Review on Darin Nshiwi's PhD dissertation

on

The Effect of Metalinguistic Awareness and the Previously Learned Foreign Languages on Fourth Language Acquisition by Adult Learners

by

Dr. Szilvia Bátyi

Institute for Hungarian and Applied Linguistics

University of Pannonia

The dissertation sets out to investigate a very important and timely question in the area of applied linguistics, and as such, it requires more empirical research. Furthermore, the importance of the topic is justified by the fact that the chosen context (Syria) is multilingual and very little is known about how the acquisition of multiple languages interact with each other in Syrian learners.

When reading Darin Nshiwi's dissertation the second time, I realized that one cannot distance herself from the previous version of the work as the improvement is very noticeable. Seeing this development, it becomes clear how useful and beneficial the mock exam can be for the candidate, for the reviewer and for the increase of the quality of the dissertation. These beneficial outcomes are only possible if the candidate is open to critical remarks and ready to modify and transform her work. As a result of Darin Nshiwi's openness, the board members of this viva could read a dissertation which addressed the main points that had been raised at the mock exam and we could see the following improvements:

-   The literature review is presented in a contrastive and comparative manner including a critical approach from the candidate (e.g. the description of the models in Chapter 2.3); the author's own voice is expressed and heard in the text.
-   The structure has become more cohesive as the main concepts (DST, TLA, multilingual awareness) are elaborated on already in the Introduction.
-   The (Syrian) context of the research has become clearer as the author explained some of the factors for the non-Syrian international readership (such as the limited access to internet and thus to authentic material or the school system).

- The interpretation of the statistical analyses is more precise. The performance at the two universities are now compared statistically.
- The language of the dissertation has been revised substantially, however, in case of publication a more thorough review will be necessary. For example, by merging and paraphrasing some parts could aid this weakness (e.g. *The first part of the study was held at the Higher Language Institute (hereafter HLI)/ **Damascus University**. The HLI is a public institute at **Damascus University**. It is responsible for hiring language teachers at **Damascus University**. It offers language courses for lecturers at **Damascus University** for free during the morning courses*. p. 35).

The study is based on a detailed review of the relevant literature: the author included 160 items on the literature list which are all referred to in the dissertation (she added 10 more references). The methodology of the research focuses on the different linguistic systems of the multilingual, however, the L1 of the participants is not taken into account. The analysis of the results is based on statistical procedures and the conclusions are firmly based on the presented results.

Chapter 1 is the introduction of the study and it sets the main framework of the study, which is the Dynamic Systems Theory, describes the Syrian multilingual context which is followed by the presentation of the Research questions, the hypothesis and the structural overview of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical considerations of the research and it discusses previous findings in the area. The author describes different approaches to multilingualism, models of bi- and multilingualism (processing, acquisition), a detailed description of the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism, which is the main model of the study, research on third language acquisition (TLA) and cross-linguistic influence (CLI) and different factors affection multilingual proficiency.

Chapter 3 details the research instruments of the study. Self-designed questionnaires were used to explore the background variables in the 2 samples, while a C-test (in English, German and French), a metalinguistic awareness test (in German and English), and a German Achievement test were used to explore multilingual proficiency and metalinguistic awareness of the participants. I was delighted to see that the description of the Language History Questionnaire and the teachers' interview was merged into 2 consecutive chapters, however, both of them are still lengthy and contains repletion. In case of publication this point should be addressed. It still feels insufficient to explore a complex concept such as motivation with

one direct and open question (*What motivates you to learn German at this age? List at least 3 reasons.*). When designing a research, we hope that our participants will diligently answer all the questions in our questionnaire but, unfortunately, it is often not the case. If the answers are not substantial enough to analyze them either quantitatively or qualitatively, it suggested not to include it (motivation as a factor) in the analyses due to unreliability. One of the advices experienced writers give to their colleagues can be implemented here too: 'Kill your darlings' – in this case: do not include the unreliable elements as they weaken the conclusions.

Chapter 4 heavily relies on statistical analyses to report on the results. I still miss a detailed overview of the predictor and outcome variables at the beginning of the chapter for both universities (average performance, dispersion, range, variation). Information is often repeated in a textual form which is already displayed in the table. It would be better to highlight the main results in the tables and figures. The results in Table 4.2.18 on page 62 is wrongly reported on (p is bigger than .05).

Chapter 5 is a well-structured part of the thesis which interprets the results in the light of previous studies. As for motivation it is suggested to be careful with the interpretation and discussion of the results.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the study. The summary of the results is a very useful part of the chapter as it points out the most significant findings of the meticulous analyses presented in Chpater 4. Chapter 6.4. Teaching a Third Language from a Multicompetence Perspective does not belong here structurally.

The chapters are followed by the literature list and the appendices (questionnaires and tests).

As it becomes clear from the answers of the respondents, this research has already raised the awareness of the teachers and the students at both institutes about the similarities and differences of the foreign languages which, in itself, is a great achievement.

Formal considerations: the dissertation heavily relies on author-prominent citation which makes it difficult to process at times. The use of full names should be avoided (e.g. in Chapter 2.3.). The language of the dissertation should be reviewed before publication.

I accept the thesis and recommend it for public defense.

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Szilvia Bátyi