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MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON EARLY-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT
This research explores the intricate nexus between multilingual education and the development of early reading proficiency in children and aims to expound effective instructional strategies, cognitive advantages, and socio-cultural influences by investigating the impact of exposure to multiple languages on the acquisition of literacy skills. The study examined diverse language backgrounds, instructional methodologies, the transferability of skills across languages, challenges in policy implementation, and the enduring academic and socio-emotional implications. The study will also discuss the influence of parental involvement and community support in nurturing reading skills among multilingual children. By employing longitudinal analyses, comparative studies, and in-depth examination and analysis of existing studies by educators and policymakers, this research comprehensively addressed the intricacies and potentialities inherent in multilingual education for the advancement of early reading proficiency.
KEYWORDS: *multilingual education, early-grade reading proficiency, instructional strategies, cognitive advantages, socio-cultural influences*

INTRODUCTION

Early-grade reading proficiency is crucial for a child's educational development. Children who learn to read at a young age are better equipped to acquire more advanced skills, which are often absorbed through reading. Proficient early readers are more likely to succeed academically, exhibit higher levels of self-confidence, and actively engage in learning experiences. Conversely, children who struggle with reading in the early grades are at a higher risk of falling behind academically and facing long-term educational challenges. The convergence of multilingualism and early literacy development is an area of increasing interest within the realm of early childhood education. The significance of language acquisition and its pivotal role in early reading proficiency among multilingual learners have garnered attention due to its profound impact on cognitive growth, academic achievement, and cultural adaptability in children (Genesee, 2006; Cummins, 2007). This paper embarks on an exploration of the intricate relationship between multilingual education and the cultivation of early reading skills in young learners, weaving together existing literature and empirical evidence. The body of research concerning multilingual education's influence on literacy acquisition underscores the dynamic nature of this field. It emphasizes the imperative to understand how exposure to multiple languages shapes the foundational skills essential for proficient reading during a child's developmental years (Bialystok, 2017). The prevalence of diverse linguistic backgrounds in educational settings necessitates a comprehensive examination of instructional strategies and cognitive mechanisms entwined with multilingualism to optimize literacy outcomes (García & Sylvan, 2011).

This work amalgamates established theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence derived from extensive literature on multilingual education and early reading proficiency. It aims to illuminate effective instructional approaches, elucidate cognitive advantages, and elucidate socio-cultural influences influencing literacy acquisition among multilingual learners (Krashen, 2004). Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate the transferability of reading skills between languages and highlight the pivotal role of parental involvement and community support in fostering early reading abilities (Hammer et al., 2006). By consolidating insights from diverse scholarly works, this paper endeavours to offer a holistic view of the complexities inherent in multilingual education and its nexus with early reading proficiency. The synthesis of existing literature, empirical research, and theoretical underpinnings aims to inform educational practices, and policy formulation, and stimulate further empirical investigations in this pivotal domain of early childhood education.

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Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of multilingual education on early-grade reading proficiency. Multilingual education has been shown to improve access to and inclusion in education, particularly for students who speak non-dominant, minority, and indigenous languages. By examining the relationship between multilingual education and early-grade reading proficiency, this study aims to provide insights that can inform educational policies and practices, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes for diverse learner populations.

Historical Context of Multilingual Education

Multilingual education has a rich history that dates back centuries. In the 19th century, bilingual education was adopted in the United States at the request of German-speaking families. This early adoption was driven by the need to accommodate immigrant communities and preserve their linguistic heritage. UNESCO has been a significant advocate for multilingual education since its inception in 1945, promoting mother tongue-based education as a fundamental right. The 1953 UNESCO report, "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education," was a landmark document that emphasized the importance of using native languages in education. The movement to educate bilingually in the United States gained momentum in the mid-20th century, driven by the needs of Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities. This period saw the establishment of bilingual programs aimed at addressing the educational disparities faced by these communities. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was a pivotal moment, providing federal support for bilingual education programs. Today, multilingual contexts are the norm rather than the exception, with around 7,000 languages spoken globally. Multilingual education is recognized as a key to quality and inclusive learning, with UNESCO continuing to champion linguistic diversity and multilingual education. The rise of globalization and increased migration have further underscored the importance of multilingual education in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Multilingual Education

Several theoretical frameworks underpin multilingual education. One prominent framework is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which integrates language and content instruction to enhance learning outcomes. CLIL has been widely adopted in Europe and involves teaching subjects such as science or history in a foreign language, thereby promoting both language proficiency and subject knowledge. This pedagogical framework, employed within bilingual educational programs, particularly in the realm of science education, equips learners not only with communicative and linguistic advantages but also facilitates the assimilation of subject knowledge alongside heightened motivation and engagement, thereby augmenting their cognitive abilities. Nevertheless, investigations into the CLIL approach appear to lack consensus regarding its educational impacts within the classroom setting.

Another approach is Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching, which emphasizes the importance of incorporating learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the learning process. This approach involves teachers using the learners' cultural and linguistic experiences to help them learn. This means connecting lessons to what students already know from their own lives. Teachers learn about their learners' cultures and use this knowledge to make lessons more relevant and engaging. This instructional resource is designed to cater to all educational levels and equips educators with methodologies aimed at assisting their culturally and linguistically diverse learners. This approach aims to create an inclusive classroom environment that respects and values diversity.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a comprehensive model for language proficiency and is widely used in multilingual education. CEFR outlines language proficiency levels and serves as a guideline for curriculum development and assessment. marks a crucial step in the Council of Europe's engagement with language education, which seeks to protect linguistic and cultural diversity, promote plurilingual and intercultural education, reinforce the right to quality education for all, and enhance intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and democracy. The CEFR distinguishes between plurilingualism and multilingualism, as well as distinguishing between multiculturalism and pluriculturalism. This distinction aims to facilitate understanding of two very different views of linguistic and cultural diversity. Multilingualism/multiculturalism considers languages and cultures as separate and somehow static entities that co-exist in societies or individuals, while plurilingualism and pluriculturalism aim to capture the holistic nature of individual language users/learners linguistic and cultural repertoires. Learners are seen as social agents who draw upon all sorts of resources in their linguistic and cultural repertoires and further develop these resources in their trajectories. This approach focuses on interconnectedness of different languages and cultures rather than on their differences and stress the importance of evolving profiles that value even the most partial competences in and awareness of languages and cultures and emphasizes that in teaching.

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Theories and Models of Multilingual Education

Several theories underpin the practice of multilingual education. One prominent theory is Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in a second language (L2) is partly dependent on the learner's proficiency in their first language (L1). This theory supports the idea that strong foundational skills in the mother tongue can facilitate the acquisition of additional languages. Various models of multilingual education, such as transitional bilingual education, dual-language immersion, and trilingual education, have been developed to cater to different linguistic and educational contexts. These models aim to balance the use of multiple languages in the classroom, promoting both linguistic diversity and academic achievement. Research has consistently shown that multilingual education can positively impact early-grade reading proficiency. Studies have found that children who receive instruction in their mother tongue during the early grades tend to perform better in reading assessments compared to those who are taught exclusively in a second language. For instance, a study conducted in Kenya demonstrated that children who received literacy instruction in both Kiswahili and English showed significant improvements in reading comprehension and vocabulary. The study advocates improved access and inclusivity through mother-tongue education. In other words, a mother language-based, multilingual education is believed to improve access to and inclusion in education, particularly for population groups that speak non-dominant, minority and indigenous languages.

Cognitive Benefits of Multilingual Education

Studies have revealed that multilingual education enhances cognitive abilities in early-grade students. Studies indicate that children who learn to read in multiple languages develop stronger executive functions, such as problem-solving, memory, and attention control. Findings showed that bilingual children outperformed monolingual peers in tasks requiring cognitive flexibility and working memory. These benefits are both physiological as well as educational. According to Marian and Spivey (2003), when an individual proficient in two languages engages in the use of one linguistic system, the other language concurrently remains active. Upon the auditory perception of a lexical item, the individual does not comprehend the entirety of the word instantaneously; instead, the phonetic components are received in a sequential manner. Well in advance of the completion of the word, the cognitive language apparatus initiates predictions regarding the potential identity of that word by activating numerous lexical items that correspond to the auditory signal. For instance, when one perceives the term "can," there is a significant likelihood that related words such as "candy" and "candle" will also be activated, particularly during the initial phases of lexical recognition. In the case of bilingual individuals, this lexical activation transcends a singular linguistic framework; auditory stimuli elicit the activation of relevant lexical items irrespective of their linguistic origin.

The Escuela Bilingüe Internacional (EBI), a diverse, supportive international community that provides a multilingual education that encourages learning and growth based in the United States maintains that the benefits of a multilingual education go beyond just vocabulary expansion but also include better cognitive development, academic achievement, and cross-cultural appreciation. According to the community, Studies indicate that individuals who speak multiple languages tend to have better cognitive abilities than those who only speak one language. The reason for this is because learning a new language stimulates the brain and improves its cognitive functions. The EBI maintains that children who receive multilingual education tend to have better problem-solving skills, creativity, and critical thinking; generally perform better academically because multilingual education helps improve memory retention, reading skills, and test scores as they tend to understand complex language concepts better and quicker, leading to better academic results. The report equally indicates that speaking multiple languages can improve memory retention and recall. This is because learning new languages requires memorization and recall of new vocabulary and grammatical rules, which is good exercise for the memory. The EBI also maintains that being bilingual can delay the onset of dementia by several years due to the fact that bilingualism requires regular exercises of the brain to switch between languages, leading to an increase in cognitive reserve, which can delay the progression of dementia. Multilingual education also exposes students to different cultures, people, and ways of life. This exposure nurtures cross-cultural appreciation and adaptability, which is essential in today's diverse global economy. It also helps children to develop an understanding of different perspectives, promotes a sense of empathy, and better equips them to navigate cultural differences in their future lives.

Academic Performance Improvements

Multilingual education positively impacts academic performance, particularly in reading comprehension and literacy rates. A comprehensive study in South Africa showed that students who received instruction in their mother tongue alongside a second language had higher reading scores compared to those taught exclusively in a second language. In the Philippines, the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program led to significant improvements in reading proficiency and overall academic achievement. Additionally, research in the United States highlighted that dual-language learners exhibited greater gains in reading skills over time compared to their monolingual counterparts.

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Social and Emotional Benefits

Multilingual education fosters social and emotional development by promoting cultural identity and self-esteem. In a study conducted in Nigeria, children in multilingual classrooms reported a stronger sense of cultural pride and belonging. This was echoed in research from New Zealand, where Maori students in bilingual programs expressed higher levels of self-confidence and cultural connectedness. Furthermore, multilingual education encourages empathy and cross-cultural understanding, as learners learn to appreciate and respect diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The Nigerian National Language Policy and Multilingual Education

Nigeria's National Language Policy has undergone significant changes over the years to address the country's multilingual landscape. The most recent policy, approved by the Federal Executive Council in November 2022, mandates that learners from primary one to six must be taught in their mother tongue. This policy aims to preserve Nigeria's linguistic heritage and improve educational outcomes by making learning more accessible and relevant to learners.

The policy recognizes the importance of using the dominant language spoken in the community as the medium of instruction. This approach is expected to enhance learners' understanding and retention of educational content. The policy also aims to promote national unity and cultural identity by valuing and preserving indigenous languages. Implementing this policy presents challenges, such as the need for trained teachers proficient in local languages and the development of appropriate teaching materials. However, it also offers opportunities to improve literacy rates and educational outcomes by making education more inclusive and culturally relevant.
Overall, Nigeria's National Language Policy reflects a commitment to multilingual education and the recognition of its benefits for cognitive development, cultural preservation, and academic achievement.

Evidence from Existing Studies

The findings from various global studies underscore the significant benefits of multilingual education on early-grade reading. The cognitive advantages, such as enhanced executive functions and metalinguistic awareness, provide a strong foundation for academic success. Improved reading comprehension and literacy rates highlight the effectiveness of multilingual instruction in fostering academic achievement. Additionally, the social and emotional benefits, including cultural identity and self-esteem, contribute to the holistic development of learners.

A study by Vogelzang, M., Tsimpli, I., Balasubramanian, A., Panda, M., Alladi, S., Reddy, A., Mukhopadhyay, L., Treffers-Daller, J., & Marinis, T. (2024). examined the influence of mother tongue education and multilingualism on the reading skills and reading comprehension of 1272 Indian primary school children from low SES homes. The children reportedly performed the ASER literacy task in both the regional, majority language and in English, which was followed by newly developed reading comprehension questions. The results show that minority language speakers from monolingual households—who do not receive mother tongue education—underperform compared to majority language speakers when reading in the majority language. When reading in English, growing up in a multilingual household improves children's performance. Finally, in sites which have a larger proportion of mother tongue-educated children, children perform better in literacy in the regional language and worse in English.

A 2019 study in Kenya to examine differences in vocabulary development in early-grade learners by language of assessment, adapted and validated instruments to measure developmental outcomes, including expressive and receptive vocabulary. The study assessed 505 2-to-6-year-old children in rural communities in Western Kenya with comparable vocabulary tests in three languages: Luo (the local language or mother tongue), Swahili, and English (official languages) at two-time points, 5–6 weeks apart, between September 2015 and October 2016. Younger children responded to the expressive vocabulary measure exclusively in Luo (44%–59% of 2-to-4-year-olds) much more frequently than did older children (20%–21% of 5-to-6-year-olds). Baseline receptive vocabulary scores in Luo ($\beta = 0.26$, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$) and Swahili ($\beta = 0.10$, SE = 0.05, $p = 0.032$) were strongly associated with receptive vocabulary in English at follow-up, even after controlling for English vocabulary at baseline. Parental Luo literacy at baseline ($\beta = 0.11$, SE = 0.05, $p = 0.045$) was associated with child English vocabulary at follow-up, while parental English literacy at baseline was not. The findings suggest that multilingual testing is essential to understanding the developmental environment and cognitive growth of multilingual children (Knauer, H.A., Kariger, P., Jakiela, P., Ozier, O. & Fernald, L.C.H., 2019) .

Implications for Educators and Policymakers

Educators and policymakers should consider the integration of multilingual education programs to enhance early-grade reading outcomes. Training teachers to effectively implement multilingual instruction and developing culturally relevant educational materials

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are crucial steps. Policymakers should support initiatives that promote mother tongue-based education and allocate resources to sustain these programs.

Challenges and Limitations

Implementing multilingual education poses challenges, such as the need for standardized orthographies and adequate teacher training. Additionally, the diversity of languages within a single region can complicate the development of instructional materials. Limited funding and political support may also hinder the widespread adoption of multilingual education programs.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of multilingual education on academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Exploring the effectiveness of different instructional models and identifying best practices for teacher training are essential areas for further investigation. Practitioners should continue to adapt and refine multilingual education programs to meet the evolving needs of diverse student populations.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the multifaceted benefits of multilingual education on early-grade reading. The cognitive advantages, such as enhanced executive functions and metalinguistic awareness, provide a robust foundation for academic success. Empirical evidence from various global studies demonstrates that learners in multilingual programs consistently outperform their monolingual peers in reading comprehension and literacy rates. Additionally, the social and emotional benefits, including strengthened cultural identity and self-esteem, contribute to the holistic development of students. Multilingual education is crucial for fostering early-grade reading skills. By leveraging learners' native languages alongside additional languages, educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. This approach not only enhances reading proficiency but also supports cognitive development and cultural awareness. The integration of multiple languages in early education is essential for addressing the diverse linguistic needs of students and promoting equitable access to quality education. The findings of this study underscore the importance of implementing multilingual education programs in early grade classrooms. Educators and policymakers should prioritize the development and support of such programs to improve reading outcomes and overall academic performance. Teacher training, the creation of culturally relevant educational materials, and sustained policy support are critical for the successful implementation of multilingual education. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of multilingual education and identify best practices for its integration into diverse educational contexts. By embracing multilingual education, we can foster a more inclusive, culturally rich, and academically successful learning environment for all students.

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