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The link between English Language Proficiency and Academic Literacy: A scientific explanation

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting a scientific explanation behind the link between language proficiency and academic performance. This paper adopted the desktop research approach which mostly relied, not only, on a review of published documents, but also extended to oral interviews. There are two types of language proficiency: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The earlier a student acquires the latter, the higher the chances of better academic performance. English language development ideally should include instruction in the types of academic language students encounter in their content classes. This paper's outcome would go a long way in enlightening and subsequently informing the stakeholders and general public on which measures to put in place to improve students' overall academic performance. Since, researchers have indicated that teachers have difficulty explicating scientific and mathematical concepts simply and clearly due to their insufficient lexical resources, the study recommends that teachers be trained to help students access the language in academic texts across the curriculum.

Keywords: Languages proficiency, academic literacy, language development, content classes

1. Introduction

Globally, it is incontrovertible that language competence in the medium of instruction impacts on academic achievement. Language is considered to be a crucial means of gaining access to knowledge and skills (Ramapela, 2014). Language can either promote or impede the acquisition of knowledge and hence impact on scholastic success. Through language, learners are able to construct and put together information to one's own understanding, understand instruction and reformulate and paraphrase information acquired. Learners also use language to seek help, to ask questions and solicit help when having difficulties in a learning activity.

In Kenya, performance ranks high on national agenda hence the furore that engulfs the country after the release of national examination results. Scores are generally acceptable measures of achievement (Maiyo and Ashioya, 2009) and therefore, KCPE and KCSE results attract considerable attention. It has become *cliché* to hear stakeholders in the academic sector talk of the connection between learners' proficiency in English, the language of instruction, and their likelihood to excel in other subjects taught in English. A considerable number of discussions have been held both at parliament and by other stakeholders in the education sector (Oduor, 2014) to discuss the declining performance of English at both the primary and the secondary levels.

The decline in performance is not only registered in English but also in all subjects each recording a mean score less than 50%.

Researchers, too, have dedicated a substantial amount of time to establish the causes and possible remedies of poor performance in the various subjects and how to improve learners' performance (Kembo, 2001, Oyatsi, 2012, Chemiron, 2015). Evidently given insufficient focus in

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these studies is the link between language proficiency and academic literacy. This paper therefore sets to offer a scientific explanation for the correlation between learners, proficiency in the medium of instruction and their overall performance.

1.1 The place of English in the Kenyan Education system

English is among the compulsory subjects that Kenyan learners encounter throughout their schooling years. English is a compulsory subject in both primary (from age 6-9 years) and secondary level (ages 14-18 years). It is the medium of instruction from upper primary (age 9 years) implying that learners not only learn the language but use it to acquire knowledge in other content classes. According to KIE (2002) on the teaching of English in primary schools, one of the objectives of teaching English in Primary Schools is to enable learners to communicate fluently, independently and accurately in English in language in their everyday lives.

It is pertinent to this paper to mention that Kenya is a linguistically heterogeneous country. English is a second language to most of the learners and so is Kiswahili, the country's national language. Kenya has more than 42 languages spoken across the country therefore children, especially those in rural areas, encounter these English and Kiswahili for the first time in school.

English is considered in various clusters that are a requirement to join various courses at the university. For instance, to join either Law or Medicine a student ought to have scored at least a B- (minus). A language is required in all clusters and a poor grade in the language can lead to failure to attain cluster points even after scoring As in the other subjects.

1.2 The performance of English at National Examinations in Kenya

Over the years, the performance of English at both primary and secondary level has been on a decline. Sure and Ogechi(2009) established that by class eight most learners are unable to communicate effectively in English which confirms Bunyi's(2008) results of another study which found that learners are not sufficiently proficient by the time they are joining class four hence affecting learning in their content classes. Schools Aware of the impact of English on academic literacy have often devised their own language policies to improve learner proficiency and performance in English (Kimani, 2012). One such policy is the ban on mother-tongue in school and further encouragement of parents to ensure their children speak English even while at home. There is no scientific backing that discouraging mother tongue use improves proficiency in the second or foreign language. To the contrary, once learners understand concepts in their first language, they can explain them better in the second language (Cummins, 2000)

Wanjiru and Miheso (2015), after their study on the effects of mathematical vocabulary instruction on students' achievement, established that language proficiency does play a role in understanding the vocabulary related to mathematics. Sanders(2007) points out that it is important for learners to be understand the terms, phrases and symbols used in communication mathematical ideas and concepts.

According to Thurmann (2013), most education systems delegate the responsibility of language development to the teachers of language and students are expected to tackle linguistic problems in content subjects with the assumption that they have the required competence.

2. Theories of second language acquisition

Many researchers, linguists and experts in cognitive development concur on the multi-stage process involved in language acquisition whether it is the first language or second language. Jean Piaget's theory divides the process into four distinct processes, Vygotsky views cognitive developments as a dialectical

process and Cummins (1980) distinguishes two types of proficiencies that a learner develops, one a prerequisite of the other.

role of language in general knowledge acquisition. To give a scientific explanation for this link between language proficiency and academic literacy, this paper presents Cummins' theories of bilingualism and cognition.

2.1 Cummins theories of bilingualism and cognition.

This study is guided by Cummins' theory of bilingualism and cognition which are applicable to contexts such as the Kenyan linguistically heterogeneous context whereby most students have English as a second language therefore learning more than one language. Cummins, a leading authority on bilingual education and second language acquisition, distinguishes two types of language proficiencies that a learner acquires in school: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

2.1.1 Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills is the proficiency a learner acquires first and quickly in the language acquisition process particularly by learners from backgrounds similar to English and who spend a lot of their school time interacting with native speakers. It entails the surface skills of listening and speaking which are easily acquired through exposure to the language including on communication media, for example, on television and radio. BICS therefore are those skills that enable learners to communicate in day to day contexts at home or while playing with their friends (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). This explains why learners from urban areas or cities speak English and understand native output but don't necessarily perform well in the subject itself. The same case applies to Swahili language and learners from the coast, they speak and understand the language but this doesn't necessarily translate to good grades in the subject.

Second language learners working with native speakers, as far as academic language is concerned acquire BICS within 5 to 7 years while native speakers attain the same in 2 years (Cummins, 2000). For the Kenyan context where English is a second language and the learners don't work with native speakers, it is expected that learners acquire BICS during their primary schooling. Therefore, it should not be assumed that just because learners have attained a high degree of fluency and accuracy in everyday English, they do have the proficiency that corresponds to academic language.

For BICS to develop, learners need to be given time to interact and socialize in school. This could be achieved by encouraging learners to speak in situations that are drawn from day to day life. BICS goes beyond words and encompasses social cues in the L_2 such as kinesics (use of gestures, body movement, and facial expressions). An ESL (English Second Language Learner) cannot acquire social cues from social interaction therefore teachers need to teach and expose learners to authentic material. Acquisition of social cues takes up to 3 years for a non-native speaker. This fits with the Kenyan education system where English is used a medium of instruction from standard four onwards, that is, after three years of lower primary schooling.

2.1.2 Cognitive Academic language Proficiency (CALP)

This is the kind of proficiency responsible for a learner's ability to cope with academic demands placed upon them by the various subjects taught in school. In the Kenyan context, English is the language of instruction and all subjects are taught in English except Kiswahili and foreign languages like French and German.

Cummins believes that in the course of learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and implicitly metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. This implies that Kenyan learners who are proficient in English should be proficient in Kiswahili but then the

two languages are learnt simultaneously; learning aspects of the language like “word classes” in English and Swahili at the same time.

CALP requires the careful thought in the choice and delivery of content. Learners need to be given opportunities to visualize by use of charts and graphs so as to understand concepts especially the abstract ones. CALP is the kind of language proficiency necessary for formal academic learning encompassing reading, writing and thinking about subject-areas content material.

2.1.3 Cummins theory of Common Underlying Proficiency and the Iceberg Model

Cummins also advocates for the need to use the learner’s primary language, L1 as a base for further learning in the second language. Studies have established that students who have strong literacy skills in their first language will learn English faster (Cummins, 1984; Baker, 1993). According to Freeman & Freeman (2001), most concepts are readily available in the learner’s first language and once developed are accessible through the second language. For example, if a learner understands the rain cycle in his L1, that learner can easily explain the same in the L2.

The acquisition of many languages by the Kenyan learners ought to be beneficial in the acquisition of CALP. Cummins theory Common Underlying Proficiency theory shows the relationship between L1 and L2 in what he calls the Iceberg model (Cummins, 2000)

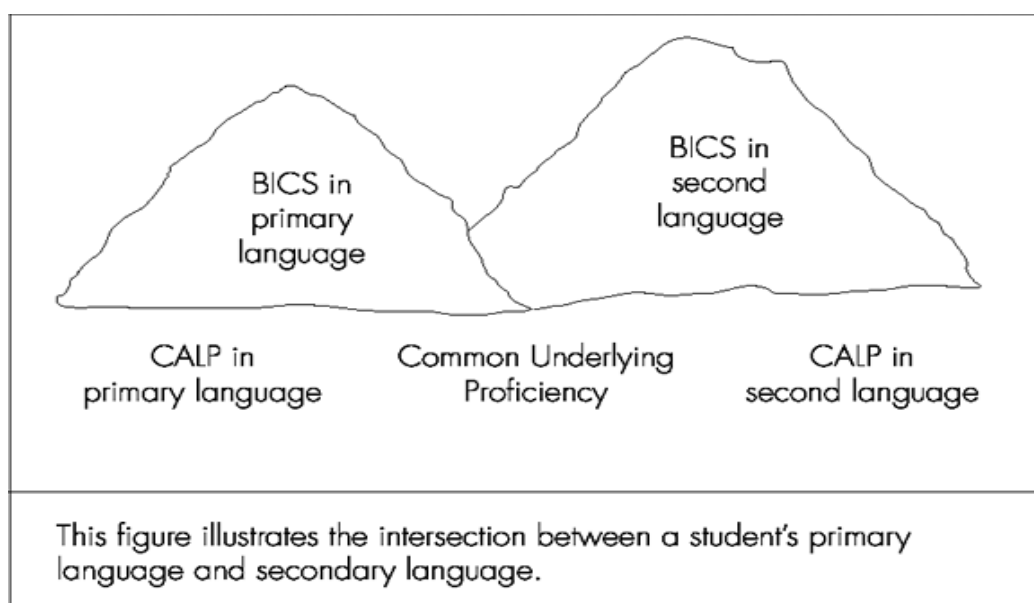


FIGURE 1: THE ICEBERG MODEL

Source: *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*

In this model, there are two peaks, one represents the learner’s social language (BICS) in the primary language (it could be their mother-tongue or Swahili for learners in Kenya) and the second one, which is higher, represents the learner’s social language (BICS) in English. The higher peak means that the learner’s BICS developed better by using the primary language as a base. Where there is an overlap is what Cummins refers to as Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP).

3. Conclusion

From the explanation on the link between language proficiency and academic literacy, it is worth noting that just because learners may speak English during social interaction or at home, it shouldn't be taken to mean that they have mastered the academic and cognitive language to handle tasks in the classroom. This illustrates that it is possible for learners to have difference in proficiency levels in each of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It would explain why some learners who are judged as having a low proficiency based on their oral skills perform well in written exams.

The importance of the first language should not be under estimated in second language acquisition for it forms a basis for the transfer of knowledge. It is advantageous for learners to have more than one language for L2 would have L1 as a base for acquisition of not only new structures but knowledge in content classes.

Based on the scanty literature on the correlation between language proficiency and academic literacy, it can be concluded that language teaching has been viewed hitherto as the affair of language teachers. Roy-Campbell (2009) in her comparative study of teaching of English in Kenya and United States, observes that the Kenya School syllabus focuses on providing students with English language skills and does not explicitly address literacy in the subject areas in which students use English as the medium of instruction. Academic language needs are not addressed in the Kenyan syllabus except for the language of literature which is addressed in the integrated syllabus.

4. Recommendations

There is need for the involvement of the non-language teachers in improving the learners' competency in the medium of instruction. Teachers need to be trained on teaching in a multilingual setting so as to participate in enhancing the learners' language skills.

Integrating language skills in subject content would ensure that the learners' English proficiency is improved. For example, learners should understand the meaning of function words like explain, illustrate, describe, analyse, contrast etc.

In the initial years of schooling, the learners' first language needs to be used. This is a recommendation that UNESCO has made but most multilingual countries in Africa, Kenya being one of them but it hasn't been implemented. The challenge most countries face is lack of teaching material and training teachers to teach in these local languages. The problem further extends to lack of established grammar and phonetic alphabet for some African languages and the dilemma of which language to teach in urban areas.

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