

Language-related problems repatriated students face in secondary education in Cyprus

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Περίληψη

Η μελέτη αυτή εξετάζει γλωσσικά προβλήματα που αντιμετωπίζουν οι επαναπατριζόμενοι Κύπριοι μαθητές μέσης εκπαίδευσης. Αυτοί οι μαθητές γεννήθηκαν από Ελληνοκύπριους γονείς, έζησαν στο εξωτερικό και θεωρούνται δίγλωσσοι στην ελληνική και αγγλική. Εντούτοις αυτή η μορφή διγλωσσίας δεν εξασφαλίζει πάντα μια επιτυχή ακαδημαϊκή επίδοση και στις δύο γλώσσες. Ο διαχωρισμός του Cummins μεταξύ BICS και CALP αποτελεί το θεωρητικό πλαίσιο στο οποίο βασίζεται η μελέτη και ανάλυση των προβλημάτων των μαθητών. Επίσης, εξετάζονται οι απόψεις των μαθητών και των καθηγητών πάνω σ' αυτό το θέμα και παραθέτονται οι εισηγήσεις τους.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an influx of Greek-Cypriot immigrants returning to Cyprus. According to the Department of Statistics and Research, there have been indications of a high immigration flow since 1989. It is estimated that the net immigration balance has been 2000-3000 on the average every year. In 1992, this figure reached 6000. The main reasons for the return of Cypriot immigrants are a prospering Cypriot economy coupled with economic and political problems in some of their countries of residence. Even though succeeding Cypriot governments have encouraged the repatriation of Cypriots, every year a substantial number of them, 20-30% (Iasonos 1994), choose to immigrate again. Among the problems faced by returnees, that often eventually force them to leave Cyprus again, are economic difficulties, problems of readapting to Cypriot society, and educational difficulties faced by their children.

Our study focuses on language-related problems of repatriated students in secondary schools where the medium of instruction is English. The curriculum of these schools provides for the instruction of all subjects in English with the exception of Modern Greek, Greek History, and Religious Instruction, which are taught in Greek, a requirement set by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The performance of repatriated students in the subjects taught in Greek is often unsatisfactory due mostly to their limited proficiency in Greek. Their low academic performance frequently triggers feelings of failure, low self-esteem, and isolation. These feelings in turn hinder the students' smooth transition and acculturation into their school environment and, therefore, into the Cypriot society as a whole. The inability to

adequately perform academically and to be accepted by their school community often forces these students and their families to leave Cyprus once again. This unsuccessful attempt at repatriation ultimately alienates these émigrés from their native cultural identity and language.

Since educational issues may be a determining factor in the decision of repatriated immigrants to remain in Cyprus, the government should expand its efforts to alleviate, and hopefully eliminate, these problems. We, as educators, wish to contribute to the understanding of the difficulties faced by immigrants' through an examination of the nature and extent of language-related problems repatriated secondary students face in English-speaking schools.

Theory

Describing a person's bilingualism is not an easy enterprise. Various definitions of bilingualism have been proposed by researchers in the field (Bloomfield 1933, Thiery 1978, and Macnamara 1969) that emphasise fluency in two languages as the main criterion for being bilingual. In addition to the two languages involved in bilingualism, the speaker has at his or her disposal more linguistic codes (varieties), such as various dialects and the two different dimensions of language proficiency as proposed by Cummins (1979, 1980). Cummins made the distinction between BICS and CALP with regard to what exactly constitutes proficiency in a language (both in L1 and L2). Cummins defines CALP as "those aspects of language proficiency which are closely related to the development of literacy skills in L1 and L2." (1980: 175). Along the same lines, Brown (1987) considers CALP as "that dimension of proficiency in which the learner manipulates or reflects upon the surface features of language outside the immediate interpersonal context. It is what learners often use in classroom exercises and tests which focus on form." (p.199). On the other hand, BICS is the communicative capacity that all children acquire in order to be able to function in daily interpersonal exchanges. Later on, Cummins added another dimension to this distinction of CALP and BICS: the notion of *context-reduced* and *context-embedded* communication. In this new framework that focuses on the context in which language is used, CALP resembles context-reduced and BICS resembles context-embedded communication. A great deal of classroom-oriented language is context-reduced, while face-to-face communication with people is context-embedded (Brown 1987: 199).

The dichotomy between BICS and CALP offers an explanation to situations/cases where a student may appear to be fluent in L2 but still encounter problems in academic work. This is evident in the study of Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976). The subjects in this study were children of Finnish immigrants in Sweden. Although all parties involved (parents, teachers, and the children themselves) considered the children's Swedish to be quite fluent, tests in Swedish requiring the children to carry out

cognitive operations showed that their oral fluency in Swedish was not reflected in the cognitive/academic aspects of Swedish proficiency.

The BICS and CALP distinction proves to be a crucial notion when dealing with bilingual children and especially with their education. Bearing this in mind, a bilingual may command the four basic language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in different levels. This kind of bilingualism characterises many children of immigrant parents.

However, most bilinguals use their languages for different purposes and in different situations, and hence "balanced" bilinguals, those, who are equally fluent in both languages, are probably the exception and not the norm. In fact, there are many kinds of bilingual speakers, and it is very rare that a bilingual person would be equally proficient in both languages.

The difference in proficiency between the two languages can be attributed to many factors such as motivation, attitudes toward languages (Lambert 1960), contact with the two languages, language choice (such as location/setting, degree of formality), as well as the bilinguals' need to have certain skills in one language but not in the other. For example, a bilingual may have reading and writing abilities in a language but not be able to speak it; another may comprehend the language but not be able to speak, read or write it. This "receptive" bilingualism characterises many children of immigrant parents as well as people who speak one of two related languages. Therefore, fluency and proficiency in each of the four basic skills in the two languages is determined primarily by language use and, in turn, language use is determined by need. Thus, even though fluency in the two languages may be seen on the surface as the main criterion of bilingualism, the stress should be placed on how a bilingual alternately uses two or more languages (Weinreich 1968, Mackey 1968).

The study

The subjects

For the purpose of our study, we contacted six English-speaking secondary schools in Nicosia. The total number of repatriated students in these six schools was 240 and this constitutes a 10.2 percent of the total student population. Questionnaires were given to 58 male and 49 female students.

Most of these students came from England, South Africa, Australia, Canada and America. The average age of these students was 14.4 years old and they had stayed abroad approximately 8.7 years. The average number of years since their return to Cyprus was calculated at 5.3 years. Both parents of 54 repatriated students were Greek-speaking. Thirty-eight students had one Greek-speaking and one non-Greek-speaking parent, 7 students had one Greek- and English-speaking parent, and both parents of 8

students were English-speaking. In the last two cases the English speaking parent or parents were of Cypriot origin.

Procedure

In order to carry out this research project, two sets of questionnaires were compiled; one addressing students, the other, teachers.

The student questionnaire consisted of 18 questions focusing on the students' linguistic background, language use, contact with Greek and English prior to and after repatriation, and language-related problems encountered in formal education settings. One hundred and seven questionnaires out of 240 distributed were completed by the repatriated students in the following six schools: The Grammar School, The GCE School of Careers, The Falcon, The American Academy, The English School, and Pascal.

The teacher questionnaire consisted of 10 questions focusing on how the presence of repatriated students in their classroom affected their teaching. More specifically, the questions were aimed at soliciting information pertaining to teaching methods and techniques used, ways of evaluating their students, and suggestions on how to accommodate their students' special needs. The 17 teacher questionnaires that were distributed were all returned. This number reflects the total number of teachers in the schools we have contacted.

Self-assessment

In order to assess the degree of our subjects' bilingualism in the four basic skills in each language, we asked students to rate themselves. The validity of self assessment has been confirmed by many studies such as Oskarsson (1980) and Kelly (1996). It is clear from the results that the majority of students consider themselves to be far more proficient in English in all skills.

If we compare the students' ratings of each skill in one language to the same skill in the other language, we get the following results. The students' reading and writing skills in English are in most cases better. Only eight students rate their reading skills in both languages equally and five do the same for writing. It is quite striking that none of the 107 subjects rated him or herself better in these skills in Greek. For listening and speaking, the students generally consider themselves better in English than in Greek. Yet, more students believe their speaking and listening skills are equivalent in the two languages (11 and 16 respectively). Only one person reported being better in these two skills in Greek.

If we consider reading and writing to be more academically oriented skills than speaking and listening (since reading is mostly used to acquire knowledge), the results

clearly support Cummings' distinction between BICS and CALP and may account for possible language related problems in Greek.

Students' perception of the problem

The language-related problems students face both in and out of the classroom because of limited proficiency in Greek are the focus of questions 9 and 11 of the student questionnaire. Student responses showed that significantly more students have problems in the academic environment of the classroom as compared to the informal environment outside the classroom (i.e. from the 107 subjects, only 33 have general communication problems outside the classroom whereas this number- almost doubles in the academic environment of the classroom). In addition to the fact that the number of subjects identifying problems in a classroom environment is greater, the nature and variety of these problems also varies to a large extent.

The biggest problem encountered in the classroom is comprehension of the subject matter taught. The main reason given for the lack of comprehension is the technical vocabulary used in subjects such as Religion, Greek History and Modern Greek language and literature. Some other problems stem from the different language skills needed to function adequately within the two environments. Outside the classroom, speaking and listening are the two skills most often, and even exclusively, used. As a consequence, the skill of speaking, when transferred to the classroom, poses few problems for students. It is not strictly evaluated by teachers since the skill is not absolutely necessary for it to be well structured.

On the contrary, writing is rarely used outside the classroom. It is usually limited to writing memos, shopping lists, quick notes, and occasionally application forms. In the classroom, however, writing is a more demanding skill. Students are expected to take notes, summarise and paraphrase lectures, write essay questions, complete exams, and do homework. Moreover, writing entails subskills that do not pertain to speaking or are less essential for oral communication. Examples of such subskills are: producing a well-organised text exhibiting both coherence, cohesion, and mechanics that include spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation. These features make writing a more complex task. Students attest to this by identifying Greek spelling, writing expression and fluency as well as advanced level written work in the three Greek language subjects as problem sources.

The skill of reading was identified as problematic inside the classroom with no comments made regarding reading outside the classroom. While students often read for pleasure outside the classroom, the subskills required of them in this situation are usually limited only to skimming and scanning. However, inside the classroom these two subskills do not suffice. Academic reading requires a good understanding and application of various reading techniques such as recognising context clues, finding the

main idea, inference, and prediction, all of which lead to a more thorough understanding of a text.

In addition to the various reading techniques that a student needs to apply in order to thoroughly comprehend an academic text, the language used in reading passages in and out of the classroom is different. Generally, textbooks - in our case, historical and religious textbooks - convey knowledge. This knowledge must be presented in a clear, unambiguous and comprehensible manner. This is achieved through the use of precise technical vocabulary and appropriate grammatical structures, such as the passive voice in technical writing. Students encounter problems understanding both the technical vocabulary and the explanations provided for certain concepts.

Some final comments refer to the difficulty students face understanding instructions and answering essay and exam questions. In a society where evaluation is the ultimate measure of success or failure, being able to perform well on a test is very important. A test is a tool used to measure someone's knowledge in a certain subject. Repatriated students may know the subject (content) very well but are unable to exhibit their knowledge because of their limited competence in Greek. Due to this limited competence, these students may not understand what a task requires them to do, or, if they understand the task at hand, may be unable to express themselves.

Overall, students identify fewer language-related problems outside the classroom and these would be even less if they did not have to function in a bidialectal speech community. Outside the classroom, where both the SMG and the CD are used, choosing a code depends not only on geographical location and/or the formality of the situation, but also on age-related factors. Conversely, the academic environment of a classroom is homogeneous in terms of both the linguistic code used and the age of the speakers. However, despite the absence of dialect in the classroom, when students were asked to identify general communication problems in Greek in various situations, they still focused on classroom-related problems. Only five out of 21 students who stated they had communication problems outside the classroom mentioned that their problems occurred when speaking to an elder or an important person.

In conclusion, it is evident that students experience frustration in the academic environment due to their limited competence in Greek. This limited competence manifests itself primarily in the areas of reading, writing and comprehending difficult vocabulary. This may often lead to lack of participation and low academic performance on the part of the students.

Teachers' perception of the problem

The teachers' assessment of the problem reinforces the students' perception of the same situation. Teachers, when asked to identify problems they face in the classroom due to the presence of bilingual repatriated students, concentrated on the following

major areas: students' lack of comprehension of subject content due to technical vocabulary and advanced language being, students' lack of participation, and lack of interest on the part of the students. These problems result in disruption and slowing down of the lesson as well as creating difficulties meeting the individual needs of the students in conjunction with the instructional objectives set by the curriculum. More specifically, teachers notice that students respond negatively towards subjects taught in Greek, especially towards grammar courses, and often withdraw into themselves. This situation magnifies the heterogeneity of the classroom environment and annoys students who prefer to "get on" with the lesson.

Teachers did not mention problems in specific skills, such as reading and writing, as students did. However, when asked to comment on the areas and the degree in which students show weakness in Greek, those teachers who answered indicated that many students encounter moderate to great difficulty in reading, writing, and technical vocabulary. The areas of listening and speaking were mentioned as being problematic by fewer teachers and, in those fewer cases, the difficulty ranged from minor to moderate.

Conclusion

The findings of our study show that children of repatriated families in Cyprus face a lot of language-related problems and constitute a group of bilinguals with specific needs. The problems related to their education can be attributed to two language-related factors. First, they may not be balanced-bilinguals in the sense that they do not equally command Greek and English. Second, they do not equally command the four basic language skills in Greek. Their apparent fluency in spoken Greek (i.e. the BICS aspect of their proficiency) is falsely regarded as an indication of their ability to perform successfully in Greek in an academic environment (the CALP aspect of their proficiency).

Recommendations

In addition to what the students and the teachers suggested with regard to the problem, we have the following recommendations:

Since it seems that most, if not all, of these repatriated students face language-related problems, the various schools must be prepared to deal with them before the problems start surfacing. This should be achieved through a timely detection of the problems via the development and administration of appropriate placement tests and/or improvement of the existing placement tests. These tests should differentiate and discriminate adequately among the various levels of proficiency in the two languages. In addition, these tests should cover all four skills and assess the degree to which the students can use BICS and CALP. For a test to accommodate all these needs, it must be

very sophisticated and contain both written and oral components. According to the results of these placement tests, students with language problems should be treated in the following ways: A) Classes for Greek as a foreign language that students can attend on top of their regular classes should be created. In these classes, the textbooks should focus on specific skills (reading, writing) and on developing the CALP aspect of the student's proficiency. B) A designated bilingual teacher should assist these students with their individual problems after class. This teacher should work in cooperation with the teachers of Modern Greek, Greek History, and Religious Instruction and provide students with materials in both languages. C) Students should be pulled out of the mainstreamed classes only for the classes in Modern Greek, Greek History, and Religious Instruction and attend classes where instruction would be in Greek at a slower pace. This will prevent students from feeling uncomfortable or disadvantaged in a classroom with native speakers of Greek. In addition, for the courses that are taught in Greek, students should have a choice in how and in what language they would be tested. For example, students could perform orally or in writing in either English or Greek. It was very evident throughout students' comments that they felt they got penalized for their inability to deliver the content of a course even though they knew the content. A solution adopted by other countries facing similar problems (US, Canada, Germany) is the creation of a transitional bilingual school where repatriated students would have a chance to prepare as quickly as possible to pursue studies in Greek. This extra year of schooling would also be useful in helping repatriated students adjust to the "new" culture. Moreover, adjustment into the "new" culture should be promoted further by having private English schools in Cyprus incorporate extra-curricular activities to help the "acculturation" process. For example, a "buddy/host family" system should be created where a native Greek student can interact with a repatriated student both academically and socially. Both parties stand to benefit from this cooperation as they complement each other linguistically and culturally. Finally, the Ministry of Education and Culture plays a major role in the implementation of the above suggestions, a role which, according to various schools, is not currently adequately fulfilled. The Ministry of Education and Culture should train teachers to tend to the needs of this special group of students, develop the appropriate materials and placement tests, and promote a closer cooperation with the individual schools.

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