Abstract

Every citizen of a country should learn the official language (s) of their country. But the question is, “when and how should instruction in that language begin? Should one say it is better to teach minority language learners to read first in their native languages or to begin with the official languages?” There are varied answers to these questions but it should be considered that minority learners learn the majority languages, but it is also assumed that these learners have the right to keep their own native languages too. Teachers work with the languages the children have learnt at home to gradually build knowledge of the majority language as appropriate. This introduces us to bilingual education. This paper will focus on bilingual education, types and some theories of bilingual education.

Keywords: bilingual education, minority, majority, learners, language, types, theories
Introduction:

Miss Evelyn, a youth corps member from Edo State has been posted to a Primary school in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria to teach English language. She meets with 50 pupils in the classroom speaking varied local languages. However, Miss Evelyn’s pupils mostly communicate and are taught in the local language of the majority speakers but she does not understand or speak the language. How can Evelyn impact and effectively teach these pupils? Evelyn has to engage a bilingual teacher who is fluent in English and the local language of the majority speakers. In the event that Evelyn’s ‘assistant’ teacher is not available to translate to the pupils, teaching on those days feel like an exercise in futility. What can Evelyn do?

Another storyline of a family who just relocated back from the USA to their home country, Nigeria with their young daughter of about 14 years of age by name Julian. She is a dual citizen with African roots and American born citizenship. Julian is admitted into the Nigerian secondary school in Akwa Ibom State and presently she is in JSS 3. She has registered for the BECE (Basic Education Certificate Examination) external examination popularly known as ‘Junior Waec’. One of the requirements of this examination is writing the Ibibio language paper alongside other subjects during the examination. Julian is faced with the challenges of learning the local language after so many years outside the country. She cannot speak the Ibibio language nor even write or read in Ibibio, how is the Ibibio teacher going to help Julian to prepare for her Ibibio paper during the examinations?

These and much more challenge the very essence and importance of more trainings and studies in bilingual education whose primary objective is not to teach English or French as a language, but to teach concepts, knowledge and skills through the language the learner knows
best. And also to reinforce this information through the two languages (e.g. English/French) in which the learner is less proficient.

What is bilingual education?

Bilingual education is commonly defined as the use of two languages as a medium of instruction for a learner or group of learners in a formal school system. Ovando & Collier (1985) in Malarz (1998) acknowledges that it is totally impossible to separate language and culture; hence they see bilingual education as a concept of bicultural education. In the same vein, the US Congress (1992) defines bilingual education as a programme of designed instruction for LEP (Limited English Proficiency) children in primary and secondary schools, given instruction in English and study of English language with the aim of allowing the learner to achieve competence in English language, yet maintaining the native language of the learner who is LEP and instruction is given in all the subjects with consideration for the cultural heritage of such learners to allow them progress effectively in their learning experiences even amongst the English Proficient learners.

Bilingual education to Borich (1996) refers to a mix of instruction in two languages. This simply explains a teacher giving instruction and applying teaching skills and methods in two languages for example, French and English which in Nigeria for instance is predominantly English. To McCarthy (2010), it involves teaching in two or more languages in a school. This means students to learn regular school subjects in more than one language. It is also viewed in four levels; individual level, family level, societal level and school level. The individual level defines a person’s bilingual and bicultural development. The family level looks at bilingual child- raising, a family that communicates in two different languages. The level of society is
concerned with language minorities and government policies and the bilingual school level talks about schools that use two different languages as a means of instruction.

There is more to looking at bilingualism on different levels, issues in bilingualism needs to be seen from different viewpoints like other concepts such as the age of the bilingual learner, to the level of exposure to more than one language regularly. Also, the majority or mainstream language(s) of the society in relation to the learner’s native language needs particular consideration especially to a bilingual learner who has a minority language. This should be considered because while it is important for the learner to cope with the majority language of the society, it is of disadvantage to the learner if the learner’s native language is lost or it’s not supported. It is therefore of great importance and necessity for language instructors to be educated on bilingualism.

Types of bilingual education programmes

Some types of bilingual educational programmes we have according to Baker (2001) who formulated them are; Submersion which is divided in two parts, structured immersion and withdrawal or pulling out programmes, transitional bilingual programme, segregationist bilingual programme, separatist bilingual programme and mainstream or English as a second language bilingual programme. To Baker (2001) these types of bilingual educational programmes are ‘weak types’ while the strong types are; Immersion bilingual programme, Maintenance/heritage language programme, Two way/Dual way bilingual programme and Mainstream bilingual educational programmes. To further explain each of these bilingual educational programmes, there are instances the writer uses English and French languages for examples as the case may be in Nigerian schools.
Submersion/ Structured immersion: this programme enables learners who have limited proficiency or knowledge of English or French to learn by plunging them outrightly into classrooms where their native language is not seen as fit to use and the medium of instruction is foreign to the learners (English or French). Its main goal is to assimilate the learners. It has a tendency of producing cognitive damage to the learners because they might lose their native language proficiency.

Submersion with simplified English or Sheltered English/ pulling out/ withdrawal: this second type of submersion programme gives the learners some light of hope and encouragement. The medium of instruction used is in simplified English, both vocabulary and sentence structures used helps them understand the regular curriculum. Sometimes learners who are language minority students are pulled out or withdrawn in small groups from school to be instructed outside school as McCarthy (2010) posits;

“Withdrawal classes take place in some Japanese cities as well with a small number of language minority students pulled out of each school to study Japanese as a second language...” (P.228)

Transitional bilingual programme: In this type of bilingual educational programme, the instructor begins instruction with the native language considerably as a medium of instruction and gradually shifts to an all English or French medium of instruction. Both submersion and transitional bilingual programmes serves the purpose of assimilating the language learners.

Segregationist and Separatist bilingual programme: these programmes have common similarities in practice. The minority language learners are being separated from the majority language society deliberately and their native languages are being used as a medium of
instruction in school. This is a way of preserving their native language. In the segregationist programme, the dominant social group goes as far to exclude the minority group from the option of learning in languages of wider communication.

**Mainstream or English as a second language bilingual programme:** in this type of educational programme, English is used as the medium of instruction. It is a pattern where the mainstream language majority learners study a foreign language (like French for instance) only during certain periods of the school day or several hours a week. This does not expose the learners enough to the language and interaction in the language is not enough to make the learners become bilingual.

**Immersion bilingual educational programme:** This is an approach to instruction not in the learners’ native language. For instance, in Nigerian schools an Immersion programme is carried out in the higher institutions or colleges where French language students partake in a “year abroad” programme as popularly called. They travel out to dwell with the native speakers of the language in the course of their studies. This programme is a well structured programme in that many studies have shown that this programme does not allow learners lose their native language abilities but rather gain cognitive benefits.

**Maintenance / heritage language programme:** This type of programme preserves the ethnic identity, culture and language of the minority language group speakers who have the need to maintain their native communication skills with people from home. Here, the language of the minority is used as a medium of instruction while the language of the majority is used outside the classroom.
**Two-way / dual language bilingual education:** this is similar to the immersion programme. In this programme, the schools try to team teach the learners (minority and majority language learners) of same number in each classroom of the programme. By teaching about half of the curriculum in the native language of the minority learners, and the other half in the native language of the majority language learners. In this situation, both languages are valued.

**Mainstream bilingual / bilingual education in majority languages:** this type of bilingual programme informs us that the curriculum content is learnt through the learners’ second language. This means that this programme takes place in schools where much of the population is already bilingual or multilingual.

**Theories of Bilingual Education**

**The threshold theory:**

This theory was propounded by Jim Cummins in 1976. It is hinged on the levels of language competence needed to avoid negative cognitive effects and/or to attain cognitive advantages. Age appropriateness for language learning is emphasized here. Students acquiring a second language need to have a solid foundation in one language in order to cognitively develop well. The analysis of the threshold theory of Cummins as Pananaki (2015) explains showcases different cognitive effects of bilingualism on a learner in three (3) levels; lower threshold level, middle threshold level and higher threshold level.

The lower threshold level represents learners who are limited bilinguals. This means they are not proficient in both languages (L1 and L2) probably due to their age range. The middle threshold level represents the learners who have developed an age appropriate proficiency in one of the two languages but less proficiency in the other. They are partly bilinguals. And finally at
the higher threshold level are the balanced bilinguals who have age competence in both languages.

The threshold theory encourages both acquisition of minor and major languages— that is L1 and L2. It is believed here that learners need to develop in the first language before learning a second so as to improve cognitive development. This theory can be linked to the transitional type of bilingual education where minority children are taught in their language until they are proficient enough in the majority language to cope with it in the mainstream education.

**Socio-cultural theory**

The socio-cultural theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978) as mentioned in Pananaki (2015) is focused on the interaction of learners during language learning processes. It is seen as a theory that improves the cognitive skills of language learners and fluency. The central focus of the socio-cultural theory is the ZPD (zone of proximal development), a moment where the language learner needs assistance from a more competent person who guides the learner in the process of scaffolding until the learner is exposed to independent capabilities of learning. McLeod (2018).

In relation to bilingual education, instructing a language learner who is limited in proficiency but needs assistance and collaborative efforts from an expert, instructor or more competent person will improve the learner’s cognitive abilities and facilitate learning the language. Secondly, bilingual education fosters cultural development through social interactions and activities and learners who are bilinguals have other greater opportunities to interact with the world around them.
Conclusion/ Recommendation

Conclusively, speaking more than one language improves cognitive development in language learning. Bilingual learners who acquire language competence in both L1 and L2 promote cognitive development in language learning. To the bilingual instructors, few strategies that could serve as a guide irrespective of the type of bilingual educational programme one uses are;

Using other ways of communication than speaking learner’s language: this happens especially in cases where the instructor is not proficient in the learner’s language. (see Miss Evelyn’s experience in introduction) using an assistant teacher perhaps who is fluent in the language to interpret what is being taught can help, use of visual images, pictures, illustrations, etc.

Have adequate knowledge of the learner’s academic performances: in some cases the instructor may have to conduct diagnostic evaluation to ascertain the various levels of cognitive abilities of the learners and their language skills as well before commencing instruction.

Be aware of the learners’ cultural differences: for instance a typical African home where a child sits at the feet of the elderly ones in the family to listen to moonlight stories daily in the evening. In a language class, the instructor could use stories for explanations and illustrations and these will help the learners in their learning experiences, etc.

And finally, in reality, bilingual learners may or may not actually be proficient in their own native language but does bilingual education gives room to improvement and nurturing the native languages of the bilingual learners in addition to the other language(s)? This remains a suggestion for further studies in bilingual education.
References


