

Universiteti "Fan S.Noli"

Fakulteti i Edukimit dhe Filologjisë

Departamenti i Gjuhës dhe i Letërsisë

STUDIME SOCIOLINGUISTIKE

Korçë, 2013

Mendimet e mësuesve në lidhje me bilinguizmin dhe zhvillimin e gjuhës tek fëmijet dygjuhësh të sistemit parashkollor

A Record of Teachers' Beliefs about Bilingualism and Language Development in Bilingual Preschool Children

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Abstract

The present study was designed to: a) record teachers' possible misconceptions about issues related to the conceptualization of bilingualism, b) identify their beliefs about bilingual children's linguistic and cognitive development, c) reveal their views on educational practices in relation to bilingual children. The sample consisted of 195 preschool teachers assigned to public kindergartens in Northern Greece. A questionnaire, consisted of 45 closed form questions, was used as the basic instrument of data collection. The results of the study indicated that the participants share some common misconceptions and inconsistencies about certain issues related to bilingualism, and bilingual children's linguistic and cognitive development. The findings could serve to establish a preliminary empirical base for the education and preparation of competent teachers who work with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.

Key words: bilingualism, teachers, beliefs, bilingual children

1. Introduction

The reason for conducting the study stemmed from the growing number of second-language students in Greek primary schools, given the fact that Greece has been an immigrant receiving country for the last two decades. Given the fact that immigrant children are subject to assimilation processes in Greek Primary education, they are expected to learn Greek language once they enter school, receiving no instruction in their home language (6). Children build on the knowledge acquired in their home environment and bring a range of knowledge, skills and experience to the classroom that cannot be ignored. For this reason, the varied needs of their students, especially of those who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be considered and met (1). Knowing how children learn a second language (L2) and understanding all the issues that surround bilingualism are basic requisites for teachers in order to decide on what intervention or remedial approaches are needed. Furthermore, through the adoption of appropriate approaches to learning, development of interpersonal relations and social skills, as well as adequate development of language skills, the following outcomes can be

potentially achieved: improvement of interpersonal and intercultural relationships, understanding of individual differences, and abolishment of bias and stereotypes (10).

In such a context, teachers are expected to meet the varied needs of immigrant students and support them. However, they often express their anxiety and uncertainty to teach to such groups of students, due to inefficient training on issues related to bilingualism and multicultural education. Moreover, they appear to share certain misconceptions, which could have an impact on the teaching process. One of the most common misconceptions about bilingualism is the so-called "balance theory" claiming that first (L1) and second language (L2) are kept distinctly separately (8). This is in contrast to the theory considering language interdependence (5), based on the maxim of 'underlying cognitive/academic proficiency', common across languages, which can be transferred from one language to another (2). The belief that cognitive and linguistic delay is a byproduct of bilingualism, because of the burden of handling two languages, has been a misconception for years. Nevertheless, it has been indicated that children educated in bilingual programs may have a cognitive advantage over monolingual ones (7). They also perform better than monolinguals on some aspects of literacy based on metalinguistic awareness. Furthermore, "code switching" as a sign of bilingual children's lack of proficiency in the languages they speak is still an ongoing misconception. However, the consensus among researchers is leading towards the opposite, by indicating that code-switching /code-mixing is a natural and usual feature of bilingual speech (9).

Some previous studies revealed teachers' misconceptions in relation to bilingual children's a) cognitive development (3), b) school performance, c) exposure to L2 (8). In studies conducted in Greece (12, 13,14), it has been indicated that teachers expressed a negative attitude towards the role of mother tongue within school context and they suggested as much exposure to L2 as possible in and out of school. In other studies (15, 16), it has been revealed that only the teachers, who attended courses on bilingualism and multiculturalism during their studies, as well as those who received training in bilingual education, or worked with students of different nationalities showed positive attitudes towards dual language development and bilingual children in general.

2. The study

2.1 Purpose and objectives of the study

Since teachers act as mediators between educational language policy and practice (11), their beliefs and views can play a central role in terms of adopting effective teaching practices (4) and influence the stance their students will adopt towards home language. In the present study an attempt was made to record pre-school teachers' beliefs on certain issues related to bilingualism in the Greek Educational context. Specifically, it aimed to:

a.Record teachers' possible misconceptions about issues related to the conceptualization of bilingualism.

b.Identify their beliefs about bilingual children's linguistic and cognitive development.

c.Reveal their views on educational practices in relation to linguistically and culturally diverse children who attend Greek kindergartens.

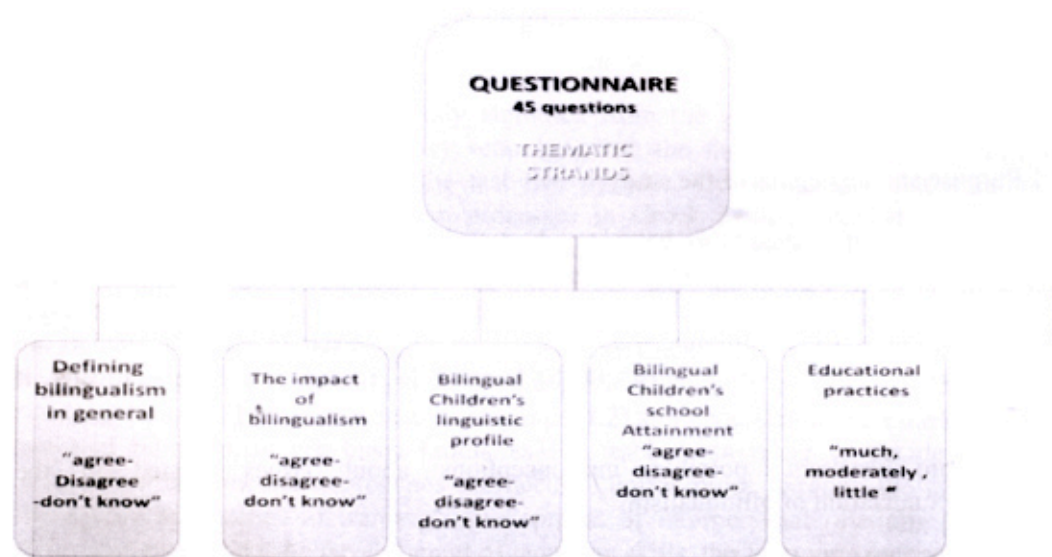
2.2 Sample

195 teachers, who were employed in kindergartens in Northern Greece, participated in the study. Their teaching experience varied from one to nine years (51.3%), 10 to 20 years (27.7 %), while the most experienced teachers had been working for more than 20 years (21 %). A certain number of the participants (25.6%) held a Master's degree. Only 6.7% of the teachers declared that they participated in seminars/ programmes related to bilingualism, and 67.7% of them expressed their wish to attend such programmes.

2.3 Instrument

A questionnaire was used as the basic research instrument, which consisted of 45 closed form questions grouped into five thematic strands (see Figure 1). The instrument included 'Likert-type' questions: teachers were asked to choose from a) "agree-disagree-don't know" for questions that fall into the areas of defining bilingualism and bilingual students' profile, and recording the impact of bilingualism on cognitive and linguistic development b) "much-moderately-little" for questions that fall into the area of educational practices. The technique of Chi-square-test (X^2) was performed in order to identify differences in teachers' beliefs in relation to their qualifications and teaching experience.

Figure 1. Thematic strands of the questionnaire



3. Results

3.1 Conceptualization of bilingualism

In relation to defining bilingualism, the vast majority of the participants agreed on the fact that bilingual is someone who acquires an L2 in a natural context (85.6%) and is exposed to an L2 at the earliest age (75.1%). Also, a significant number of teachers agreed on defining bilingual a person who manages to communicate in an L2 without being perfectly proficient (65.1%), and alternates between the languages according to the communicative situation (60.5%). However, for a significant part of the teachers being 'truly' bilingual does not mean acquiring an L2 either through formal schooling (73.8%) or successively (84.1%) (Figure 2).

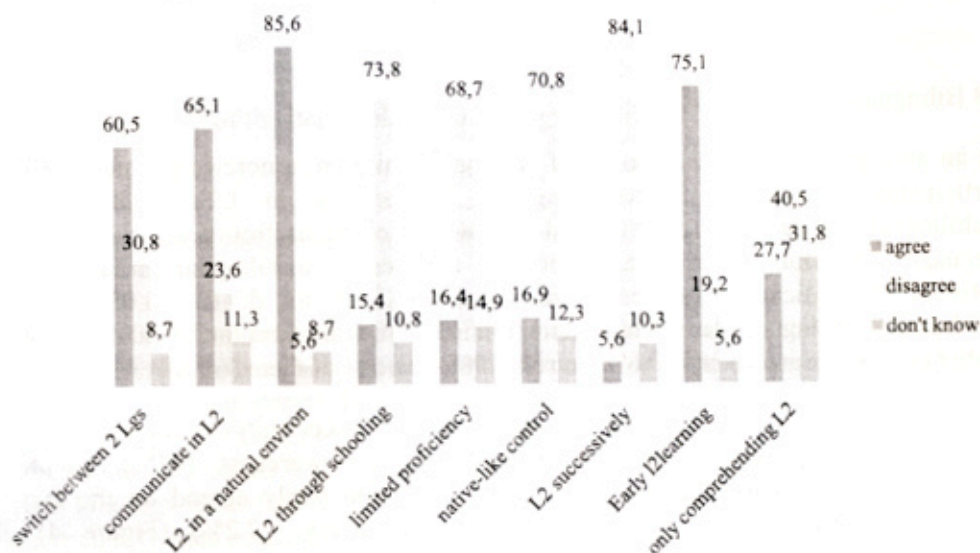


Figure 2. Percentages of the items related to 'conceptualization of bilingualism'

3.2 The impact of bilingualism on children's development

Concerning the effects of bilingualism on children's cognitive and linguistic development, it is worth mentioning that for a significant percentage of the participants bilingualism is closely related to creative thinking (52.3%) and communication flexibility (31.8%). On the contrary, they strongly disagreed with the statement that bilingualism results into children's cognitive advantages (87.2%) (Figure 3). Statistically significant differences were revealed ($X^2=6.043$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$), regarding the interrelation of bilingualism and creative thinking, between the teachers with extra qualifications (postgraduate studies, programme attendance) (81.4%) and those with no extra qualifications (63%).

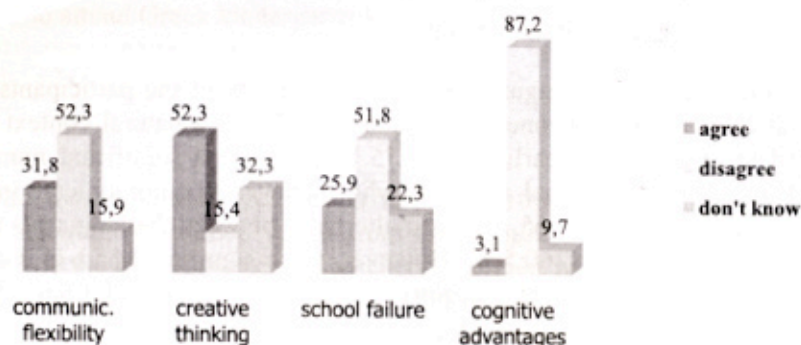


Figure 3. Percentages of the items related to the 'impact of bilingualism'

3.3 Bilingual children's profile

In an attempt to outline the profile of bilingual children, a noteworthy number of the participants considered 'limited language competence in L2' (51.8%), 'higher multilingual competence' (53.8%), and 'transfer of elements from L1 to L2 because of language confusion' (56.4%) as important features of a bilingual child. However, statistically significant differences were revealed ($X^2= 5.384$, $df=1$, $p<0.050$) regarding children's multilingual competence, since the teachers with extra qualifications showed a higher degree of agreement (79.6%) in relation to the rest of them (61%).

A significant number of the teachers declared uncertainty on accepting certain features of bilinguals such as 'higher metalinguistic awareness' (41%) and 'lower performance in reading and writing' (27.7%), while partly agreed on the fact that bilingual children show a higher pragmatic awareness (27.2%) (Figure 4). The crosstabulation of data indicated statistically significant differences ($X^2=5,421$, $df=1$, $p<0.050$) between the less and more experienced teachers in relation to 'switching from L1 to L2 because of language confusion'; the less experienced teachers (88.6%) showed a higher degree of disagreement compared to the more experienced ones (68.7%).

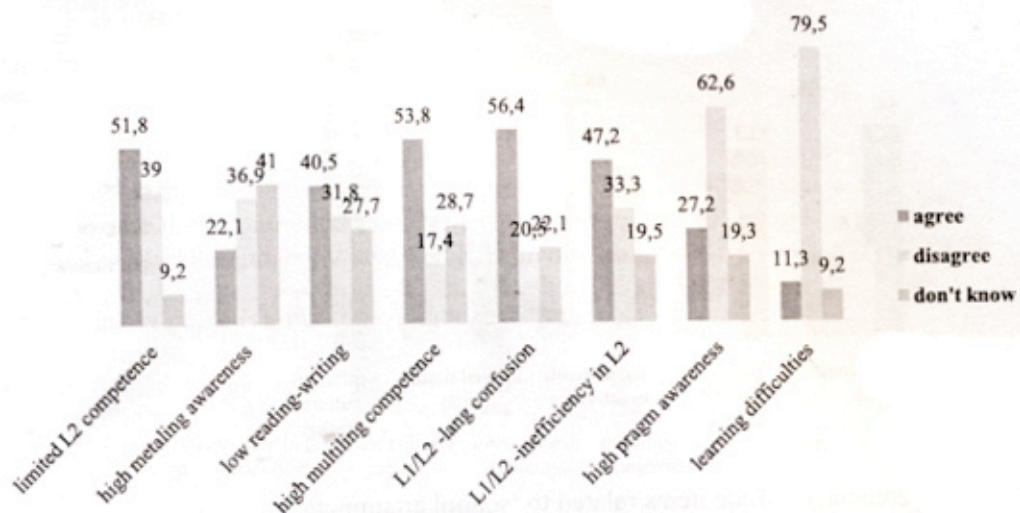


Figure 4. Percentages of the items related to 'bilingual children's profile'

3.4 Bilingual children and school attainment

A great part of the teachers believed that school underachievement is attributed mainly to children's 'different cultural background' (82.1%) and their 'limited competence in L2' (59%). Also, the 'lack of parental assistance in relation to out of school activities' was marked as an important factor by a significant part of the teachers (52.3%). However, the participants disagree on the fact that school failure is linked to children's 'limited interest in certain kindergarten activities' (68.2%) and their 'unwillingness to participate in kindergarten activities because of limited social skills' (61.0%) (Figure 5). The crosstabulation of data indicated significant differences ($X^2=6,843$, $df=2$, $p<0.050$), concerning children's limited interest in certain activities, between the less experienced teachers who showed a greater degree of disagreement (82.6%) and the more experienced ones (65.3%).

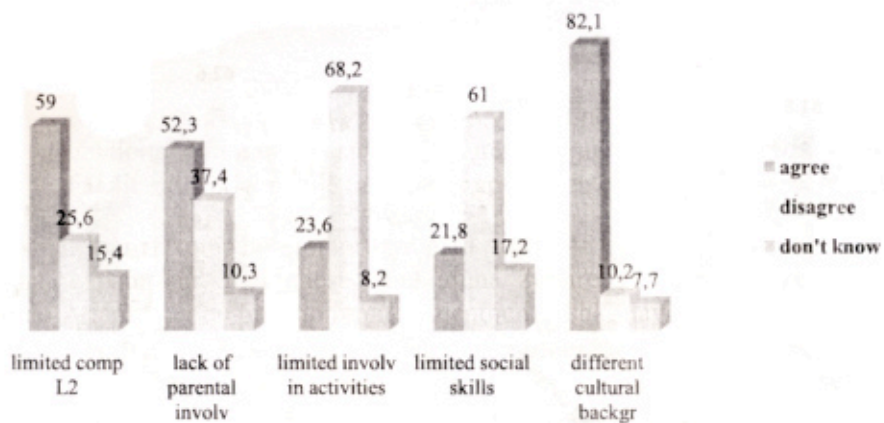


Figure 5. Percentages of the items related to 'school attainment'

3.5 Bilingualism and educational practices

The teachers were asked to express their views on certain issues related to educational practices. 'Activating cultural background of bilingual children' was highly favoured by the majority of them (80.5%). However, significant differences were highlighted ($X^2=8,198$, $df=2$, $p<0.050$) between less experienced teachers who regarded it as more useful teaching technique (95,5%) than the more experienced ones (76,2%). Also, 'intercultural exchange among children' (57.9%) and 'promotion of children's multilingual awareness through activities at kids' corners' (55.9%) were considered to be useful practices for children's smooth school inclusion. The crosstabulation revealed differences ($X^2=10,891$, $df=2$, $p<0.010$) between the less experienced (72.7%) and the more experienced teachers (53.6%). On the other hand, they disfavoured 'bilingual children's non inclusion in mainstream classrooms' (84.4%) and 'counseling parents to create an environment of exposure in L2' (67.2%) (Figure 6).

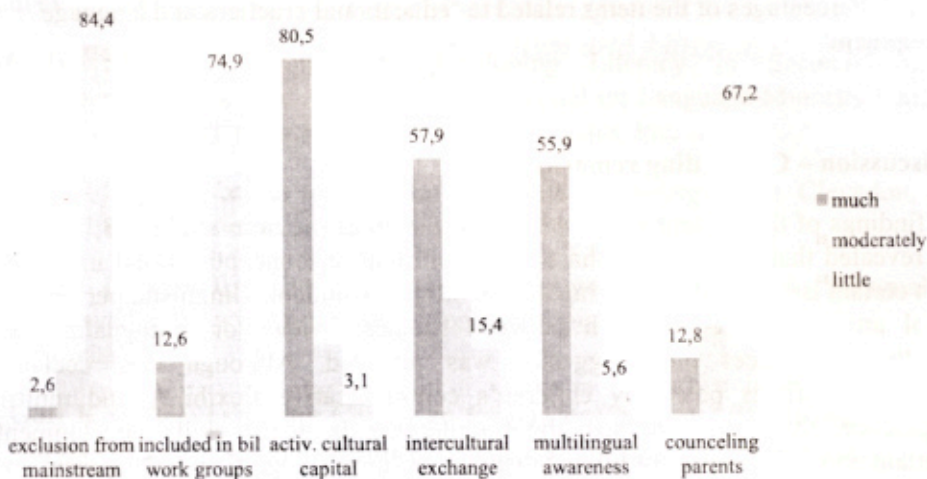


Figure 6. Percentages of the items related to 'educational practices'

Concerning the educational practices linked to children's language development, the teachers welcomed the idea of 'immediate correction of their errors and transfers from L1' (55.1%), as well as the children's 'maximum exposure to L2' (48.2%). It is noteworthy that the teachers expressed concern about considering 'code switching as a natural process' by indicating a significant percentage of uncertainty (51.8%). For this reason, they suggested 'contrastive analysis of similarities and differences in L1 and L2' (48.2%) as a useful teaching technique (Figure 7). It is significant that 'code switching as a natural process' was marked higher by the less experienced teachers (56%) than the more experienced ones (38.9%) ($X^2=15,059$, $df=2$, $p<0.010$).

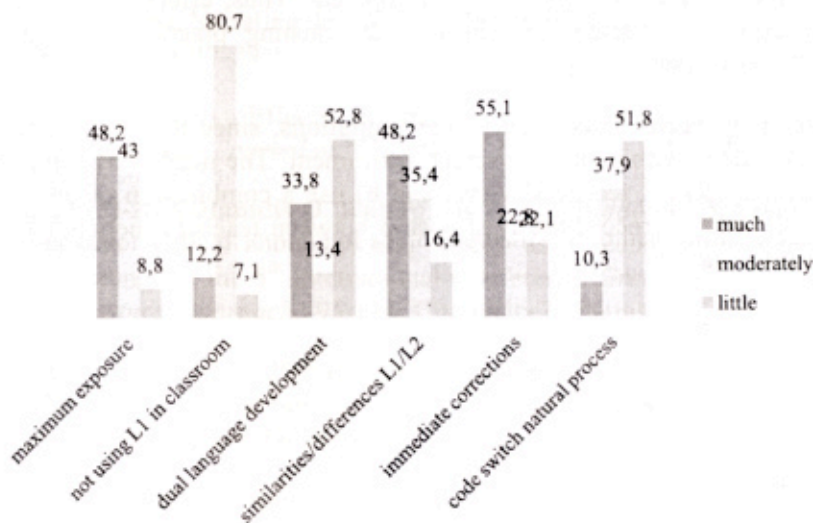


Figure 7. Percentages of the items related to 'educational practices and language development'

4. Discussion – Concluding remarks

The findings of the present study, which fully support previous studies (8, 13, 14, 3, 15, 16), revealed that the teachers share some common misconceptions and inconsistencies about certain issues related to bilingualism, bilingual students' linguistic performance and school attainment. A mismatch between teachers' views on bilingualism and the educational practices they suggested was revealed. Although they declared that bilingualism affects positively children's communicative flexibility and multilingual competence, they felt confused about children's language skills development, and uncertain about the impact of bilingualism on children's cognitive development and their academic attainment. In addition, some teachers were not aware of the fact that languages are in contact within bilingual individuals. For this reason, they are not familiar with the phenomenon of code-switching and code-mixing which is interpreted as confusion in the child's mind and assessed as delay in the acquisition of L2.

However, significant differences were revealed between more and less experienced teachers, as well as between teachers with extra and no extra qualifications. Teachers with credentials and training experience felt more secure and showed more positive attitudes to adopting multicultural practices compared to those teachers without any extra qualifications. Furthermore, the less experienced teachers were more open to multicultural and multilingual practices and expressed fewer misconceptions, since they declared they had attended courses on bilingualism during their studies.

Teachers, who work with linguistically and culturally diverse children, should realise that ignoring children's home language and culture at school could have an impact on his/her cognitive and linguistic development. Thus, effective instruction for these children requires a variety of educational/ teaching practices that take into consideration their diversity of experience.

Concluding, the study needs to consider some limitations, since it is only a part of a broader study conducted with a single research instrument. The need to a) compare pre-primary with primary school teachers' views and b) use a combination of observations and interviews, in order to record the relationship between teachers' beliefs and actual practices, is considered.

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