

Review on Zsófia Lengyel's PhD thesis
on

Bilingual written word recognition of learners of English in a vocational secondary school

by

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The dissertation focuses on the bilingual written word recognition of Hungarian students learning English in a vocational school. The importance and the relevance of the study is already justified by the setting of the research: as opposed to most studies in the area, the candidate chose a vocational school where English is not a special subject and students come from a disadvantaged situation (low SES, no parental support, no external motivation). The dissertation is based on empirical research and provides new and valuable results, but in case of publication a number of points should be addressed.

Chapter 1

The main goal of the study was to identify the main factors which play a role in successful second language acquisition, however, the review of the related literature in Chapter 1 and the analyses of the results in Chapter 3 (see below under the Chapter 3 part) has some shortcomings in this regard. In the literature review, chapter 1.2.2 and chapter 1.4. are dedicated to the discussion of the topic. *Criteria of successful language acquisition and language learning* is the title of chapter 1.2.2., however, after reading this part it is still unclear what factors are considered the most influential. A number of ID factors are linked to SLA but none of them seem to be better predictors of achievement than the others. The article(s) I suggested in the previous review could have served as a guideline in this chapter. Gardner, Trembley and Masgoret (1997), for example, used structural equation modelling to identify the relative importance of a large number of individual differences and explored the causal relationship between them. They show that motivation most strongly predicts achievement in the L2 (.48), followed by aptitude (.47), while confidence is most strongly loaded by achievement (.60). Furthermore, Lowie et al (2017) reviews some more recent articles which use more sophisticated methods to find out which factors predict success at each linguistic level.

Chapter 1.4 (1.4.1. – 1.4.7.) discusses each factor (SES, motivation, aptitude, attitude, ICT, creativity, bidialectism) in separate subchapters. Unfortunately, more attention is paid to the conceptualization and definition of the concepts than to findings from previous research. One of the aims of any new research is to join an ongoing discussion about a topic and reviewing previous research which gives the foundation of the research questions and helps to identify the research gap that is being addressed in the study. The literature review of this dissertation is not entirely sufficient in this regard.

A large proportion of Chapter 1 heavily relies on direct quotations which should be limited in academic writing and these texts should be paraphrased. This is a serious shortcoming of the dissertation.

Paragraphs are loosely connected within the chapters and logically built arguments are missing. Claims and arguments are taken from the literature but are not contrasted.

The lack of cohesion characterizes some of the subchapters. For example, in Chapter 1.2, following Krashen (1977) and Klein (1986), the author makes a clear distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Then, the next paragraph starts with a vague sentence:

Regarding the language background, secondary vocational school students in Hungary, in general, are in a multiple situation as they compulsorily learn their mother tongue (Hungarian) and a foreign language (i.e.: English) simultaneously in educational settings, according to the national curriculum. The rest of the chapter describes the aim of language teaching according to the NAT and the choice of foreign languages and its influential factors in the Hungarian schools which has nothing to do with Krashen's and Klein's claims.

Statements without references are frequent in Chapter 1 and these can only qualify as personal opinions:

p. 8. *The debate about the onset of written L2 acquisition is a critical issue in Hungary. Language teachers are concerned whether it is good or not for bilinguals or second language learners to start the acquisition of the written forms of their languages at the same time. Many teachers believe that children are not capable of learning two writing systems at a time, and that they will be confused and delayed in their learning processes. The general view is that children first should learn how to read and write in their L1, and so learning a second language should only be started some years later to avoid interferences and delays.*

P. 22: *I strongly believe that language teachers should keep in mind that in our era students and circumstances of teaching are permanently changing.*

In academic writing paragraphs should be built around an argument, an idea or a (sub)topic and link the sentences together with phrases and conjunctions to guide the reader through the presented argument. In Chapter 1 the paragraphs are often disrupted in the middle of a presented idea.

p. 9. *Results of OECD-PISA show that education is not always successful. Children, who do not have many opportunities for successful language acquisition, have difficulties in education to catch up.*

Therefore the educational gap becomes bigger, and that is the reason why relationship between socioeconomic status and school success must be attended to.

Models of bilingual processing are well-explained in Chapter 1.3., however, the use of extensive quotation and the disrupted paragraph structures should be avoided in case of publication.

It is not clear why the author prefers to use footnotes to give the references of those articles which can be found on websites. The referencing in these cases should not be different from the traditional referencing (e.g. Kiss 2017 (p. 4); Petneki 2009 (p. 6)).

It is also unusual to put the full bibliography of the source of the adapted figures and tables; surnames, date of publication and in some cases page number is the accepted format.

Chapter 2

The 22 pages long methods section describes the standardized and the self-designed instruments in a detailed way. It is suggested to check whether the adapted instruments were really standardized or are used only as popular tools. As for the LLAMA tests, Paul Meara himself reports that the tests were not extensively standardized and are largely built on the previously developed MLAT test.

The suggested table was added (p. 49) and it is very useful because it summarizes all the instruments used in the study (14 instruments + school achievement results). There is no information about the reliability and validity of the self-made instruments. How did you ensure the reliability and validity?

The following suggestion was not addressed in the final version of the dissertation: In case of the self-made questionnaires and tests, in the next version of the dissertation the main principles of developing these instruments should be made clear.

Chapter 3

I was delighted to see that the “less is more” principle was applied in the presentation of the results. However, some questions and inadequacies still remain.

- Which statistical procedure was used in Chapter 3.3 to check the differences between the means? What does ‘r’ stand for?
- At the end of the chapter, Table 31 is meant to summarize the correlation between the linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Unfortunately, neither the strength of the correlations nor the significance is reported on in the table which makes it impossible for the reader to interpret these results. Furthermore, the lack of this information makes the discussion of the 3 research questions difficult to evaluate. In the previous version of the dissertation some of these correlations were presented in the discussion part.
- The main goal of the study was to identify the factors predicting successful second language acquisition, however, no multiple regression analyses was used which could have helped to reach this goal. It is suggested to consider this point in case of publication.
- Suggestion for the future: it would be worth analyzing the ERP results of the 27 participants including background variables from the (valid and reliable) questionnaires. It could reveal more about how variables like attitude and aptitude are related to bilingual processing.

Chapter 4

The strength of the discussion is that it discusses the results in the light of previous work presented in Chapter 1 and it follows the research questions and the hypothesis. The chapter could be improved by linking the authors own results with specific empirical research from previous studies.

It is suggested to consult the literature on aptitude again. On page 31 and 119 the author argues that she shares Singleton’s (2017) views on aptitude that “it is an individual trait, an innate advantage what learners have in language learning, so the focus is on the individual”. If you read the whole article you will see that Singleton’s argument is the opposite:

The view of language aptitude as an innate trait has, however, long been questioned (see e.g. Neufeld, 1978). Recently, this questioning has intensified (see Singleton, 2014), especially since the development of a widespread consensus that working memory needs to be recognized as an important component of language aptitude (see Wen, 2016). Working memory was also once thought of as a trait, but is now recognized as susceptible to the influence of experience and instruction (see e.g. Williams, 2012).

In conclusion, the candidate demonstrated the ability to carry out independent research and to report on the (extensive) results. Her findings contribute to the second language acquisition literature both in the Hungarian and the international context and the novelty of the study is guaranteed by the fact that it focuses on the word recognition process and achievement of students with low SES coupled with low motivation and attitude towards learning English and low number of classes/week. The collected data has lots of potential for future analyses and I encourage the candidate to dig deeper in the dataset and explore connections.

In case of a successful defence, I recommend the award of a Phd-degree to the candidate.

Question(s):

How did you ensure the reliability and validity of the self-made instruments?

What were the main principles and underlying concepts when developing the instruments?

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