A Bidialectal Methodology of Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract: This paper investigates the issue of bidialectism as a medium of instruction of English as a second language (ESL) in Cyprus, where both Standard Modern Greek (SMG) as well as Cypriot Greek (CG) are used extensively. The study implements a methodology, which embraces both linguistic varieties as a medium of instruction in the ESL classroom, as opposed to the use of only SMG. An experimental design is used in the evaluation of this alternative methodology, comparing the results of ESL competence of a control group and an experimental group, after experimental exposure for six months. The results show that there are significant differences in the two groups, where the experimental group outperforms the control group in all tests.

Key words: bidialectism, ESL, ESL teaching methodology, Cypriot Greek

1. Introduction

The issue of linguistic diversity in Cyprus, where the Greek Cypriot community communicates in two different, yet similar linguistic varieties: SMG and CG, has often been described as the case of bilingualism, bidialectism, and diglossia (Arvaniti, 2002). In defining what bidialectism is, one must also examine the phenomenon of bilingualism and diglossia, since they are related phenomena. While bilinguals are in command of two distinct languages, which differ in terms of grammar, syntax, lexicon, pragmatics, the writing system, etc., bidialectal speakers command two similar linguistic varieties, which are not linguistically different to a great extent (as in the case of SMG and CG where they both share a great amount of the same lexicon, grammar and syntax), but have complex differences in their function and usage (see, Bhatia & Ritchie, 2006; Richards et al., 1985; Rickford, 1996).

After many disputes and investigations on the issue, the Greek Cypriot community is characterized as bidialectal and not as bilingual or diglossic, mainly due to sociopolitical and economic, rather than linguistic reasons (see, Browning, 1983; Contossopoulos, 1994; Pavlou, 1990; Sciriha, 1995; 1996). According to Papapavlou (2002) it may be argued that as a result of SMG educational “intervention” Greek Cypriot native CG speakers become bidialectal, able to express themselves in two dialects, even with some difficulties in the official one, since it not their mother tongue. Today, most of the times, both varieties are used by high and low social prestige speakers in the same context (university classrooms, governmental offices, the media, the press, etc.), in their oral as well as their written form. Greek Cypriot speakers use both linguistic varieties without any tendency for one societal group to use one more than the other in relation to a second societal group (Papapavlou & Pavlou, 1998).

2. Language Policy in Education

As far as the language policy in Cyprus’ education is concerned, the educational system, up to 2002, had no reference whatsoever to CG, since it was mainly believed to be used at home rather than school and only in oral communication. Just before the beginning of the academic year 2002-2003, a circular was distributed in public primary schools which stated that although SMG is considered, and should be considered the language
of instruction within the classroom, CG should be tolerable and useful in cases of children’s problems in oral communication in SMG. CG should also be used in school plays and celebrations of national holidays. This tolerance and respect of CG use should help students appreciate the national and geographical variations of the Greek language as well as to acquire awareness and knowledge of their own linguistic tradition. Also, the document claims that CG is used in Cypriot schools to the extent that it facilitates and enhances effective communication (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2004).

This circular is particularly interesting because of the claimed language policy, which treats SMG as the students’ first language and the medium of instruction within the classroom and excludes CG which is the students’ actual mother tongue. Linguists as well as teachers and educators in Cyprus admit that there is a problem relating to SMG versus CG within the classroom, due to the already discussed phenomenon of bidialectism. Parents as well as the rest of the public seem to be preoccupied with the matter as well. Many have turned to speak their mind, either through the means of the local media, or through excessive discussions with educators (see Moschonas, 2000; Yiangou, 2001; Tsingis, 2004). Very little research evidence has been presented for the lack of a linguistic educational policy on the island. Even if linguists and educators agree that such a problem exists, none has authorized permission to take drastic measures in suggesting possible remedies. At present, language teaching approaches and educational syllabi are being re-examined, while linguists and educators, who take into consideration the Greek Cypriot children’s bidialectism, try to suggest more efficient methods and new syllabi from which students could benefit as much as possible.

3. English as a Second Language and Teaching Methodologies

English in Cyprus has the role of a second language, rather than the role of a foreign language (Davy & Pavlou, 2001), since it is introduced in primary education as a compulsory subject at fourth grade. It is taught two times a week for forty minutes through the eclectic approach, which features a lot of communicative activities but at the same time focuses on language form and accuracy. Throughout the first year, emphasis is placed on listening and speaking while reading and writing skills seem to develop in sixth grade (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2004). The aims and objectives of teaching English in primary education, is to teach children how to communicate effectively in English in various situations, to help them develop a positive attitude towards the English language, people and culture, and acquire listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the language. English is taught as a subject, not by teachers who studied English as their Major, but by primary school teachers, who have studied English as a subject, part of their university studies’ syllabus. It is mainly for this reason and at this age, during their fourth grade academic year, that Greek Cypriot students and their families insist on the children receiving extra courses by English teachers in private institutes after primary school in their afternoon free time.

Each private institute has its own teaching methodologies as well as its own policies for the language of instruction within the classroom, but mainly the use of L1 (the children’s mother tongue) is used, especially for the first couple of years. However, which linguistic variety is considered by English teachers to be the L1 of Greek Cypriots, is another principal issue. Mainly for practical purposes English teachers tend to use SMG as the L1 in which they instruct the students. SMG is the language in which Greek Cypriot children learn the linguistic terminologies and vocabulary, as well as the rules of grammar, syntax, spelling and writing in primary schools. It is far less
troublesome and unproblematic for English language teachers to use SMG in instructing English, rather than trying to implement CG vocabulary and explanatory terms in their teaching.

As a result of the current, official language policy in education, private schools tend to follow an “unwritten” law in instructing English through the medium of the students’ first language, which, according to this law, is SMG, while all other subjects are being taught in SMG, according to the Ministry’s guidelines. However, the confusing condition as to what is now considered to be the first language, or, in other words, the mother tongue, of bidialectals, which should come to perplex the situation even more, is usually completely ignored. Although in the linguistic circles researchers are trying to prove that the official L1 of Greek Cypriot bidialectals is CG, in the governmental sectors the official language of education remains SMG. In private institutes, independent of the methodology or approach of language teaching followed, SMG is the “mother tongue”, or better the L1 to use within the classroom.

According to most institute owners, teachers and coordinators, at early levels of beginner L2 learners, L1 is used quite massively in the classroom. The prevailing methodology in English language teaching today in public and private schools, is the eclectic approach, comprising mainly a mixture of the communicative in combination with the natural approach, featuring a lot of communicative tasks, and real-life situations. Apart from the L1 use within the classroom by the teacher in order to provide explanations, translations and meaning of the L2, textbooks and other material used in the classroom, containing Greek instructions, guidelines, or translations, are expected to apply the standard dialect. Usually, the material used in the first one or two years which includes the students’ L1, is the one used for supplementary learning, such as the “study companion”, as opposed to the main “activity book” and the “pupil’s book”. Teachers apply the guidelines from their “teacher’s book” according to their preferences and own personal teaching approach, but, more or less, all classes in an institute follow the same procedure during lessons, especially for first year students where L1 is used immensely.

It should be mentioned here, that some experimental studies examined the acquisition of new vocabulary items in English by Greek Cypriot bidialectal speakers in terms of transferability from two dialects – the standard and the non-standard one (Kouridou, 2005). From the study, it is observed that Greek Cypriot students of English have an advantage in learning a second language since they have in their disposition two linguistic varieties to transfer from in terms of phonology, semantics and the lexicon. This could suggest that bidialectals have got a higher sense of metalinguistics than any other monodialectals learning a second language. The very same was also claimed by Papapavlou and Kouridou (2007), in a study held between monodialectal primary school students of mainland Greece and bidialectal primary school students of Cyprus. The findings of the study suggest that in certain levels of metalinguistic awareness such as metagrammatical and metasemantic awareness, bidialectals, just like bilinguals, possess certain additional “linguistic sensitivities” compared to monodialectal speakers. These “sensitivities” are of paramount significance in the acquisition of a second or foreign language and can be of great educational importance in the process of becoming a multilingual speaker. A bidialectal speaker has the advantage of transferring knowledge gained from both native varieties in the process of learning another language. It could also be argued that in addition to the control and mastery of two linguistic varieties, the bidialectals’ contact with different traditions, cultural events and social norms promotes tolerance towards “otherness” and facilitates the process of integration with the culture and members of the target language, learned later in their life.
The alternative eclectic approach used for the purposes of this study, is created in terms of a number of possible methodological options, through which classes are tailored for the specific age, nationality and level group. It includes a number of basic principles of learning and teaching on which it relies for the design and evaluation of the ESL lessons used. It draws from previous methodologies, the positive effects and principles, so as to attempt a powerful combination for successful ESL teaching and learning approach. By having in mind the history of virtually any methodology’s theoretical foundations, an alternative eclectic approach was created and creatively adapted to this specific teaching situation. Comparative and contrastive analysis is not only considered helpful for determining points of interference (negative transfer, false friends, etc.) and finding ways to avoid them; it is also helpful for determining points of positive transfer and comparing L1 and L2.

In the case of bidialectal students this is especially supportive, since the comparison and contrast among two, is now done among three varieties: standard L1, non-standard L1 and L2 varieties. In cases where, for example, the non-standard L1 shares a certain similarity with L2 while the standard L1 comes in contrast with L2, the teacher reinforces comparison to non-standard L1 by setting specific examples and provides standard L1 paradigms as classic examples for the students to avoid. A simplified pronunciation paradigm, using SMG and CG in ESL learning would be the comparison of CG sound /ʃ/ in English word shelf pronounced as /ʃelf/ where the teacher can model the pronunciation, but also draw attention to the fact that SMG sound /s/ should be avoided for this word, since a pronunciation similar to /self/ can cause misunderstanding due to difference in meaning (English word self).

In brief, this alternative eclectic approach keeps in mind the aforementioned studies and draws its principles from all previous theories and hypotheses, in that it chooses and uses the positive aspects and influences from every methodology\(^1\). For example, it draws from the grammar translation methodology, the easy construction and objective evaluation of grammar tests, which can be followed by a reward in order to increase the learners’ intrinsic motivation. From the direct method, the small size classes, the individual attention to students and the intensive study are brought forward, which help teachers consider the students’ affective factors that influence second language learning. From the audiolingual method, the carefully prepared materials and language practice outside the classroom is emphasized so when properly followed, it can lead to automaticity. The designer methods provide enough evidence as to why they were a popular trend during the 1970s: Community Language Learning brings forward the attention to student-centered participation and the development of student autonomy in order to reach higher levels of risk-taking and strategic development, while suggestopedia offers evidence that deliberately induced states of relaxation are beneficial in the classroom, thus establishing faith in the human brain and security for the learners’ self-confidence. Through the silent way teachers are not so easily tempted to provide everything for their students and encourage “discovery learning” and “autonomous learning” (Cameron, 2001); moreover, through Total Physical Response teachers reconsider the use of drama and theatrical language within the classroom as a motivating means of learning and as an effective means of the “language ego” protection. Through the natural approach, the similarities and differences of the mother tongue and the target language are respected when teaching and therefore the connection of language and culture as well as the positive effects of the native language

\(^1\) For a historical overview of the different Second Language Teaching Methodologies, see Brown, H. D. (2000; 2001).
are more closely examined. The **communicative approach** encourages direct communication and the use of authentic language in novel contexts, which can lead to meaningful learning and advanced communicative competence.

4. The Study
In carefully observing the existing literature on ESL teaching methodologies and approaches over the years, and in examining the linguistic setting prevailing in Cyprus, a hypothesis is formed: will Greek Cypriot bidialectal ESL students perform better when taught through both Greek linguistic varieties (SMG and CG) than Greek Cypriot bidialectal ESL students being taught in only the standard Greek variety (SMG)? This is what the present study is about to examine, through an experiment using two groups of Greek Cypriot students: one receiving lessons according to the language policy in education of Cyprus, using only the standard L1 variety (SMG) in the classroom and another receiving lessons through both L1 varieties (SMG and CG) in a supplementary manner.

4.1 Subjects
In more detail, the present study deals with two groups of Greek Cypriot bidialectal children, speakers of Standard and Cypriot Greek, who learn English as a second language in a private institute in Nicosia. The two groups were randomly selected and were of the same age, nationality, and English language level. The Greek Cypriot bidialectal children were all from the Nicosia district, they were of ages nine to ten (commencing fourth grade in primary school as of September 2006) and had no previous contact with the English language, in terms of formal education. At the beginning of the semester a pre-test was conducted in order to ensure that all children were of the same level, that is, it was their first year in English and they had no previous formal, scholar instruction on the subject. The pre-test required information about the current date, teacher and classroom, the students’ name, surname and age, and the English alphabet. It should be mentioned here that at this age most students throughout Cyprus enrol for private English courses since it is the year in which they will be introduced to the English language in primary school.

4.2 Methodology
Both groups were taught by the same teacher, in the same institute, with the same material and based on the same syllabus. The first group (which served as the experimental group) consisted of five students (two girls and three boys) and received six month differentiated ESL lessons, re-prepared by the researcher according to the needs of the current experiment, that is, by adding CG instruction where possible; while the second group (which served as the control group), consisting of six children (five girls and one boy), received regular, lessons, free of experimental exposure, based on no more than the institute’s curriculum and the coordinator’s lesson plans.

The experimental exposure of the first group was different in the conduction of the lessons and involved the use of both linguistic varieties (SMG and CG) as the medium of instruction, while the second group received instruction in solely one variety (SMG). English was taught through the medium of both SMG and CG in the first group, while in the second, English was taught with the use of SMG alone, as the syllabus demands. In other words, the first group received formal instruction of vocabulary, grammar, phonology and syntax through the two native linguistic varieties (SMG and CG) while the second through only one variety (namely SMG).
The textbooks for Elementary 1 students were selected by the institute coordinator: Gray, E. & Evans, V. (2003) *Welcome Aboard! 1* Newbury: Express Publishing and consisted of three books: the Pupil’s book, the Activity Book and the Companion. The books consist of seven modules, beginning from the gradual instruction of the alphabet parallel to the learning of communicational phrases and vocabulary, ending with more complicated expressions about imaginary topics. Throughout the four out of the seven modules taught during the period of the experiment, the children were taught among others: *Vocabulary* (including the English alphabet, colours, numbers, rooms of the house and furniture, family members, toys); *Phonology* (identifying sounds according to spelling and the correct pronunciation of words, phonological processes, like assimilation in the plural form of nouns, expressing thoughts and ideas in a native-like manner); *Grammar* (possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns, the possessive case, plural and the verb *be*); *Syntax* (how to compose paragraphs about themselves, their family, their bedroom and how to write a letter-like card).

The lesson plans were based on the school syllabus and were prepared in advance by the institute’s coordinator who is responsible for choosing textbooks and outlining the lesson plans for all teachers in the institute who teach English to first-year students, i.e. teachers of Elementary 1 level. The lesson plans guided the teaching process for both groups; while for the first group they were differentiated with the addition of CG on the material (in instructions, exercises, vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical explanations and instructions), for the second group, the syllabus remained intact, in the use of only SMG for in-class, formal instruction.

Throughout the semester, children were evaluated through oral performance, dictation, small compositions and written in-class tests based on the material taught at the end of each module, which were again prepared by the institute’s coordinator, as well as on oral achievement and participation in class. The guidelines for the marking of tests, dictations, compositions and oral performance come from the coordinator at the beginning of the school year and apply to all Elementary 1 teachers as such: in *Dictation*, 5 points out of 100 are to be deducted for each mistake; in *Compositions*, teachers should mark holistically with emphasis on content rather than grammar and syntax, points are to be deducted for errors, not mistakes. It should be mentioned here that this leniency on composition marking is due to the fact that children are not given any marks on their report at the end of each term for composition writing, instead, compositions at this level are merely a practicing writing task for future, more productive writing; in *Oral Performance* teachers should mark holistically with emphasis on originality and content; a crucial criterion is whether communication is achieved, they should also focus on grammaticality and syntax; in *Tests* teachers should mark according to each exercise’s guidelines.

### 5. Results

At the end of every three months, marks were given on the oral and written level. More analytically, in three levels: dictation, oral participation and performance and written work. Each lesson is conducted within the time-limit of seventy-five minutes for two days per week, except national and public holidays. In total, the lessons for the present study added up to forty. The first term began on September 19th and ended in November 7th and the second term began on November 10th and ended on February 20th.

The subjects are classified as A1-A5 for Group A and B1-B6 for Group B. The total scores of Group A students for the end of the first term are relatively higher than the scores of Group B students and have a mean score of 98.4 in Dictation, 100 in Oral performance and 99.6 in Tests. In Group B students’ results have a mean score of 93.0
in Dictation, 90.0 in Oral performance and 93.3 in Tests. It is quite obvious that even from the first three months, a different approach to teaching and a more relaxing atmosphere in the classroom with the help of the non-standard variety can make a difference.

When compared, the scores of Group A for the first term in relation to the scores of Group B for the first term seem to have a high statistical significance. In dictation: \( t=3.432; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.005 \) one-tailed. In oral performance: \( t=4.029; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.005 \) one-tailed. In written work: \( t=1.416; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.10 \) one-tailed.

As the academic year passes by, the scores of Group A students appear to increase up to a perfect score, whereas in Group B, students begin to find it even more difficult from the beginning to cope with more complicated grammatical or lexical phenomena. The scores for Group A for the second term still exceed the scores of Group B at all three levels: Dictation 98.4, Oral Performance 99.4, Tests 99.6. Group B scores are slightly lower than they appear in the first term: Dictation 93.1, Oral Performance 88.8 and Tests 90.5. It is worth mentioning here that for two out of three tests that took place during the second term all five Group A students scored a perfect score (100/100).

When compared, the scores of Group A for the second term in relation to the scores of Group B for the second term have once again a high statistical significance. In dictation: \( t=3.540; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.005 \) one-tailed. In oral performance: \( t=4.757; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.005 \) one-tailed. In written work: \( t=2.292; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.025 \) one-tailed.

Summed up, the overall mean scores for both groups during the entire six month experimental exposure appear as follows: Dictation: Group A 98.4 vs. Group B 93.0; Oral Performance: Group A 99.7 vs. Group B 89.4; and Test Results: Group A 99.6 vs. Group B 91.9. It is again obvious that the overall scores are significantly lower in Group B than in Group A. The importance of the results is clearly found to be statistically significant. In dictation: \( t=1.978; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.05 \) one-tailed. In oral performance: \( t=4.497; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.005 \) one-tailed. In written work: \( t=1.987; \text{df}=9; \text{p}<.05 \) one-tailed.
The experimental exposure can be said to be successful, since the hypothesis was confirmed. The results seem promising, since the first group achieved overall higher scores than the second group, on all three levels, after the six month experimental exposure. Does this mean we should reconsider the use of CG in second language teaching? Can the use of two linguistic varieties in the teaching of a third facilitate rather than hinder education after all? Can these results change attitudes toward the use of non-standard linguistic varieties like CG in education? A thorough discussion of these questions takes place in the next chapter, along with suggestions on the matter and insights on bidialectism in education.

6. Discussion

The fact that Greek Cypriot bidialectals have not yet mastered SMG during their primary school years, rather they are merely introduced to it through public schooling, renders them almost incapable of learning another language, namely English, through the medium of SMG. As already mentioned above, the two dialects differ systematically in function and usage; while SMG is considered the formal and official language of instruction in schools, CG is tolerable and can be used as long as it facilitates communication, yet, not as an official medium of instruction within the classroom (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2004). Based on the current situation and due to the lack of enough research evidence investigating the claim that SMG and CG are (or are not) equally present or equally developed in the Greek Cypriot bidialectals’ cognitive depository, the speculation that both varieties are present, in varying degrees, leads to the hypothesis that bidialectals do have an advantage over monodialectals, just like bilinguals have over monolinguals. Greek Cypriot bidialectal SMG and CG speakers are viewed as more profitable in ESL learning than monodialectals, since according to the above speculations they have in their command two varieties to transfer from rather than one. Apart from being helpful in the process of positive transfer due to possible similarities with the target language, the two varieties are accessible for contrast as well, not only in relation to the target language, but among themselves too. This fact can provide helpful strategies for the development of metalinguistic awareness and intelligence.

Monodialectal SMG speakers on the one hand, have only one variety available in their cognitive depository and in their effort to learn a second language through transfer from L1, they may encounter various problems, since their single native variety may differ vastly from the new one learnt at the time. Bidialectals on the other hand have the advantage of comparing and contrasting two native varieties with the third one learnt at the time. So, where one of the native varieties may differ vastly from the one learnt, the second native variety may be helpful in the sense that it could share similar processes.
and rules (grammatical, syntactic, phonological, semantic and pragmatic) with the target language. Therefore, through the learning process of positive transfer and comparing and contrasting strategies, bidialectal students have the advantage of accessing two, rather than only one, varieties from their cognitive linguistic depository.

References