

PERCEPTION OF BILINGUALISM AMONG ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN ISRAEL

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1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem and purpose of the study

Socio-cultural and historical processes as well as immigrant absorption policy in Israel over the past 50 years place Ethiopian immigrant children (who number 1,751 out of 89,300 children in public kindergartens) at risk for subtractive bilingualism. Children's attitudes towards their native and second language and knowledge of them affect their ability to function in those language and may influence school achievement. Examining attitudes towards bilingualism among Ethiopian immigrant children during their first year of compulsory education may aid kindergarten teachers in providing appropriate instruction for Ethiopian immigrant children and better prepare them for first grade.

1.2. Research question

In the context of an interest in early literacy in a non-native language, the present study examined the extent to which Ethiopian immigrant children value their native language and their second language. On this background, the study investigated bilingual childrens' perception of their likelihood of success in the acquisition of literacy skills in their second language (Hebrew). It also examined the relationship between self-evaluation and teacher evaluation of language proficiency.

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2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty six children participated in the study. Participants were 5-6 year old kindergarten children in an entirely Ethiopian background kindergarten, all of whom were to enter first grade the following year. All children had significant exposure to Amharic at home.

Criteria for choosing the children were that Amharic was spoken in the home and the parents had immigrated to Israel within the past fifteen years. All children were drawn from two religious public kindergartens in the center of the country. The two kindergartens are located in the same neighborhood, a few blocks apart. Twenty-three boys and thirteen girls were included in the study. Twenty-two of the children's parents had little or no Hebrew skills, and 30 of the 36 sets of parents were over the age of 30. Most parents arrived in Israel as married adults. Parents reported that their families consisted of 1 to 8 children. Of the children, 16 of 36 were the youngest children in their families.

2.2. Procedure

The administration of the testing materials took place during the months of November and December, 2001. Data were collected individually from the children. Effort was devoted to making the child feel comfortable at all times. Each session lasted about 20 minutes. The child was seated at a table facing the interviewer in a small, quiet room adjacent to the kindergarten classroom.

The experimental procedure, based on Anderson's (1990) functional measurement approach, was conducted by asking each child to imagine a bilingual child in kindergarten and recounting a short narrative about the child. In each narrative a bilingual child was described as having a particular level of Hebrew and Amharic ability. Six narratives were presented, and after each narrative the participant was asked to rate the likelihood the child in the story would succeed in learning to read Hebrew in the first grade. Each child was exposed to two replications of the entire set of narratives (12 narratives altogether).

2.3. Materials for evaluating children's perception of bilingualism and its relationship to literacy skills

Testing materials assessed each child's perception of L1 and L2 as they relate to the likelihood of success in reading acquisition (following Anderson's, 1982, 1990) functional measurement approach.

Information was presented to each child in the form of six person-perception narratives depicting situation which were taken from the child's environment. The critical information in the narrative described a child who speaks a combination of Amharic (L1) and Hebrew (L2). The six narratives were composed from a 3 by 2 factorial combination of very good, average, and not so good Hebrew and very good and not so good Amharic. The individual child was asked to rate the likelihood that the child in the story would succeed in reading in first grade. Each child rated the narrative by placing a button on a graphic ten-point scale with the end points marked by sad (☹) and happy (☺) faces.



The following is an example of one person-perception narrative:

In the kindergarten there is a boy named Malko. He speaks Hebrew and Amharic with his parents. He speaks very good Hebrew and very good Amharic. How likely will he succeed in learning to read in Hebrew in first grade?

Before presenting the child with the person-perception narrative, a warm-up was conducted introducing the child to the graphic scale. This was performed by having the child rate various activities in the kindergarten on the 1 to 10 scale. This was followed by the first of two administrations of the six bilingual narratives.

Questions to determine *self perception of their bilingualism* were asked. They were then asked to separately rank their Hebrew and Amharic abilities as (1) very good, (2) good, (3) average, and (4) not very good. Following this they placed a button on the graphic ten-point scale to depict how they anticipated their success in reading would be in the first grade. Upon completion of their self perception of their bilingualism, the six person-perception narratives were repeated. The entire procedure took approximately twenty minutes.

The data from the functional measurement procedure allows analysis of individual children as well as patterns of responses across groups of individuals.

According to Anderson (1982), it provides valid linear measures from multiple sources of information (in this case the child's perception of L1 and L2 ability). Each source of information about Amharic and Hebrew was evaluated and integrated based on a single dimension of judgment, in this case "likelihood of success in L2 reading".

In addition to the person perception/functional measurement procedure used with the children, teachers were asked to evaluate the children's Hebrew (L2) according to the same parameters that the children evaluated themselves, i.e. (1) very good, (2) good, (3) average, and (4) not very good.

3. Results

Children's ratings of the narratives were analyzed in a 3X2 (Hebrew ability X Amharic ability) ANOVA for repeated measures. The means and standard deviations of the likelihood of success as perceived by the Ethiopian children are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean judged likelihood of success in reading as perceived by Ethiopian children (n=36).

	Hebrew proficiency							
	Not very good Hebrew		Average Hebrew		Very good Hebrew		Average	
	M	(sd)	M	(sd)	M	(sd)	M	(sd)
Not very good Amharic	1.39	(0.70)	3.47	(2.22)	7.85	(2.36)	4.24	(1.10)
Very good Amharic	3.56	(2.56)	7.08	(2.58)	9.57	(0.79)	6.74	(1.07)
Means	2.47	(1.45)	5.28	(1.94)	8.71	(1.25)	5.49	(0.80)

These data are depicted graphically in figure 1.

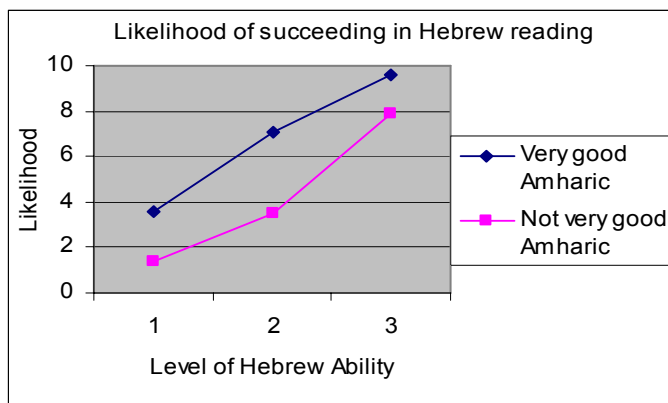


Figure 1. Pooled data for perceived likelihood of success in Hebrew reading as a function of Hebrew and Amharic ability.

In Figure 1 the likelihood of success in Hebrew reading (vertical axis) is plotted as a function of the level of Hebrew (1=not very good, 2=average, 3=very good) and Amharic ability (not very good vs. very good). The level of Hebrew is indicated on the horizontal axis; the level of Amharic is represented as the separate curves. An effect for level of Hebrew is graphically represented by the slope of the curves; an effect of Amharic is represented by the distance between the curves. The overall arrangement of the curves implies the integration level.

Visual inspection of the graph in Figure 1 shows that the children took into account both Amharic and Hebrew. The noticeable lower left to upper right slope of the curve indicates that the Hebrew proficiency had a strong effect; the greater the knowledge of Hebrew, the more likely the child is perceived to succeed in reading in the first grade. The relatively small distance between the curves reflects the relatively smaller effect of Amharic; nevertheless, Amharic still contributes to the likelihood that the child will succeed in (Hebrew) reading in first grade. The finding that children took into account information about both Hebrew and Amharic lends support to the view that both languages are perceived as relevant in the acquisition of second language literacy.

A two way analysis of variance for repeated measures confirmed the visual impressions. The ANOVA for the pooled data of the two replications (each child responded twice to the set of narratives) revealed significant differences among the different levels of Hebrew, $F(2,70) = 127.43$, $p < .001$, while the first and second set were also significant with $F(2,70) = 110.60$ and 80.82 , respectively ($p < .001$). According to the means in Table 1, we see that the higher the level of Hebrew, the higher the likelihood of perceived success. Newman-Kuels tests revealed significant differences for all three levels of Hebrew. Significant differences were also obtained for the two levels of Amharic, $F(1,35) = 105.39$, $p < .001$.

In addition, the analysis of variance revealed a small, but significant interaction of Amharic and Hebrew proficiency, $F(2,70) = 5.17$, ($p < .01$). That interaction effect can be seen in the slightly barrel shape in the middle portion of the graph in Figure 1. When children judged likelihood of success for “average proficiency in Hebrew,” Amharic had a stronger effect than it did for “very good” and “not so good” Hebrew.

In summary, results from this experiment showed that bilingual (Amharic-Hebrew speaking) children

1. evaluated L2 (Hebrew) as more important than L1 (Amharic) for becoming a successful reader in L2.
2. regarded mother tongue (Amharic) skills to be important for becoming a successful reader in the second language.

3.1. Bilingualism and self-evaluation of language proficiency

To understand the connection between the children's own evaluation of their languages and their evaluation of the children depicted in the person-perception narratives, the children were asked to evaluate their own knowledge of Hebrew and Amharic. Each child evaluated their own Hebrew and Amharic on a one to four scale (very good, good, average, and not good). Children's evaluations were then used to divide them into two groups: those who reported that they know Hebrew better than Amharic ($n=13$) and those who indicated that they have a relatively equal proficiency in Hebrew and Amharic ($n=20$). These two groups were then compared in terms of performance on the person-perception narrative task described above.

For this analysis a three-way ANOVA for Group X Hebrew X Amharic was performed on the childrens' ratings of likelihood of success in first grade reading. Results showed no difference between the two groups, $F(1, 31)= 0.76$, $p>.05$, and no interaction effects for Group with either Hebrew or Amharic.

3.2. Teachers' assessments of childrens' Hebrew proficiency

In a further effort to understand the connection between language spoken and the person-perception narrative, children were divided into two groups according to the teachers' assessments of the childrens' Hebrew proficiency: (a) high evaluation of the children's Hebrew and (b) low evaluation of the children's Hebrew. Examination of the differences between these two groups in a three-way ANOVA again failed to reveal significant differences between the two groups, $F(2,33)= 2.46$, ($p>.05$). In addition, this analysis did not reveal any significant interaction effects.

According to the results from the person-perception narratives, children value both languages (Hebrew and Amharic), but there seems to be little relationship between the way they perceive the importance of the languages for children in the narratives and their own self-assessment of proficiency of these languages. In other words, although

they perceive knowledge of both languages as important, there is no correlation between this perception and their own level of proficiency of the languages.

4. Discussion

From the findings in the person perception experiment, it appears that this group of bilingual children value both their native and second language in a task judging their importance in acquiring second language reading. These results suggest that children are aware that being bilingual is advantageous.

The advantages of bilingualism leading to superior performance on a variety of intellectual skills when comparing both bilingual children of varying levels of development to monolingual children is supported by Diaz (1983). In this instance bilingualism is additive, and, as such, the children perceive knowing both languages as an asset. The children's attitudes towards both languages appear to be positive: they perceive knowledge of both languages as determining success in reading in first grade with high Hebrew proficiency significantly more important for success. This is supported by the research of Perkins & Solomon (1989) who relate positive attitude in the second language to success in the second language. Hakuta & D'Andrea (1990), on the other hand, place the emphasis on L1 and refer to attitude as a predictor of how well they maintain L1.

Although the kindergarten children in this study perceived both Amharic and Hebrew proficiency as being influential in the experiment conducted through the person-perception narratives, the children's subjective attitudes towards their knowledge of both languages showed different results. Before conducting the experiment, all children but one denied that they knew Amharic, while after the experiment, all the children stated that they knew Amharic. Only a few stated that the other children in the kindergarten knew Amharic, although, in fact, all the children in the kindergarten did know Amharic. From this, one may conclude that although the children were aware of the importance of the Amharic language, the message that they may have been getting from the assimilationist environment appears to be different and nonsupportive of the Amharic language.

4.1. Bilingualism, self-evaluation of language proficiency and teacher evaluation of language proficiency

To understand the children's bilingualism, it is important to evaluate their knowledge of Hebrew proficiency and Amharic proficiency and determine if it affects the way they perceive their bilingualism. There were no significant differences between the teachers' evaluation of the children's Hebrew proficiency and how the children perceived the two languages, nor was there a significant difference between the children's evaluations of their Hebrew proficiency and how the children perceived the two languages. In other words, regardless of their actual proficiency of the language, this particular group of children perceived L1 and L2 relatively the same.

Although these very young Ethiopian immigrant children may have been aware that bilingualism is an advantage, they may only be benefiting minimally from these advantages, as seen from the teachers' evaluation of their Hebrew proficiency and their own subjective evaluations of each language. The teachers' evaluations of their Hebrew proficiency revealed that 7 children's Hebrew proficiency was very good, 23 moderate and 5 not very good. From these results, it is apparent that only a few of these children were functioning at a high level in their L2 (Hebrew). Moreover, most of them were unaware of their own level of Hebrew proficiency, and 32 children rated themselves as very good or good in their level of Hebrew proficiency. Although all the children in this study were aware of the importance of L2 (Hebrew) and L1 (Amharic) and the relationship between the knowledge of these languages and their success in first grade reading, only 7 out of the 36 children had good levels of Hebrew proficiency according to the teacher. However, it is not clear if the teachers were making the comparison to kindergarten monolinguals, monolinguals in general, or to other kindergarten bilinguals. To further understand this group's level of bilingualism, consideration should be given to their L1 (Amharic) proficiency. Here twenty-two children thought they had a 'good' level of Amharic proficiency, while 14 felt that they did not have such a good level. Future research should examine the mismatch between teachers' and children's perceptions of language ability and the influence of these perceptions on teachers' attitudes and academic achievement.

Lack of bilingual kindergartens and bilingual public schools, a shortage of teachers who speak Amharic, and the placement of all Amharic speaking children in

homogeneous immigrant classes do not provide the kind of environment which encourages or promotes bilingualism. In addition, children in the kindergarten were not aware that their classmates spoke Amharic, as the kindergarten was run strictly in Hebrew. No opportunities were provided for the children to speak with each other in Amharic, nor were there any Hebrew L1 speakers in the kindergarten who may have helped strengthen the Amharic speakers Hebrew.

If we add to the children's limited Amharic proficiency, the lower income levels of all the children, and attendance of all the children in a monolingual Hebrew kindergarten, one can further anticipate that these children may be at-risk for becoming subtractive bilinguals (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998) with Amharic gradually disappearing (cf. Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). As there is no active teaching in Amharic, the children are likely to become receptive bilinguals (Döpke, 1992). Further, as maintained by Sparks & Ganschow (1991), when children have not developed their L1 oral and written language skills fully enough, their L2 may be negatively affected. According to Cummins (1984, 1994), not having learned L1 at a high level of proficiency will result in an inadequate basis for a common underlying proficiency to be transferred from L1 to L2. From this we may understand that Amharic speaking children in the Hebrew environment may be at-risk educationally.

Thus, contrary to the children's perception of their bilingualism as important, there appears to be a large gap between their perception of their bilingualism and their actual bilingualism. Children who are at different levels of bilingualism in an environment that does not cater to their needs will tend to be subtractive bilinguals, while the few who may be proficient may be additive bilinguals.

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