals are better than partial bilinguals on the deletion tasks. The lowest score for full bilinguals is 9 compared to partial bilinguals' score of 2.

The standard deviation in final phoneme detection shown in Table 3 is higher compared standard deviation in deletion tasks in Table 5 indicating the scores in final phoneme detection are spread out than deletion tasks.

Table 6.0 : Frequency Distribution of Deletion Tasks

Score	F	%	Valid %	Cumulative Percent
15	2	5.0	5.0	5.0
14	6	15.0	15.0	20.0
13	4	10.0	10.0	30.0
12	2	5.0	5.0	35.0
11	1	2.5	2.5	37.5
10	7	17.5	17.5	55.0
9	5	12.5	12.5	67.5
8	4	10.0	10.0	77.5
7	4	10.0	10.0	87.5
6	1	2.5	2.5	90.0
5	2	5.0	5.0	95.0
4	1	2.5	2.5	97.5
2	1	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	40	100.0	100.0	

The distribution of scores among all group test-takers on deletion tasks reveals only 15% got the highest score of 14 out of 15 items, whereas the most frequent score of 10 got a frequency of 17.5%.

Table 7.0 : Summary of Results

Phonological Awareness Test	Full	Partial	Effect size
Initial Phoneme Detection	13.75	14.20	.423
Final Phoneme Detection	12.50	4.70	2.130
Deletion Tasks	12.25	7.65	1.99

Score	F	%	Valid %	Cumulative Percent
15	3	7.5	7.5	7.5
14	10	25.0	25.0	32.5
13	4	10.0	10.0	42.5
12	1	2.5	2.5	45.0
11	1	2.5	2.5	47.5
10	1	2.5	2.5	50.0
8	1	2.5	2.5	52.5
7	3	7.5	7.5	60.0
6	2	5.0	5.0	65.0
5	2	5.0	5.0	70.0
4	1	2.5	2.5	72.5
3	5	12.5	12.5	85.0
2	1	2.5	2.5	87.5
1	2	5.0	5.0	92.5
0	3	7.5	7.5	100.0
Total	40	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 illustrates the summary of mean scores in all the three phonological awareness tests. Of the 15-items, initial

phoneme test was the category where the subject performed the best and deletion tasks appear to be the category where the subject performed the lowest. It can be seen from the table that there is a minimal discrepancy of .25 which gives the subject an advantage on final phoneme detection over deletion tasks.

Comparison of scores between partial and full bilinguals, the full bilinguals (n=20) performed better than partial (n=20) bilinguals in two phonological awareness tests of final phoneme detection and deletion tasks. However, the partial bilinguals got a better score in initial phoneme detection with a lead of .45 over full bilinguals.

3.2 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results indicated that Grade I ESL learners in the full bilingual group showed better performance than the partial bilingual group for both final phoneme detection and deletion tasks but this was not the case for initial phoneme detection. The results of the phonological awareness test in English showed a higher mean for full bilinguals than partial bilinguals on the two tests which likely support the hypothesis that full bilinguals who are considered to have good grasp of English language are assumed to have scored higher in phonological awareness test in English than partial bilinguals and are considered to be in the higher threshold. From the current study, it is observed that those Grade I ESL bilinguals performed better on the metalinguistic skill of phonological awareness on categories of final phoneme detection and deletion tasks. The study done by [6] had yielded a remarkably similar picture despite the difference in the score in the task of initial phoneme detection task. It is somewhat interesting to figure out that partial bilinguals with 14.20 outscored full bilinguals who attained 13.75 in initial phoneme detection test, although the difference in scores is considered of moderate effect compared to the large gap between the scores of full bilinguals over partial bilinguals on the task of final phoneme detection with 12.50 and 4.70 and deletion tasks with 12.25 and 7.65 respectively for full and partial bilinguals. Compared with final phoneme detection and deletion tasks, full bilinguals scored significantly higher than partial bilinguals. The findings of the study converge with [5] study which revealed that phonological awareness seems to be positively influenced by bilingualism. Her study indicated that bilinguals have an advantage in metalinguistic awareness specifically in the task that requires conscious attention to language sound systems. It also corresponds with the findings of [3] who claims that both monolingual and bilingual develop metalinguistic knowledge, balanced individuals appear to develop metalinguistic ability and awareness in monolinguals. While the grouping of the participants was influenced by their written performance and oral skills of the students in English language, results of the group mean for the phonological awareness test seemingly suggest that the degree of bilingualism of the students is associated with phonological awareness.

The study reported geared toward exploring the effects of bilingualism, that is full bilinguals and partial bilinguals, in the metalinguistic skill of phonological awareness. Given

the results of the study, it is recommended that there may be other factors interplay in determining the degree of bilingualism among bilinguals in terms of phonological awareness. Other areas and categories of phonological awareness might play a great role and would yield different results. Further, there should be a more systematic way of assessing the degree of bilingualism other than evaluation of the teacher based on their written and oral performances. Other means such as the amount of exposure to the English language, the language used at home and in community, and parent reports could be utilized in the process of grouping the participants.

The present study bridges the gap between phonological awareness and the extent to which it contributes to bilingual advantage. It also lends support to the hypothesis that the students in the higher threshold are those students with a high degree of competence in two languages will consequently perform better results in phonological awareness test in L2 than those students in the lower threshold who have competence only one language.

The study has implications for future research for the practice of teaching phonological awareness to bilingual children. For a better demonstration of the bilingual advantage on phonological awareness, a longitudinal study with larger a sample and inclusions of other areas of phonological awareness could provide a more complete picture on the effect of bilingualism on phonological awareness.

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