

CURRENT RESEARCH IN MULTILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION IN LEBANON: A REPORT

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Abstract – *In their research report the authors introduce 11 research projects in the area of multilingualism and education currently undertaken in Lebanon. A number of projects tackle the issue of multilingualism and language learning. Empirical studies describe students' perceptions as well as the perspectives of their teachers and discuss consequences for educational practices in schools and universities. The authors present the contributions in three groups: The section on 'Multiculturalism between yesterday and today' comprises papers dealing various aspects of multicultural aspects of life and communication, whereas the focus of the second group, 'Special cases of multilingualism', is on specific patterns of multilingual communication. The contributions of the last section, 'Multiculturalism and education', discuss a variety of language related issues in multilingual education. The overall aim of the article is to present the studies to a wider public and encourage a more international discussion of these issues which are relevant in many countries around the Mediterranean.*

Introduction

It is often claimed that multilingualism and multiculturalism are cornerstones of Lebanese society. For many generations now, Lebanon has adopted Lebanese Arabic as the spoken language and Modern Standard Arabic as the official written language. In addition, there is a considerable amount of Arabic-French bilingualism with English rapidly gaining ground in recent years. It is generally accepted that English is the language of business and French that of culture. Many schools use French or English as the language of instruction, and university education is increasingly dominated by English. Further, since the end of the civil war in the early 90's, many Lebanese who had settled abroad in English-speaking nations, returned to Lebanon to be close to their elderly parents and, most importantly, to give their children a chance to grow up Lebanese, thereby adding another facet to the multilingual, multicultural quilt that characterises Lebanon.

The conference on 'Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Lebanon: Conflict or Opportunity?' held at the Lebanese American University, which sparked the idea for this special issue of the *MJES*, included an afternoon of

workshop sessions. Teachers from a wide variety of institutions in Lebanon presented contributions on questions about the relationship between language and identity, the consequences of multilingualism in education and every day life, and finally the effect of multilingualism on language learning were raised. Presentations varied between empirical research, qualitative approaches and case studies, and dealt with a wide array of issues ranging from historical aspects to schooling to communicating with domestics. We divided them into three main categories.

First, 'Multiculturalism between yesterday and today'—This group of presentations included discussions on the historical implications of multiculturalism, the effect of multiculturalism on communication, particularly in the ways it empowers or disempowers individuals and reflects their conflict resolution styles, and finally characteristics of code-switching among the Lebanese.

Second, 'Special cases of multilingualism'—Some presentations narrowed their focus to specific situations such as raising awareness about the recent phenomenon of 'Third Culture Kids' or emphasising home communication, particularly language preference with children and domestics.

The last group of studies dealt with multicultural issues at school and university, and raised concerns about the choice of instructional materials at school level, about interference between English and Arabic in elementary school teaching, the challenges of foreign-language instruction at the university level and the reasons behind students' writing difficulties in the English language.

Multiculturalism between yesterday and today

A. Ekmekji (Haigazian University, Beirut) presented a paper on 'Multiculturalism in Lebanon: Opportunities (Archaeological Perspectives)', in which she hypothesises that multicultural cities have a better chance of survival in history than mono-cultural ones. Using the history of Lebanon as a framework for analysis, Ekmekji emphasises the capacity of man for learning and transmitting knowledge, and focuses on cities, namely Beirut and Byblos, that survived throughout history because of their multicultural rather than mono-cultural inclination. The author believes that multiculturalism is closely related to dexterity and flexibility and hence a society possessing these characteristics has a better chance of survival. A chronology of key events in the history of these two cities is delineated, and, to further support her argument, the author refers to the Darwinian theory of natural selection or the survival of the fittest. She also draws up a number of similarities between the two port cities and other Mediterranean cities in terms of trade, politics, language, religion, architecture and writing, and stresses that exposure to various cultures results in a number of enriching cultural

experiences. The many vestiges that survive today are living proof of the richness of the cultural exchanges and the openness of those ancient societies. The paper also contrasts other cities, where multiculturalism was not evident and hence were ill-fated: they perished and disappeared in the aftermath of a natural disaster or in the wake of a human invasion and left no trace of their pre-existence, presumably due to their inability to adapt to a new environment and culture. The author concludes on an optimistic note, hoping that lessons be drawn from our ancestors' experiences and transmitted to future generations.

The next paper in this category focuses on the effect of multiculturalism on communication and the many lessons one can learn from analysing the choice of language in oral narratives of bilingual individuals. M. Crespo's article 'Learned Helplessness: How Does the Language Reflect it?' focuses on the relationship between choice of students' language and the underlying psychological attributions. Specifically, the author discusses a behavioural pattern called 'learned helplessness' in which students see themselves as lacking the power or strength to manage by themselves. This concept is in turn associated with locus of control, that is, whether individuals feel or do not feel responsible for the consequences of their actions. Helpless individuals ascribe failure to internal factors such as lack of ability but not to lack of effort, and ascribe success to external factors such as easiness of the tasks or help from others but not to ability or effort. Learned helplessness seems to act as a self-defence mechanism to help the individual cope with the lack of self-esteem. The author asserts that, when control is possible and the individual fails to exert it, the consequence will be negative on the person's mood and attitude (depression); whereas when there is a pervasive feeling of inability to control a given situation, a passive acceptance of outcomes ensues, as in the case of natural disasters.

The author indicates that the salient characteristics of learned helplessness are a lack of persistence on tasks which could realistically be mastered, poor self-concept, low self-esteem, low tolerance for frustration, passivity, unwillingness to take risk, unwillingness to attempt academic tasks, less independence and more demands on teacher time, no control over outcomes, and emphasis on shortcomings.

The author refers to the Spanish language to illustrate how people choose particular phrases to describe themselves and their relationship to events, which reflect their tendency to place the locus of control on environmental causes. According to her, bilingual Spanish-English speaking children seem to have internalised the system very early when they code-switch from English to Spanish to avoid responsibility for a given situation. In the last part of the article, the author refers to research on reactions to failure depending on perception of locus of control. She points out that active (mastery-oriented) and learned helpless learners (passive) react in completely opposite ways. Mastery oriented learners accept responsibility

for failure while maintaining high expectations, they seek the task, are stimulated to work harder, take responsibility for success and are independent learners. Passive learners accept responsibility for failure but lower their expectations for future success; they give up, quit, avoid the task, ascribe their success to external forces and develop dependence. The author concludes that learned helplessness is a 'learned' behaviour and can therefore be 'unlearned.' She recommends that teachers and parents help students conquer helplessness by helping them to alter their belief that their personal behaviour does not affect achievement outcomes.

A second study in this vein deals with the implications of communication on conflict resolution styles. Using Rotter's Social Learning Theory (SLT) as a framework, D. Tawil's article 'Language as a Mediator of Coping Strategies in a Conflict Situation' discusses the effect of language on conflict coping styles. According to SLT, each language carries with it implicit associative meanings which are culturally specific (emic) and which may not extend to other cultures (etic). Thus, languages can conceptually be arranged along a continuum of strong to weak associative meanings, which differ relative to the extent of the associative meaning, the languages carry.

The article discusses the extent to which the language of the conflict influences the reactions it elicits from respondents and its universality. A review of literature focuses on bilingual research and the influence of the respective culture on response to questionnaires. In one study, bilinguals' patterns of response to some tests were characterised by ethnic affirmation, i.e. endorsement of native culture value when responding in their non-native language particularly with 'ego-involving' items. In another study consisting of non-ego involving items, cultural accommodation was suggested to explain bilinguals' responses that were appropriate in the non-native language. Social desirability was cited as a motive behind this pattern of response.

In order to answer the question whether a subject's responses to a conflict situation are affected by changing the language in which the conflict is presented, the author reports an experiment with a sample of 320 college students divided into four groups of 80. They were confronted with a critical conflict situation in a different language: Arabic, English, French or Armenian. Results showed that the French-language group's style of coping with a conflict was excessively confrontational and was characterised by a low avoidance response tendency which may be attributed to the higher individualism valued by the French culture. Further, social desirability was cited as an explanation for the observed differences between the French on the one hand, and the Arab and Armenian groups which are renowned for their collectivism. Finally, the English group showed collectivist proclivity in their conflict resolution styles. In his conclusion the author discusses the relationship between the ways in which a foreign language

is acquired, the cultural values attached, the role of teachers who teach this foreign language, and the implications for conflict resolution styles.

The last article in this category shifts emphasis to code switching and sheds some light on the level of bilingualism or multilingualism among the Lebanese. Starting with the premise that pure monolingualism is virtually non-existent and that code switching is a universally common practice that may encompass use of body language, A. Rabai takes an optimistic view in his contribution 'Code Switching in Lebanese Rhetoric: A Choice or an Obligation'. He focuses on evidence that multilingualism in Lebanon is an asset to the culture and can be used as a basis for more effective language instruction. Focusing on vocabulary as the more salient form of code switching in Lebanon, the author analyses input from three sources: interviews with employees, college students' essays on subjects of their choice, and finally a language situation questionnaire soliciting information on various reasons for code switching. Results from the interviews show that, despite their varying levels of proficiency, subjects possessed a functional level of English. Substitution of Arabic or French was observed when fluency in the first language could not be maintained and evidenced cognitive code switching, a process that the author deems advantageous to one's learning experience. The writing samples indicated that students switched codes when they hedged on the correct word in English. The questionnaires finally ranked Arabic the language of choice when communicating with family, friends, supermarket clerks and government officials, and hence, Arabic is the language that fulfils emotional and personal needs. Paradoxically, English is used in fast-food restaurants, electronic, business and casual written communication.

In light of his findings, the author advocates more effective use of bilingual/multilingual communication patterns and the use of code switching in the classroom as a means to address language deficiencies and improve language instruction in order to enhance communication in a world bound for globalisation. The author concludes that multilingualism in itself does not constitute a threat to one's cultural identity, but rather the political agendas that the teaching of foreign languages might hide.

Special cases of multilingualism

The second category of presentations deals with special cases of multilingualism in Lebanon, which have significant implications for the rest of Lebanese society. Chief among these special cases is the concern raised by R. Auty's article 'The Return of Third Culture Kids (TCKs)' referring to a special category of children living Lebanon. The author uses the term Third Culture Kids

(TCKs) to refer to those children, who, having been born or having lived abroad for some time, then return to Lebanon typically, because their parents decided to give up a prosperous lifestyle in a foreign country in order to play an active role in the reconstruction of Lebanon or to be close to their ageing parents. These children often experience difficulties due to their inadequate mastery of the Arabic language and struggle in a vastly different educational system.

The paper stresses cultural problems that TCKs experience and have to learn to cope with and starts with a number of inspiring quotes that reflect the mixed blessings of being born and raised in a different culture. The author provides a detailed example focusing on a child born in Australia who then returned to Lebanon. Lifestyles between Australia and Lebanon are compared and contrasted, and the struggle of this child at school is delineated. Not only is the language an impediment but also different methods of teaching contribute to the child's difficulties. Aware of the considerable number of students, who have faced and will probably face this problem in the future, the author suggests that teachers acquire a broad cross-cultural knowledge and deal with these students by way of more positive reinforcement. Referring to a 1995 study, the author maintains that it takes 3 to 6 months for children to adjust to a new environment, new school and new culture, and hence children experiencing such cultural changes should not be graded during this transitional period. The author concludes by urging teachers and counsellors to be more tolerant and understanding of the needs of these special children to prevent alienation and/or repatriation to their country of birth.

J. Bahous' paper 'What Language Should a Lebanese Child Learn First?' shifts the focus to a question many parents invariably ask when thinking of the choice of language to be used at home. There is a common belief among Lebanese parents regarding the importance of teaching their children a foreign language at an early age in a culture where foreign language instruction is deeply valued. Parents tend to set three years as an age limit for their child to master a foreign language. The author refutes this misconception by citing a number of studies in the field of early childhood education and psychology identifying more accurately the exact period where the child is most receptive to foreign language instruction. Studies concur that second language acquisition is governed by a biologically determined period considered a sensitive stage where the acquisition is easier than at any other periods. This period is near the age of puberty, beyond which acquisition of a second language, particularly the native accent, becomes significantly more challenging. The author details the different stages of brain development and studies implications on language acquisition. In the last part of the article, she surveys a number of cognitive theories regarding the principles of language learning and teaching, and discusses a study on children whose native language was English and second language French. The study shows the inability

of non-native speakers to communicate with native speaker ability despite adequate comprehension. This failure could be attributed to the insufficient opportunities to use the target language or to be adequately reinforced. In her conclusion, the author advises parents not to push their children to learn a foreign language at an early age, but instead wait for the proper time when a foreign language could be most effectively acquired.

Concerns related to choice of language at home extend beyond using language with children to using language with domestics. The title of A. Oueini and N Haraty's case study 'Karooona Bring Madame Shahata!' refers to a commonly heard phrase in many middle- and upper middle-class households in Lebanon, where foreign domestics are ubiquitous, in order to establish the premise of their study. The Lebanese use a combination of Arabic and English phrases when addressing their Sri Lankan, Filipino, Ghanaian or Ethiopian maids, assuming that the domestics in question would not understand otherwise. While the Lebanese have thus found a relatively effective common ground to communicate with their domestics, a direct outcome was reported to be limited language acquisition for these maids and the prevalence of a language environment characterised by a hodgepodge of phrases comparable to bilingual baby talk.

The authors used a qualitative case study with a Sri Lankan maid who was given a list of instructions in three modes: simple but accurate English sentences, simple but accurate Arabic sentences, and a combination of Arabic and English telegraphic speech. Results showed that the maid understood instructions in all three modes of language. Further, in discussing the stages of development of English language acquisition, the authors emphasises the supremacy of comprehension over expression, and conclude that the Lebanese communicate with their domestics as if they were communicating with children who are 27 to 48 months old. The last part of the paper details the drawbacks of bilingual telegraphic speech used with maids, namely the tedium of finding a linguistic common ground with the maids, the negative effects of such limited language models on children, the difficulty of communication during emergencies, limited comprehension and expression during phone conversations, and limited language acquisition for the maids. The authors recommend in their conclusion that one language and complete sentences should be used in communication with domestics.

Multiculturalism and education

The last category centres on language instruction at the school and university levels and raises various issues ranging from choosing effective instructional materials to writing correct essays in English. Kabbani's paper, 'English the

Global Language—Whose Culture is Reflected, Especially in Textbooks and Materials?’ discusses how the target culture could be taken into account when selecting materials for instruction at the school level.

Starting with the premise that English has become the international language of choice, and that most ESL books are written for immigrants to Northern America, England and Australia, the author addresses the issue of language as it relates to culture and questions the validity of culture-biased American ESL books. To appreciate the difficulty of learning about a culture, the author gives the example of a best selling American textbook that purports to teach cultural literacy and that includes items the author, an American and native English speaker, was not cognisant of. She argues that teaching about cultures need not be too overpowering, but rather, should make learning an enjoyable experience through a variety of learning activities such as songs, rhymes, proverbs and idioms. Further, the author favours a global view to English and perceives multilingualism as a more enriching experience to be embraced by the educational system, and urges fellow English teachers in Lebanon to develop materials and resources with a global cultural agenda.

Staying in the realm of the elementary school, J. Fitzgerald draws on her experience as a classroom teacher in Egypt and Lebanon to explore common patterns of linguistic interference between English and Arabic. She starts the paper titled ‘Linguistics Interference and Language Learning: Arabic-English’ with a physiological explanation of language. She points out that language is stored in the brain as in a coil, which gets tighter as one’s proficiency in a language increases. She adds that one’s mother tongue is stored in the tightest coil of all layers, which are created by the acquisition of a new language form on top of the first coil. The native language coil tightens as one’s knowledge of the new language becomes more complete, but occasionally interferes with the first coil, depending on the gaps that exist in the new language. Referring to her experience in Egypt and Lebanon, the author devotes the rest of her brief paper to list examples of such interferences, which fall into two categories: Arabic into English, and English into Arabic. In the first case, errors include the misuse of possessive pronouns, and failure to see a preposition as part of the verb. In the second, mistakes involve word order and numbers. The author recommends that teachers separate language coils so that students can achieve more effective bilingualism using such strategies as meaning posters, role-playing, and structure of the week practice activities.

Shifting focus to the university level, the next two studies are perspectives provided by two ESL instructors raising concerns about some of the challenges associated with teaching non-native speakers of English who claim to be multilingual.

C. Kfoury's article 'The Effects of Multilingualism on University Students as seen by ESL Instructors' purports to answer the following question: Are our university students really multilingual? The author believes that truly multilingual students are rare in Lebanon. Multilingualism, 'the ability to understand, speak, read and write in more than two languages,' exists at the rate of 2 students per class of 35, usually born to a foreign parent living in Lebanon, having attended a school that teaches three languages in Lebanon, and having a higher success rate at the graduate level in foreign universities.

Despite the wide interest in an American education to ensure better professional opportunities, many students at the sophomore level reportedly make basic grammar errors, and have significant difficulties expressing themselves at a critical or analytical level. To prove her point, the author analysed 35 papers written by native Arabic speakers for an English course at the sophomore level in an American college that uses English as the primary language of instruction. In these papers, the influence of the native language or the second language over English was evident, and hence, the papers written in English were replete with evidence of French or Arabic. Out of the 35 papers, only two showed little evidence of difficulties with the English language, whereas the rest had problems of varying degrees of seriousness, ranging from subject verb agreement, the basic rule in English writing, to distinguishing between countables and non-countables.

The last part of the paper tackles the reasons behind these difficulties and the effective ways to remedy them. The author maintains that the problem originates at school, and suggests that schools emphasise academic writing and reading to help college-bound students make a smoother transition to higher education. She also asks students and parents to appreciate the rigors of an English education, and urges college students to work harder on improving deficits in the English language, thereby dispelling the myth that English is an easy language.

In her contribution 'Students' Perceptions of their Language Learning in a Multilingual Context: A Study at LAU,' N. Bacha took a different perspective on college students' difficulties with learning English and targeted their perceptions with respect to their academic struggle. As research indicates that L1 Arabic non-native speakers of English with L2 English or French face difficulties in writing in an academic setting, this empirical paper focuses on a sample of students' perceptions as possible factors that contribute to their writing difficulties. A comparative study was carried out in the Freshman and Sophomore English composition classes between students who had mainly followed an English system of education during their high school studies and those who had followed a French system. The following aspects were explored: students' language background, comparison between the perceptions of the English and French

educated students; and, finally, a comparison between the perceptions of the students as a whole with those of the faculty.

Results are presented based on a quantitative analysis of the statistical findings, and the author points to the following implications for the teaching/learning of writing in a multi-lingual context. Although teachers should be aware of contrastive rhetoric and lexicography, writing conventions may not necessarily influence or be the cause of the students' problems in writing in English. Second, students' perceptions such as those of the French educated that indicate a high rating for French interference may not necessarily reflect the real situation. It is not uncommon to find students' perceptions quite different from those revealed by detailed linguistic analysis. Teachers, however, need to be aware of the influencing L1 factors on the language of instruction and the importance of students acquiring relevant learning strategies to the development of their writing proficiency.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism in Lebanon, just like any other aspect of Lebanese culture, is far from simple. It has significant historical antecedents and presents serious challenges in today's fast-growing economy and ever-changing society. The collection of papers presented in this conference raised important issues and demystified many beliefs about multilingualism. While some studies remained theoretical in essence, others adopted a more practical perspective and made specific recommendations or provided practical tips for remedying certain problematic situations. The reality remains: Multiculturalism is here to stay in Lebanon and will thrive for many more years. The Lebanese are advised to continue addressing these important issues endemic to their culture in the hope of finding common grounds for communication and sensible solutions to persisting problems. It is hoped that this report is the beginning of an international discussion, which should raise more issues and provide alternative solutions and perspectives for the region around the Mediterranean.

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