Research in Bilingualism: A Dilemma!

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Abstract

This article suggests that if given confidence in taking up bilingualism as an area of research, the researchers may tap the potential that this field might offer for improving and exploring new avenues, like better understanding of the difficulties faced by the foreign/second language learners, greater scope for bilingual students in the job market e.g. as interpreters, translators of world literature in regional languages, and better image of bilingualism in the society at large.

Introduction

The main thesis of this article is that research in bilingualism is becoming the need of the hour. In twenty-first century, all the countries, including Pakistan, cannot afford to exist in isolation without having been affected by the global changes. One of the changes is the fact that today half of the world is bilingual or multilingual, so why shun this reality and continue to show conservatism and resistance in exploring the field of bilingualism. Moreover, there is no doubt about it that in a world of global interdependence and mass communication, knowing more than one language is a key factor for economic, societal and educational success.

Although research does not favour bilingualism, on a closer look we’ll see that many of the errors that we see in the field of research in bilingualism are because of the mistaken generalizations since a researcher’s view of the world determines the choice of material and the interpretation of findings. Cazden and Snow (1990) take bilingualism as “a simple label for a complex phenomenon.” Research in bilingualism does not pertain to only one discipline rather we have to cross the boundaries of disciplines and take a universal view of bilingualism, and this makes bilingualism a
complex phenomenon as languages are used as media of instruction and interaction in majority of the human communication scenarios. For this, first we have to see what bilingualism in education means actually. Greene (1998) defines it as a system in which the students are taught using some of their native language. Greene’s definition is closer to the concept of bilingualism which people normally have in Pakistan.

When we try to peep into our classrooms, we find not only English but other disciplines at all levels in general and at tertiary level in particular are taught with a blend of English and Urdu/native language in Pakistan’s higher education institutes. Despite knowing this ground reality unofficially, the official medium of instruction is said to be English at higher level. This dichotomy appears because the amount of research done and data collected in this field have not been presented before us in a systematic and coherent manner; as a result we have developed an apologetic attitude about the use of native language, especially in our classrooms.

Here the question arises: Why don’t we accept this reality? The answer is: We are biased. The factors responsible for this include the low status given to the use of native language in classrooms and other professional scenarios. As mentioned earlier, in Pakistan people have a bit apologetic attitude towards Urdu/native language, and that is why they shy away in accepting that they use Urdu/native language in various real life situations such as in classes, at work places, in the market, at social gatherings, during interpersonal and even intrapersonal communication. In addition, other factors are the international importance given to English language and the myth about English medium institutes in urban areas as keys to success in life in the modern world. This biased view is further strengthened by the transitional approaches of teaching of English as a second/foreign language that aim at teaching target language through the target language medium. Hence, when we look at bilingualism in this perspective, we find why research in this field has been hindered a lot.

However, this continual hesitation for researching the potentials of this field is not going to get us anywhere in a world where bilingualism is
being explored with a great momentum and programmes like immersion education, inclusive education, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL/EMILE, 2002), dual language education, etc. are becoming the norm that are allowing the use of more than one language in education keeping in view the benefits this approach has.

Therefore, through this descriptive study, the researcher aims to find out the possible hurdles in the field of research in bilingualism focusing the tertiary level English language courses in Pakistani universities which might provide a platform for conducting inquiry in this field but are not being used for the purpose.

**Literature Review**

The debate on the effectiveness of bilingualism in education is making its way in the avenues of research. However, the interpretation of the voluminous research on bilingual education has been highly controversial among both academics and policy-makers for more than 25 years. Clearly, one cannot determine what the research is actually saying. A more fundamental cause of this confusion is the extremely limited way in which educational researchers have examined the research and in particular the quantitative research on this issue (Cummins, 1999). The advocates and the opponents of bilingualism agree unanimously that the amount of research done and the data gathered in this field are of poor quality (August & Hakuta, 1997; Greene, 1998; Rossell & Baker, 1996). Whether good or bad, at least we must accept that finally bilingualism has been allowed to be researched rather than viewed, like always, with raised eyebrows. On a closer look, we find that the problem might not be with the data gathered but with the way it is interpreted. That is why in Pakistan, research in bilingualism in general and research in bilingualism especially in English language programmes is viewed with a grain of salt. Sharing knowledge, new models and practices with other countries globally is a positive act for improving upon our shortcomings, but while selecting and adapting this knowledge we should not forget our socio-cultural realities. Bilingualism may take a new connotation in Pakistani educational scenario. There is a good explanation for this given by Swain
(1996) who refers to the need to "transfer" the stages and processes of evaluation, theory building, and generation of hypotheses, experimentation, and further evaluation to ensure the implementation of programs appropriate for the unique socio-cultural contexts in which they will operate. For this, she warns that we should not view it as a particular model of innovative language education (and, in particular, a Western model) that should be transferred but rather a "cycle of discovery" that should be transferred.

Here we need to further define bilingual education; according to Baker (2001), it refers to education in more than one language, often encompassing more than two languages. Its importance has been internationally realized in recent years. In 1953, UNESCO, responding to the educational failure of children in colonial situations, issued an important resolution declaring:

On educational grounds we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible (UNESCO, 2003).

The challenge of twenty-first century is to prepare learners to balance their own linguistic ecology (Fettes, 2003), enabling them to go freely back and forth in their overlapping languages and literacies. Mühlhäusler’s “ecological approach” (2000, 2002) calls for “a situation of equilibrium whereby languages automatically readjust themselves to fit into the environment, and perpetuate themselves through language contact, rather than isolation” (Tsai, 2005: 11). At the same time, in the twenty-first century we are aware of the linguistic complexity of the world in which monolingual education seems utterly inappropriate. Language differences are seen as a resource, and bilingual education, in all its complexity and forms, seems to be the only way to educate as the world moves forward. This development is shown in Figure 1.
The emphasis on bilingualism is justified by the benefits it offers. There are many advantages of bilingualism in ESL/EFL programmes because bilingual education programmes talk of a gradual transition to English, offer native-language instruction in declining amounts over time, provide continuity in learners' cognitive growth and lay a foundation for academic success in the second language. By contrast, English-only approaches and quick-exit bilingual programs can interrupt that growth at a crucial stage with negative effects on achievement (Cummins, 1992). Cummins (2000) further reinforces: "Conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible."

Bilingual education has great potential to improve the quality of basic education in developing countries like ours. Researchers worldwide (see reviews in Baker, 2001; Cummins, 1999, 2000) have highlighted that bilingual teaching offers clear pedagogical advantages over traditional programs (transitional programmes for ESL/EFL). Further, initial literacy in the L1 means that the learners can make the connection between spoken and written communication, developing skills upon which they can build once they learn the L2, which is taught explicitly. Teachers and students
can interact more naturally in the L1 and negotiate meanings together, which greatly facilitate participatory teaching and learning, and have positive consequences for the affective domain (Baker, 2001). If the culture and language of the home is brought into the classroom, it will increase the sense of identity and personal as well as group empowerment (Cummins, 2000). Outside this teaching/learning environment, competence in more than one language may provide wider scope in the job market.

All these benefits can be fully attained if we have a clear understanding of what various types of opposing views say about bilingualism. Porter (1990) says, "Many parents are not committed to having the schools maintain the mother tongue if it is at the expense of gaining a sound education and the English-language skills needed for obtaining jobs or pursuing higher education" (p. 8). In addition to this, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) presents Fishman, Mackey, Troike and Madiano’s views that bilingualism is generally associated with poverty, powerlessness and subordinate social positions. Many ESL/EFL learners at higher level, who are bilingual, say that that their skills in English are lost because of the use of L1/native language in their language classes.

**Objective of the research**

Living in an environment where there is an ongoing tug of war between various perceptions about bilingualism, the present study aims to know the possible factors responsible for the lack of initiative in the field of research in bilingualism especially in English language courses at tertiary level in Pakistan, so that a paradigm for this research dilemma could be chalked out.

**Methodology**

The participatory research consists of a questionnaire based interview in which the following broad questions have been focused. For this purpose almost one hundred i.e. 50 teachers and 50 students, were interviewed who belonged to the courses like English Language and Linguistics, English
Literature, and Technical and Business Communication in two public sector and two private sector universities. The data were qualitatively analyzed with a narrative presentation of findings of the study.

**Broad Questions**

1. Is English taught in English in your classes?
2. Do you use your mother tongue in the class? When and Why?
3. Do you use English outside the class and/or university? Why?
4. Are you encouraged or appreciated for using L1 for learning English?
5. Would you like to opt for bilingualism for your research project voluntarily? Why/ Why not?
6. Do you think there are benefits of being bilingual?
7. Could you please tell whether you are encouraged to choose bilingualism as a research topic by the research supervisors?
8. What change will you find in your skills of inquiry if you choose to do research in bilingualism?
9. If you choose to do research in bilingualism, what are the problems you may face?
10. Do you have enough reference material in your university about research in bilingualism?

**Findings**

Since bilingualism is a polydirectional discipline, the findings of the present study do not only reflect what is happening in our language research classes but also what external factors are influencing the choice of research areas.

The questions about choosing bilingualism for research have been answered with a long list of fears and reservations about this topic. Majority of the respondents show reluctance in taking up bilingualism for their research; rather they show a kind of apologetic attitude about this area. They believe that bilingualism has been actually the hindrance in
their ability to master English language, so there isn’t anything positive that will come out of this enquiry. Both the teachers and students express the lack of encouragement from the research supervising bodies in this field. Instead of exploring the potential that bilingualism might have, they are asked to research the effective ways to teaching and learning English, which guarantee success in the academic and professional life, and enhance their image in society. Using English language fluently is considered a status symbol and a sign of high qualification in our society. Hence, they say that research should be focusing only English language and problems related to the failure in becoming proficient in this language.

Choosing bilingualism voluntarily is a ‘No’ to the majority of respondents with the exception of a few. These few respondents show their willingness to explore the field but come up with the limitations like lack of support from the research supervising bodies, shortage of qualified teachers and supervisors in this area, scarcity of reference material available in our universities, and the question of recognition of research (Whether it will be considered something substantial or not.). Whereas the majority of the respondents, who dislike the idea of researching bilingualism, feel their inquiry skills might not be fully utilized while studying this particular field.

In contrast to what the respondents feel about taking initiative in research in this field, the results of the study show that in our English language classes monolingual approach is not always followed as it is promised officially in the programme descriptions. Majority of the teachers and students have revealed the fact that they do use Urdu/mother tongue in their classes while interacting with teachers and peers, as it saves time and clears misconceptions in certain cases. Obviously, shared adult and child literacy in the L1 means shared values, skills, abilities, and higher valorization of the L1 (Benson, 2005).

The respondents further confess that in most of out of class/university situations they use L1 e.g. at the cafeteria, in the market, at their work places while talking to peers and colleagues, with their relatives, during
social interaction, and so much so when they have intrapersonal communication like planning, dreaming, thinking etc.; they do all this mostly in their L1. So this reflects that the idea is not to escape this reality, rather adopt it and exploit it constructively as some researches have proved that many respondents agree with the idea that the first language can be helpful in providing background knowledge, most agree that literacy transfers across languages, and most support the principles underlying continuing bilingual education (Shin, 1994; Shin & Gribbons, 1996).

However, despite taking advantage of L1 in their L2 classes, the respondents have expressed their reservation regarding the benefits of using L1 for teaching and learning English. Students find L1 as a hindrance in the learning of English because it won’t allow ample practice of English for learning. Teachers also partake in this reservation owing to the instructions from their university administration and higher education officials to adopt those methods and approaches which ask for teaching English in English i.e. monolingual approach. As Williams and Cooke have explained, “It is abundantly clear that education in a language that few learners, and not all teachers, have mastered detracts from quality and compounds the other problems of economically impoverished contexts (2002: 317).”

When asked about the benefits of being bilingual especially in the job market, most of the respondents did not consider it of any use. The parents usually want their children to learn that language well whose demand in the job market is more than other languages to ensure that they have better educational and economic prospects than the parents themselves had (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). However, few think it important in the global perspective as it is evident in case of Canada where bilingual advantage appears to extend to individual income. According to the 2001 Canadian census, people who speak both official languages (English and French) had a median income ($24,974) that was nearly 10% higher than that of those who speak English only ($22,987) and 40% higher than that of those who speak French only ($17,659) (Français, 2008). As the world is increasingly becoming multilingual, along with
Canada many other countries having cultural diversity like USA, UK, Gulf region, etc. where people from other parts of the world emigrate, have realized the importance of knowing more than one language and developed inclusive approach in education.

**Conclusion**

The findings of the study overall refer to a list of fears and reservations that people in Pakistan in general and students and teachers at higher level of education in particular, harbour in their minds about bilingualism. The low status given to Urdu/native language and associated negative phenomena like poverty and powerlessness because knowledge and use of English language promise socio-economic success in our society, and the ESL/EFL teaching approaches and methods focusing monolingual technique are the causes of absence or lack of initiative for launching inquiry in the field of bilingualism. This research dilemma is further aggravated by the acute dearth of motivation, qualified research supervisors, reference material and moral and official support for the purpose.

**Recommendations**

There is a dire need of changing the mindset of people about the use of native language in the teaching of English.

The research supervising bodies should provide incentives to the prospective researchers to choose bilingualism for their research projects.

The university administration should make for enough reference material about bilingualism, so that the prospective researchers feel facilitated in their research.

The students of English language, linguistics and English literature should be involved in the comparative study of their native and the target language.
Researches about the role of native language in increasing competence and literacy skills in the target language should be brought into the limelight.

ESL/EFL students at advanced level should have at least one or two small scale research assignments in their programmes about exploring the benefits and utility of bilingualism.

Teachers should partake in removing the biases learners and their parents have about bilingualism by creating awareness about what is happening internationally in this field.

They should also provide career counseling in this discipline keeping in mind the interdependent mass communication taking place in the twenty first century the world over.

The concepts of inclusive education and immersion programmes for teaching of English language should be incorporated even at higher level education which will enhance the sense of identity and respect for the native language. This will be considered a help in learning a second/foreign language rather than a hindrance.

Many occupations in business and administration, tourism, sports and recreation, and in sales and services identify bilingualism as a definite asset for job candidates; career counselors in education institutes should hold the responsibility of making the job seekers aware of these new dimensions of professions.

Works Cited


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