

The Effect of Multilingualism in a University Foreign Language Classroom

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## Research Proposal

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Language educators will almost unanimously agree that having knowledge of a second language in addition to the speaker's mother language will facilitate the learning of subsequent languages. This assumption is seemingly taken for granted, but language instruction does not reflect this view since instruction will often proceed under the premise that a student is learning everything from scratch. The majority of language programs begin with teaching the basics with the assumption that language learners are all beginning at the same level and have no other frame of reference to build upon.

Having taught German I have often had to use Spanish during office hours as a means to show my Spanish-speaking students what exactly a German grammatical structure translate to in Spanish. Once having done so the students will rapidly understand how that structure works without any additional explanation, especially when a given structure does not exist in English or is not used the same way. Research I have read shows that even having partial knowledge of a second language aids in the learning of other languages later on (Lightbrown, 1993, Marshall, 2000, & Vasilijev, 2000).

### Problem Statement

Given all this research showing how beneficial having knowledge of a second language is, there is still large amounts of information lacking that would justify having courses geared towards learners possessing this knowledge of a second language and the benefits this knowledge has in the language classroom.

### Purpose

As a result of the lack of knowledge this research will gather the information that is needed to help language educators make better decisions to the extend of how to better expand

language programs. The research that will be conducted will be to primarily collect quantitative information showing that there is a difference between monolingual and multilingual language learners in a university setting using traditionally aged students that would typically enroll in a language class. The information that will be collected (placement exam scores, quiz scores, test scores, and final exam scores) will be used to help mold a course specifically designed to cater and help accelerate the acquisition of a new language in monolinguals.

### **Research Questions**

How much more of an advantage do traditionally aged university language learners having knowledge of more than one language have over their colleagues enrolled in the same class, but with no other language experience aside from their mother language?

Is there a significantly higher proficiency in the language from those that took a traditional language course compared to those who took a language course designed for students knowing other languages?

### **Hypotheses**

*H1<sub>0</sub>*: [There is no difference in learning a new language among monolinguals and multilinguals]

*H1<sub>a</sub>*: [There is a difference in learning a new language when comparing monolinguals learning L2 and multilinguals learning L3]

*H1<sub>b</sub>*: [Given the difference from *H1<sub>a</sub>*, multilinguals are capable of learning a new language at an accelerated rate with a higher proficiency in a specialized course than monolinguals in a typical language course]

### **Significance of the Study**

The completion of this research would give language educators quantitative research that they can use to help design and promote language courses created for this ever-increasing population of language learners. The research will also provide additional information showing the usefulness of learning more than one language in regards to language acquisition and the aid this additional language provides in further language learning.

### **Definitions<sup>1</sup>**

Monolingual – A person who has never learned or been exposed to a second language.

Multilingual – A person who is a heritage speaker of another language (spoke a language other than English at home), learned a second language at some point in their academic career, grew up in a multilingual environment but never spoke a language other than English.

L1 – Mother language

L2, L3, L4... any subsequent language known in addition to L1.

### **Summary**

From talking to colleagues it would easily seem that null hypothesis would easily be defeated and testing the research hypothesis would be definitely possible. Given how there are observations from within the classroom of a difference, the research and literature should be able to support the claims from language instructors. If this also happens to be correct, the possibility to expand and accelerate language learning for bilinguals should be a significantly motivating factor for language departments at the university level and perhaps even K-12 schools where foreign languages are offered.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions provided are common linguistical terms and are common accepted meanings.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Purpose Statement, Organization, and Sources**

The literature and the review that follows were chosen as examples to support the purpose of this research portfolio, which is to identify validity of the commonly held belief among foreign language instructors that having knowledge of a foreign language will help in learning new languages. This belief is not without validity, there is plenty of research showing that knowing a second language or more is very beneficial to the learner and that globally there is a large proportion of the population that speaks more than one language. The dilemma is that this research does not indicate exactly how much these known languages will influence the learning of a new language, especially not in a university setting where languages are still taught with the assumption that the language learning student has no other linguistically background. This research project will hopefully help language faculty and administrators decide the benefits of tailoring some of the language courses to students that already possess knowledge of two or more languages.

The overarching theme of the literature was the influence of bilingualism on third or subsequent language acquisition in a university setting. The three sub-themes and literature review that are under the main theme are presented in a logical and progressive nature as far as language acquisition is concerned. The first sub-theme as well as the supporting literature will be the influences that previously learned language grammar linguistical structures have on a new language being learned. The next sub-theme or step demonstrates that the fluency level of the previously learned languages have a correlative effect on the amount of influence they have on the new language being learned. The third sub-theme or step illustrate that previously learned languages do in fact have an additive effect that enhances the learning of new languages. Lastly

the final sub-theme or step will present some of the of the literature that exists on customizing language instruction to take advantage of previous language experience in learning new languages.

The literature search strategy that I used to find the articles for this section were Linguistics and Language behavior abstracts database, the ERIC database via EBSCO host and the Literary Reference Center also via EBSCO host. These databases were chosen because the CSULB Library categorized them under Language and Linguistics. These databases provided a wealth of secondary literature when I used the following search terms: Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Second Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Foreign Language Acquisition, Language Proficiency, Third Language Learning, and Native Language. Using a combination of these search terms and the OR and AND Boolean operators helped reduce the search results to articles that were relevant to the topic of this research proposal.

**Previously learned or acquired languages will influence the grammatical and linguistic structures of the new target language being learned.**

Missaglia (2009) compared learning a new language by adults to that of children and found that while infants show better results in acquiring the phonetic system of a language adults on the other hand have the ability to call upon their first language to outperform infants in lexical and grammatical acquisition. The adult language learner's inability to outperform an infant on a phonetic ability is due to the fact that after puberty the sensitive period in which to modify the phonetic reception patterns becomes resistant to modification resulting in a higher reliance on the phonetic system of the mother language of the learner (Missaglia, 2009). In the case of the of the German and Italian speakers who are learning English in the Missaglia (2009) article it is easier for them to acquire the phonetics and phonology of English, because English is viewed as a

mixed language in that it is a Germanic language, but with about 40% of its lexicon derived French “and many further lexical items of Romance origin (Latin, Italian, Spanish, etc.)” as such the learner already has the ability to produce English phonemes before even being trained on how to do so.

Leung’s (2007) research also found that there was transference from Cantonese speakers who learned English into the French that was being learned. The research did notice an anomaly that could pose a problem in learning a 3<sup>rd</sup> language; there were in grammatical certain tasks no transference from Cantonese into French as there was from English in to French. This lack of transference resulted in errors being created in French typical to English speakers, but not by the Cantonese only speaking control group.

The tests that were conducted by Jaensch (2010) on the other hand show showed that there was no significant different from L2 into L3 on most of the tests involving adjectival inflection of nouns conducted. This conclusion can be interpreted by the idea that perhaps similar adjectival inflections do not exist in L1 or L2 to be called upon to be used in L3.

These three articles suggest that while there is some transference between second languages into a third language being learned, which depends on the actual structures that exist in L1 and L2 that are similar enough be applied to the new language. The conclusion can also be formed from this research is also, that some of the structures can be transferred from previous learned languages into a new one if the language is similar enough; otherwise the new structures would be learned by memorization, which is the case when the learner is unable to transfer similar structures from L1 into L2 or through overgeneralization in a circumstance where transferring a structure from L1 into L2 works, but only in certain conditions. This would at the



very least appear to be the case in most modern languages that tend to cover the more common European and Asian languages.

**The proficiency and linguistic knowledge of previously learned languages have a direct effect in the acquisition of a subsequent language.**

Chamot (1972) used children who were bilingual French and Spanish speakers to see what effect that has on learning English in an immersion environment. While this study may not be too applicable in a university setting due to the fact children are still well within the critical period, which makes it possible to assimilate a language and develop native fluency. The dissertation did use the same method I would use to measure whether L1 and L2 have any effect in L3, school achievement scores Chamot (1972). The majority of the other articles have attempted to measure responses on specific exams instead of attempting to measure over all achievement, which should be the primary method of assessing language skills. The article though is in agreement with those from Sub-Theme one, which is that two or more related languages can have a greater influence than would two unrelated languages Chamot (1972).

Tremblay (2006) found similar results but narrowed it down a step forward to indicate that if an L2 learner has a high L2 proficiency and exposure then there is significant influence in L3 nearly to the same level that L1 had on the L3 being learned. Along these same lines Rask (2010) found that multilingual students upon beginning to learn a new (L3) language or new grammatical structures were often found to be using their various L2 language knowledge in an attempt to understand the new structures that were being learned in L3. The test results showed that even when first exposed to these new structures they were able to use the new grammatical ideas sooner than those students that only had L1 to work with. Even Carvalho (2006) who viewed that there was a discrepancy in the research showing that some studies show that L1 has

a greater role than L2 in learning L3 and vice versa found that these differences can be due to the similarities or distance between L1 to L3 and L2 to L3. In other words the further removed, linguistically speaking, L1 is from L3 the more L2 will be used to learn the structures of L3. The only major drawback presented was that in the case of languages that are so close together such as Portuguese and Spanish, extra care needs to be taken during instruction to ensure that students don't overgeneralize the syntax and begin committing errors by ignoring the rules of L3 in favor of those of the familiar L2.

The research on using L2 to assist in Learning L3 does seem to so far support the idea that it can be used to the advantage of a language instructor, as long as they are aware that there is a high possibility of negative influence in L3 due to overgeneralization. Knowing this an L3 instructor, who is also proficient in L2, would be able to point out similarities that exist and what errors not to commit or the use grammar that is more like L1 even though the learner would have the tendency to use L2 due to a potentially overall similarity of L2 to L3.

### **Previously learned languages have an additive effect that enhances language learning.**

Cenoz (2003) presents that previous studies have shown that the mere fact of being multilingual gives the speaker the ability to "use a wider range of linguistic and mnemonic strategies and are more flexible in their use than monolinguals." This alone should support bilingual students learning more languages; they are more adept at being able to use their linguistic strategies to form connections to the new language from the languages that are already known. In addition this article also points out that multiple studies have also concluded that bilinguals have a higher metalinguistic ability and as a result are more easily able to reflect on language and manipulate it especially on tasks where they need to identify incorrect meaningful sentences Cenoz (2003). In other words multilinguals are more capable of identifying

sentences that are grammatically correct anomalous sentences, which would translate to being better at identifying incorrect word order in the language being learned even though the grammar might be correct.

In addition Cenoz (2003) shows that the mere fact of being bilingual was found to exert a significant influence on a third language being learned even after taking “general intelligence, and motivation” into account, which were shown to be “more important than the influence of bilingualism.” These studies are promising, because at a university level there is not much of a requirement that students take a foreign language. There are usually other options for students to take to meet General Education requirements aside from the Foreign Languages. This tends to mean that students who enroll in a language course are more often students who have an interest in being there or have some form of motivation to learn a language. This motivation coupled with a potential for bilingualism can be easily used to help expedite language learning at the university level especially with courses tailored for this audience.

A similar conclusion from Falk & Bardel (2010) was reached showing the bilingualism has a direct effect on L3 acquisition, but with the caveat that “it is not always clear which background variable is decisive for transfer from L1 or L2 into L3.” This also corresponds directly to language learners potentially over generalizing grammatical structures because they falsely view one language as being more grammatically closer to L3 and choosing to use it over another background language. This effect shows that as the learner learns more languages, they will naturally be inclined to use the linguistic knowledge they have accumulated when learning a new language. This additive effect leads the students to pull upon their lexical knowledge to interpret the language being learned, but also has the potential to introduce a negative effect such as incorrectly assuming or applying syntactical rules based on what the learner views as being

correct based on previous linguistic experiences. Although this still leaves a lot to be studied to see how a language learner makes this decision and to use that to correctly build upon in the classroom.

### **Summary**

All of the journals that I've found and used for this research proposal appear to indicate, that there is transference between the known languages and a new language being learned. There was though significant divergence between what exactly a student uses from their linguistic background to help them learn a new language. Further research needs to be done at least in the specific area of language pedagogy to see exactly how this linguistic transference can help in the classroom, since the majority of current research seems to have looked for very specific examples of language transference rather than an over all view which, is what would be of most interest to a language instructor. Predominantly the research is positive and a more comprehensive review of current literature would also help further shape any research done in this field. Especially taking into account what some of the problems that can be encountered when a language learner is attempting to learn a language that is extremely similar to one that is already known. Further consideration needs to be given as to the proficiency of the languages that a student has knowledge of since this also plays a major role in language learning as well as to the motivations that lead a student to learn a given language. These are all variables that need to be accounted for and perhaps be setup as multiple different control and experimental groups with a certain minimum amount of proficiency in L2 in order to establish a more representative picture of the language learning that occurs in a university language classroom. To further address these problems an instructor will need to be chosen that is also bilingual in the same L2

as the students who are enrolled in the foreign language class to take into account any of the problems that can arise from languages that are similar enough to each other to introduce errors.

### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

#### Research Methods and Design(s)

As has been made clear by the literature that was reviewed for this research proposal, the results are still inconclusive when it comes to determining whether bilingualism has a positive in further language learning. The literature suggests that previous languages do have an effect in further language learning, but the extent of that influence in affecting proficiency in a new language being learned still needs to be determined. The research done so far claims that previous language learned has a negative effect in learning a new language in specific circumstances, but simultaneously claiming the opposite by citing different conditions and circumstances in language learning where there is a positive effect shown. Further research must still be conducted from a language education perspective where the overall concern is general fluency and the eventual mastery of a language that is being learned and less so on whether previous languages affect specific grammatical structures in the target language. In addition research needs to be conducted in this field, focused on the overall effect that previous languages have on any new target language specifically focusing on how much of a positive or potentially negative effect there is. In the case of a positive effect, which is the one that will hopefully be the result of this research, the task must then be undertaken to see if such a positive effect is cause enough to begin pursuing pilot programs where language learning is conducted taking into account the additional linguistic knowledge that is brought by bilingual students to the language classroom.

To that effect the research being sought for this proposal will resolve these questions: How much more of an advantage do traditionally aged university language learners having knowledge of more than one language have over their colleagues enrolled in the same class, but

with no other language experience aside from their mother language. The research will also seek out if there is a significantly higher proficiency in the language from those that took a traditional language course compared to those who took a language course designed for students knowing other languages and by how much more?

*H1<sub>0</sub>*: [There is no difference in learning a new language among monolinguals and multilinguals]

*H1<sub>a</sub>*: [There is a difference in learning a new language when comparing monolinguals learning L2 and multilinguals learning L3]

*H1<sub>b</sub>*: [Given the difference from *H1<sub>a</sub>*, multilinguals are capable of learning a new language at an accelerated rate with a higher proficiency in a specialized course than monolinguals in a typical language course]

From the pre tests that will be given to both the monolingual student group and the bilingual student group learning a language to determine if a difference exists between them and by how much a Null Hypotheses question can be determined, which is that there is no significant difference in learning between these two groups as well as that there is no difference between students that are taught a language in a classroom designed to take advantage of student bilingualism versus those in a standard language classroom. On the other hand if the pretests show that there is a significant research then the research hypotheses is that there is a significant quantitative difference between the two groups then having courses structured to take advantage of this difference and provide language instruction in an environment where knowledge of more than one language can be used to the benefit of learning additional languages.

It was found that for this research the best approach was a quasi-experimental design because we would need to observe the results of the students before to see at what state their language learning was as well as to see how much and what kind of a difference there is between

monolingual and bilingual students. This initial stage is more of a descriptive approach, but the experimental stage of the research would be in having three groups created in which two groups continues to receive instruction typical to what is found in the majority of language classrooms with the exception that one group is a traditional group of students and the second group a bilingual one, but the third bilingual group would be in a course specifically designed to take advantage of their bilingualism. It was determined that by the nature of the research it could not be a strict experimental design due to the fact that this research is being conducted on a small population to begin, traditionally aged college students learning a new language, and then the population is then further reduced to students that are bilingual and for which there is a professor who is a speaker of the same language of the students that will be assigned to the specialized instruction classroom. This population sample does not leave an opportunity to have a selective population group.

### **Participants**

The participants for this research project will be traditional aged (18-24) college students who are enrolled in a university first year level foreign language course with no students who are native speakers. This population size is usually at around 12-30 students per course, depending on the language with Spanish, French Chinese, and Japanese courses having the most students in the first year language courses. Combined with all three groups there would be roughly 36-90 students. Additionally it may be necessary to combine multiple sections to establish a big enough control groups. One control group being students who are monolingual and second control group who are bilingual but stay in the traditional language classroom with the monolinguals. To further reduce the possibility of errors it may be also necessary to create a third control group of bilingual students who are also enrolled in a traditional course but the only participants will be



bilingual students. This additional control group will be used to rule out the possibility of students helping each other by explaining similarities of the grammar of the new language being learned and how it relates to the grammar of any known languages. Given that there is a difference between the monolingual students and bilingual students the final group on which the experiment will be conducted on will be enrolled in a foreign language course where they will be learning the same language as the control groups. In order to produce a results that rapidly demonstrate the effects of being bilingual in a third language classroom, the students of the experimental group will all need to share the same second language as well as the instructor who will be teaching the course. This will ensure that instruction is specifically tailored to this common language by a language instructor who is able to demonstrate the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 and how they apply to L3.

This method leaves the ability for the experiment to be repeated in other regions of the world where there is a high percentage of multilingual citizens where research participants could be found who have the same L1 and L2 who are interested in the same L3. Once it is determined that L1 and L2 have a significant role in L3 learning the experiment could even be modified and expanded upon by other researchers by attempting to produce the same experiment, but perhaps by modifying the L1 or L2 so that perhaps the participants all have a different L1 and the same L2, or same L1 different L2. A further variation could be possible such as having a different L1 and L2 learning the same L3, but this could potentially slow down language instruction depending on the instructor's ability to teach L3 with out being able to communicate with the students if the instructor does not have the ability to communicate with the students.

**Materials/Instruments**

The materials that will be used for this study would be the textbook that is approved for usage for that level language course, which will vary by language level and college where the research is conducted. Additionally both the control groups and the experimental group will use the same tests that are given by the instructors for the course to assess progress in the students learning of the language including the pretest that is used to place students in the correct course at the beginning of language study. This pretest will also serve as a posttest to see if the students would be placed in the subsequent course to the one that was just completed or in a higher level course. There will be no need for specialized tests nor textbooks since the initial aims are to see how much more the bilingual students in the experimental class are able to progress compared to the control groups who are in the traditional courses. The test results from all the groups will be collected and used to make the determination if the specialized instruction results in higher test and quiz scores as well as the pace at which the students are able to successfully learn the new material.

**Operational Definition of Variables (Quantitative/Mixed Studies Only)**

Pretest score – The score that is gathered from the aetip.com website which is used to place new students in the correct language course. This score will server as variable 1 and will be used as a baseline and to help determine language proficiency.

Quiz/test scores – The scores from quizzes and tests given through out the semester by the language instructor to help assess the student’s progress in the course. These scores will serve as intermediate variables (Variable n) and will be used to assess the learning of the specific grammatical/thematically units of the course.

Posttest score – The same test from the pretest will be given (aetip.com) because the test has previously been given to students from all the different language level courses to establish a baseline for student placement. The results from this final test will be used as the last variable to see whether multilinguals outperformed monolinguals in the same course and to determine the difference in language proficiency between the groups in this study.

While there may be multiple different scores being studied, the main dependent variable is the degree of language proficiency that is attained at the end of the semester. The multiple scores being used throughout the research will be used to track the dependent variable throughout the semester. The two independent variables in this case would be the amount of time that is studied, but this can be partially controlled by having students keep a log of how much they study. The other independent variable is impossible to control, and that is the student's innate ability to learn a new language coupled with any known languages.

### **Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis**

The materials that will be used to instruct the control and experimental groups will also serve as the data that is collected and will be supplemented by the results from the pre and post tests. A database will need to be created where the L1 and L2 of the students will be recorded as well as the L3 being learned. This database will also need to be divided to reflect the different control and experimental groups. Once this is done it will be a matter of recording the test scores of the students' progress for the duration of the experiment, which would preferably be the entire semester. Once all of the data that is collected it will need to be entered into SPSS to determine what the mean and average improvement occurs during the specialized instruction as well as that of the students in the normal courses.

The independent variables that exist for this research is the amount of time that is studied by the individuals participating in this study. This variable cannot be controlled since each student will study the amount of time that they feel is required for their own goals in mastery of the language and grade. Tied to this is also the motivation to learn the language by the students since more highly motivated students will study more. The only thing that can be done to take this into account is to ask the students how many hours they each studied and group the test scores accordingly. The dependent variable that is being measured is the students test scores as well as an assessment of the learner's fluency/language mastery since having high scores on grammar exams does not immediately translate to fluency and an ability to communicate in the language. The extraneous variables for this research project would be the student's access to universal grammar (UG) that allows for L1 learning. The amount of access that a language learner has to UG is debated and cannot be taken into account for any language-based research.

Given the gathered materials and the entry of the pre and post test scores as well as the result from the semester exams and quizzes, the difference between the multiple control groups and the experimental group. The pre test and post test score will be used to determine if there is a difference between the control groups at the end of the semester and using SPSS to perform a one way ANOVA, we will be able to compare the results of the control group posttests to the scores of the experimental group to determine the difference that exists and the level at which the experimental group surpassed the control groups in learning the new language.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Since the research that will be conducted to determine if there is a positive influence of bilingualism on third language learning as well as creating an experiment where language instruction will be conducted to further enhance this positive influence, the reliability of the

results will be easy enough to reproduce, since the same research can be conducted by others in other language classrooms with a big enough concentration of bilingual students. The experiment can be easily reproduced in other language classrooms, allowing the results to be verified by other researchers. As long as the multiple control groups are established to compare their results with the experimental group, the results of this study can be verified.

### ***Methodological Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations***

The major limitation for this research project is the availability of participants. Given that in order to conduct this research participants need to be found that are enrolled in a language course in a university, are bilingual, that there are enough participants that speak the same language, and that there is a language instructor that is also a speaker of the same languages as the students, this significantly limits the ability to reproduce the results. In addition the researcher needs to also be able to find a language program that is receptive of the research proposal and would be interesting in having the experiment implemented in their department as well as being capable of absorbing the potential influx of students into higher level courses that would normally take a few semesters more to reach the same level of language proficiency.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Given the nature of this experiment simply involves language learning and all the participants will be learning the language in the courses they are enrolled. The research will also be conducted in such a way that it will not hinder language learning and thus run afoul of the language departments giving their consent to have the research conducted. In addition if the experiment is successful it will produce students with a higher proficiency that would otherwise be possible within the same amount of time. As a result there are not any ethical problems that could be perceived arising from the experiment. Since the research and the experimental portions

of the research will also all be conducted following the typical syllabus for the course as well as by actual instructors of the language, the confidentiality of the individuals will be constantly maintained as is normally done for the courses.

### **Summary**

The research is well suited for a quasi-experimental design especially with data being analyzed using a one-way ANOVA given that there will be three groups, the two control and one experimental, and due to the use of the aetip.com pretest to determine any of L1 or L2 can be transferred into L3 before language instruction begins. Once the control groups are identified their scores will be collected to see if the Null hypothesis is negated and allowing for the Research hypothesis to be valid. With the entire amount of documentation that already exists in language instruction this experimented can be conducted at other institutions to see if they have the student body with enough bilingual students to continue with the research. All of the language instruction that exists and the ability to conduct this experiment it will be easy to verify the results that are collected as well as the reliability of the research. The limitations that exists which is primarily the availability of students to conduct this experiment will still pose a problem to other institutions that are willing to conduct it. Although with all the research that exists and the availability of language programs it should still be feasible enough to conduct the experiment especially given the potential to quickly produce students with high language proficiency.

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