

The Effects of Bilingualism on Language Learners' Beliefs: A Small-scale Case Study

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This case study investigates two groups of learners as they approach the study of L3 (French, German and Spanish) at tertiary level: co-ordinate bilinguals from the Gaeltacht and English-dominant bilinguals from outside the Gaeltacht community who had thirteen years exposure to Irish as an L2. Taking account of crosslinguistic interactions and the positive impact of bilingualism on language learning, this small-scale study using questionnaire and reflective-type interviews will examine the degree to which balanced bilingualism impacts on learner self-awareness and learning strategy deployment.

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Introduction: Objective of the study

This study is based on research conducted among learners of French, German and Spanish as L3/L4 at tertiary level in Ireland. Fifteen students self-reported as co-ordinate bilinguals from the Gaeltacht (Group A) and fifteen others were English speakers who had experienced thirteen years of school-based learning of Irish as L2 (Group B). It has commonly been assumed by teachers of both

Irish and foreign languages that learning Irish with all the particular conditions that surround it, may have some relation to, or some bearing on the way that students approach or perceive third language learning, typically French, German or Spanish. This area with the exception of a few small-scale studies (e.g. Ó Laoire, 2004) remains relatively unexplored to date.

Few need to be convinced today of the positive linguistic and cognitive effects of bilingualism. Equally beneficial effects include social and economic ones provided that positive values are attached to the languages involved. In the case of additive trilingualism (here taken to mean the acquisition of a third language in chronological order, e.g. Hufeisen, 1998), there has been a belief that coordinate bilinguals are relatively better at learning an additional language than monolinguals (Bild & Swain 1989; Thomas 1988, Cenoz 2003; Ó Laoire 2004). Cenoz (2003), for example, has shown the positive effects of bilingualism on cognitive development, metalinguistic awareness and communicative skills. Bearing in mind that there is evidence as supported by Bialystok (1989;1994), Karmiloff-Smith (1986) and Gombert (1990) regarding the acquisition of metalinguistic awareness, which indicates that learners consciously or subconsciously draw on various sources of previous language learning in all subsequent language learning; the present study seeks to investigate two different groups of learners as they approach the study of L3 at tertiary level: one group, co-ordinate bilinguals coming from balanced bilingual context of the Gaeltacht speech community, with the other group mainly comprising monolingual speakers who

had 13 years exposure to Irish as L2.

Taking account of crosslinguistic interactions and the impact of bilingualism on cognitive development (Jessner, 2006), this paper compares learners' self-awareness as language learners, i.e., the set of beliefs that learners hold about themselves as language learners, including learner strategies deployed when faced with communicative and cognitive tasks in L3. Language learner beliefs have been recognized as important learner characteristics that must be accounted for (Horwitz 1987; 1988). In fact, more recent studies like Dörnyei (2005) include learner beliefs as a justifiable variable in ID (Individual Difference) research. Few studies, if any, as of yet have been conducted on the kinds of learner beliefs that may be engendered by Irish-English bilingualism which teachers encounter in the classroom.

The Participants

The participants in this study were thirty Business, Engineering and Science students at a tertiary institution in Ireland (see Table 1). Fifteen students are from the Gaeltacht with Irish being the home language of all students. The remaining fifteen students were from a non-Gaeltacht background with thirteen years exposure to Irish as an L2. They were predominantly in the 17–23 years age cohort, typical of the vast majority of undergraduate students.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to all thirty participants, which comprised four sections. The first section targeted

Students	Gaeltacht (Group A)	Non-Gaeltacht (Group B)
N	15	15
Ls studied	Fr 8 Ger 6	Fr 8 Ger 5
Ls studied through the medium of Irish	Sp 1 Fr 0 Ger 0	Fr 0 Ger 0 Sp 0

Table 1.

background information (age, languages studied, periods spent in target language speech community). The second part of the questionnaire sought to explore learners' experience of the Irish language, including an investigation of the extent that learners come into contact with the language after leaving school. It sought information on background knowledge of Irish and other languages. In exploring general attitudes to Irish, it intended to gain insights into the learning strategies used by informants. Informants were provided with a taxonomy of learning strategies e.g. SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning; Oxford 1990) and a list from Abraham's and Vann's case study (Wenden & Rubin, 1987) comprising cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective strategies as outlined by O' Malley and Chamot (1990). The fourth part of the survey sought to get some data on learner awareness and perception of learning the L3.

Finally in a reflective-type focus-group conducted immediately after the questionnaire, both sets of learners were asked, for example, if studying the L3 was "easier" because they had spoken or had studied Irish. Significantly they were asked to comment on any similarities or differences they perceived between the approach taken by them to learning Irish and to learning other languages. A number of BALLI (Horwitz, 1983) items were used to identify students' beliefs about language learning with a view to correlating these beliefs related to a choice or deployment of a particular learning strategy.

Are bilinguals better learners of the L3?

Not all students in Group A reported to be "good at languages". In fact ten students (75%) self-reported as being "bad at languages". This contrasts with group B students' approach to the L3 where 58% perceived themselves as being good at languages. When students in the bilingual group were asked why they considered themselves not good at languages, 33.4% replied that they relied more on English than Irish when approaching the L3 and that they did not perceive Irish to be of any extra help. The most surprising finding here was the fact that Gaeltacht learners did not view their bilingualism as being of any "added" value in approaching their study of the L3. It is interesting to note in this regard, however, that only one of the bilinguals had studied an L3 through the medium of Irish.

Interestingly when students in Group A were asked to consider their best skill in the language, most of them recorded writing. One would have expected speaking because

of their marked and easy, natural fluency in Irish and English, but apparently there was no positive transfer. This result contrasted starkly with the monolingual group who associated their best skill with listening. There was also a marked dissimilarity between both groups when considering the aspects of language learning they enjoyed or found easiest. Those who had reported themselves as being “good” at languages highlighted the following:

- *Engaging in conversations with a fluent speaker*
- *Being able to read and understand a text*
- *Getting the sentence right*
- *Achieving high marks*
- *Taking risks*
- *Learning from mistakes*

Those who self-reported as not being good at languages listed the ability to read and understand a text as being the most enjoyable and easiest skill, as well as learning about the culture of the target language. They also listed that they liked getting feedback.

There was an interesting variation within the bilingual group when asked what aspects of language learning in the L3 they found “easier or easiest”. Those who had professed themselves to have been “good at languages” mentioned learning new vocabulary and recognising vocabulary in new contexts as easiest. These bilinguals who saw themselves as being less successful learners listed those aspects expressed by the monolingual group almost in the same frequency:

- *Recalling what I have learned*
- *Looking up words*

- *Doing tasks set by tutor/lecturer*
- *Learning from mistakes*

The surprising factor emerging here, therefore, was learners’ affective reaction to learning language, which appeared to be independent of, or indifferent to, or to override the variable of bilingual competence. If there were a certain degree of confidence and initiative towards the active use of the target L3, it was only to be found among the bilingual positive learners (five learners). This finding coincided with a low rate of dependency on teacher or tutor-led activities.

Bilinguals and L3: “Added value”?

Students in the bilingual group were then asked if they found the L3 easier because they were bilingual. Here, in contrast to earlier data elicited and discussed above which showed bilingualism not to be a dominant factor in learners’ self-beliefs, the bilingual students were one hundred per cent affirmative in their perception of the facilitative role of bilingualism. Reasons given as to why and how being bilingual facilitated the L3 are worthy of inclusion here. Some mentioned that they saw a link between the vocabulary of all languages, while others mentioned cognates between Irish and French, notably *pardon* (Fr) and *pardún* (Ir). Others mentioned similarities between sound patterns in Irish and German, notably /x/ as in *ach* (Ir.) *machen* (Ger.) as being helpful. Significantly, many of the students implied that over time they felt they would indeed master the language. So of their bilingualism was born a certain confidence and predisposition towards success as they approach the L3.

This confidence factor was not present in the monolingual group, however, where under 40% said that learning Irish was not of any help in learning the L3; stating that the approach they took to learning was completely different and had no bearing whatsoever on their approach to learning the L3. All of Group A as opposed to 60% of Group B stated that they had a good ear and a good memory for language. The bilingual group also said that they would prefer to analyse the language themselves in the case of difficulty in comprehension rather than have the difficulty explained to them. One learner specified:

I kind of know how German works...I don't really want anyone to explain it to me—I know I look up the words and that but I...I kind a' always know what it's about.

This contrasted with the monolingual group who demonstrated less of a preference for analysis of the language. Those who were bilingual also stated that they wanted less guidance from the lecturer and expressed a confidence in working on their own which was not present in the monolingual group.

Students in Group B felt that Irish did not help because it was 'unlike other languages', evoking the issue of language distance and lack of cognates between Irish and English, thereby confirming metalinguistic knowledge. It is interesting to note that those who did feel it was of benefit, showed evidence of a more developed metalinguistic aptitude in that they specifically mentioned such elements as:

- *I understood what tenses were.*
- *I applied the same techniques.*

- *I was used to learning rules.*

The most interesting finding was the reply by bilingual learners to the question: *Do you know how the language works even though you don't fully understand the grammar?* All of the bilingual students replied positively to this question, compared with 20% of the monolinguals. This was an interesting finding suggesting that bilinguals might have some potential advantage as learners, even though research would contend that explicit instruction might be needed to encourage learners to be aware of language as a system before they can develop a facility for learning the L3 (Thomas 1988:236).

Again a surprising finding was that those bilingual learners who professed to be good at languages stated that when confronted with a difficulty in the L3, they would never compare or contrast the target L3 features either to Irish or to English. Those who had perceived themselves to be less successful learners stated similarly to the monolingual group that they used English more to compare, contrast and analyse features of the target L3 and thus facilitate learning.

Learning strategies

While no clear pattern has yet emerged in bilinguals' deployment of strategies, it is clear nonetheless, that Group A on the whole used more strategies than the monolingual group when approaching L3. One interesting example might suffice to demonstrate this: both sets of learners were asked to report on strategies they deployed in learning to speak the language or to communicate. The following

strategies were mentioned more by bilinguals: speaking the target L3 to other students. This was mentioned by ten out of fifteen bilingual students compared with two out of fifteen in the monolingual group. The bilingual students also scored higher in specifying the following speaking strategies (see Table 2):

Strategy	Gaeltacht	Non-Gaeltacht
Imagining dialogues in my mind	11	0
Talking to myself	11	1
Speaking to students in L3	5	3
Imitating a speaker	6	2
Taking a risk	11	1

Table 2.

Conclusion

This data indicated that bilinguals use more strategies than monolinguals as they approach learning the L3. Preliminary findings from this small study would suggest that bilinguals have a greater awareness of language which when made explicit may translate into **confidence and a sense of language usage** not demonstrably present in monolinguals' learning styles.

While the findings here lend support to the generally held belief that bilinguals have a facility for approaching L3, obviously potential contributory factors to the data yielded here such as motivation, intelligence etc. will need to be analysed in all further studies before more scientific conclusions can be drawn.

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Storytelling among the Ojibwe (Anishnaabe): the Roles of Language and Story, and Similarity with Irish Celtic Tradition

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This paper examines the oral tradition of Anishnaabe people by looking at the roles of language and story in their spiritual tradition. Similarities will be shown with the Irish. Mythos will be shown to be more revealing than logos for interpreting and comparing spirituality in oral traditions. Specifically, I propose to examine how language and story encode spirituality in ancient oral Anishnaabe and Irish traditions, to compare how these two spiritual traditions share a holistic unifying motif, and to speak to the question of whether orality rather than literacy makes language and story more effectual as conveyors of the sacred.

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The temptation of reason became a statement of tradition.

A last chance to listen.

It came as a song in the middle of the night,

whispering,

over and over again,

that it was cold and hungry.

(Robinson 1998)¹