

HPEN7004

Key Issues in Linguistics

Assignment 2: Essay

Critique of Research Article:

“Is multilingualism linked to a higher tolerance of ambiguity?”

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Introduction

One essential technique in quickly locating useful research papers, critically assessing their credibility and determining the relevance of their findings to one's own research and practices is to write research critique (Brink & Wood, 2001). The research article being reviewed in this critique is named "*Is multilingualism linked to a higher tolerance of ambiguity?*" by Jean-Marc Dewaele and Li Wei (hereinafter referred as "the authors") (2012), which was chosen out of my interest in applied linguistics and my practical work in simultaneous interpretation as well as English language education.

This reviewed article (hereinafter referred as "the article" or "this article") investigates the impacts of multilingualism on the personality trait tolerance of ambiguity (hereinafter referred as "TA") through large-sample questionnaires. After analysing this topic from four aspects including the number of spoken languages, the language proficiency, bilingual family growing-up environment and the experience of living abroad, the article comes to the conclusion that a high level of multilingualism makes individual more capable in dealing with ambiguity.

In this critique, the article will be critically assessed from its theories, hypotheses, methodology, analysis, and results and how the findings of this article can be linked to practical work.

Theory

In building the theoretical framework, it is important not to make a list of the everything, but rather, in addition to summarising relevant theories, to analyse how each part relates to another and to synthesise theories – bringing them together to form something new (Thomas 2013, p.119-120). From this point of view, this article has drawn a logic-clear and comprehensive theoretical background.

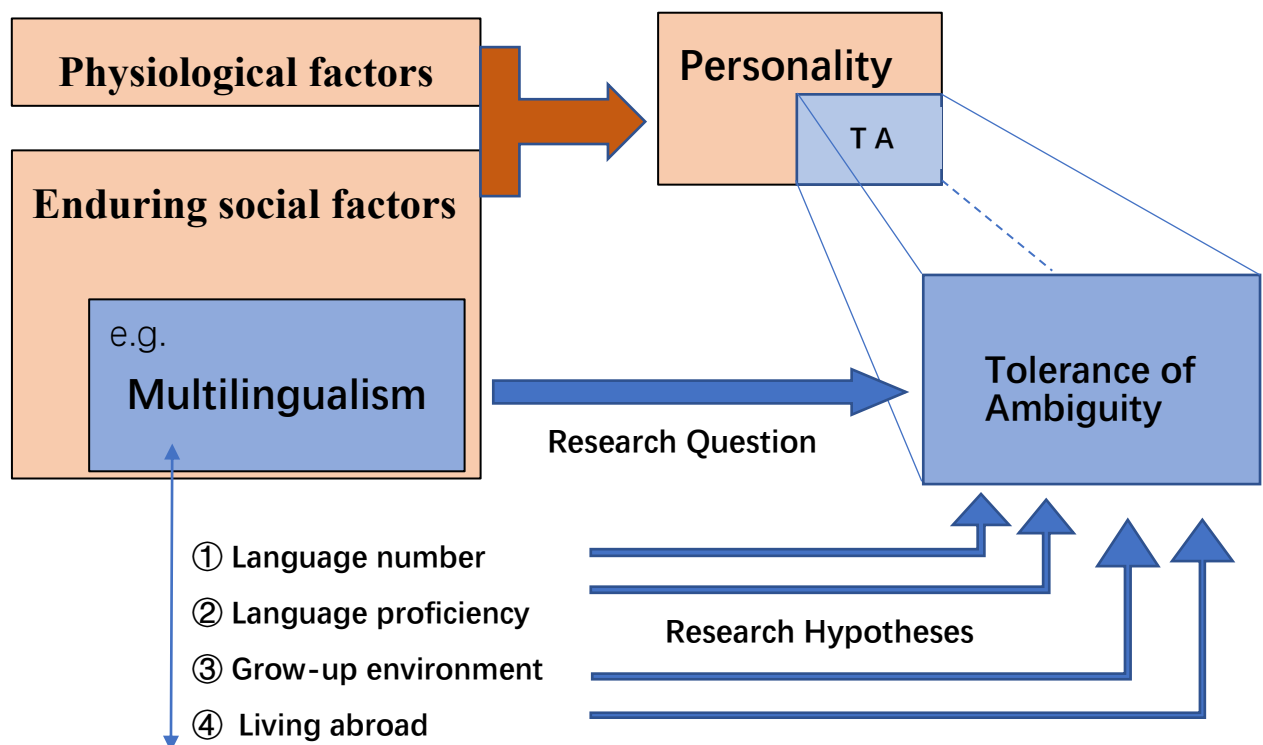
This article researches on the impacts of multilingualism on personality. Around this topic, the authors firstly introduce the overarching theory, that is, a combination of physiological and enduring social factors can influence the personality-shaping (McCrae, et al., 2000). Then, the authors highlight that the multilingualism, an important enduring social factor, can have a small but vital impact on some personality traits, which point has been proved by multiple researchers, such as Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven (2009), and Korzilius, Van Hooft ,Planken & Hendrix (2011), etc. In this article, the authors argue that multilingualism can shape personality.

Next, the authors narrow down the idea of personality to people's tolerance of ambiguity (TA). They review the definition of TA and its significance as a personality trait. For example, TA was defined as the “tendency to perceive ambiguous situation as desirable” by Budner (1962) and ambiguity can exist when lacking of sufficient cues, such as “novelty”, “complexity” and “insolubility” (Budner, 1962). Moreover, in terms of its significance, the

authors further point it out TA is closely linked with second language (L2) learning, because problems in L2 learning process such as encountering unfamiliar foreign accents (Seravalle, 2011) or unknow words or grammar (Ely, 1995) can be easily associated with aforementioned cues. Therefore, to find out more about TA would facilitate the L2 learning. Also, Furman (1994) highlights that TA has a wide application in many branches of psychology as well.

Therefore, by synthesise them together, we can come to the logic map of the theoretical background as below.

Theoretical logic map



To conclude, through the analysis and synthesis of theoretical background, the authors make it clear the logical links behind the theories and how they relate with each other, and at the meanwhile, emphasize the necessity and significance of the research.

Another point worth mentioning is the high credibility of this article. Suggested by Ryan-Wenger (1992), questions using for critiquing include “credibility variables”, which he defined as “how believable the papers appear and how strong the researcher’s qualifications are”. This article comes from *Bilingualism: Language & Cognition*, a peer-reviewed journal from Cambridge University Press. Moreover, in terms of two authors, Dr. Dewaele and Dr. LI Wei are both well-known professors in UK universities, and both have published widely in the field of second language acquisition and multilingualism and has won many awards in this field too (2020 [online]), so They both have very strong academic background, deep insights and seminal research in the field. In this article, most of the references are within 5 years, making the research findings up to date.

Hypotheses

The authors put forward the research questions by viewing “multilingualism” from 4 perspectives, namely 1) the number of speaking languages, 2) the language proficiency, 3) the bi- or multi-lingual grow-up environment, and 4) whether has been living abroad, and if yes, for how long. Then, to take a close look of how multilingualism under these four perspectives would affect individual’s TA respectively. The 4 hypotheses are as following:

1. Participants knowing more languages are expected to have higher level of TA.
2. Participants with higher global proficiency of multiple languages are expected to score higher in TA.
3. Participants who grew up in a bi- or multi-lingual environment are expected to have higher level on TA.
4. Participants who have lived abroad for no less than 3 months would have better TA, and it is expected the longer the time abroad is, the higher TA score is.

Generally, the hypotheses fulfil the research goal and are comprehensive (hypothesis 1 and 2) and formative factors (hypothesis 3 & 4) of multilingualism. Moreover, the research questions need to be precise and doable (Thomas 2013, p.56-57), the questions in this article all fit these criteria. For example, in terms of the 4th perspective of living abroad, the authors consider 3 months and 1 year as two boundary points that make the research more feasible and doable. More specifically, I found the second perspective is particularly vital as this is a self-selected questionnaire, so it is necessary to keep the relatively same standard for measuring the global language proficiency. Importantly, this point has been reflected in the questionnaire design later.

However, as I can find supportive argument in theoretical part for hypotheses 1, 2, and 4, but cannot find the theoretic foundation for hypothesis 3, and answering hypothesis 4 may also involve some practical problem of how to

separate multilingual effect and multicultural effect.

Methodology

Research approach design

To answer the research questions, this article uses questionnaire, an important quantitative research method. Guided by positivist paradigm, the quantitative mode of inquiry involves counting, measuring and ultimately performing the analysis of numerical data (Smith, 1988), and it is about verifying the research hypotheses on certain set of data using empirical method (Frankfort & Nachmias, 1992).

The reason of using quantitative method in this article is corresponding with the literature review part where the authors point out that there are already small-scale studies and case studies (Kinging, 2008) examining the links between the multilingualism and personality-shaping using qualitative method. Therefore, choosing quantitative method, on the other hand, will enable this article to research the question from a different paradigm and thus becoming a good supplement to the existing research and fill the gap. Moreover, the choose of research method is consistent with the theoretical development.

The major advantages of using questionnaire in this article include 1) more objective and authors' bias-free conclusion (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996) which leads to more reliability and replicability; 2) large number of data – a total of 2158 samples in this article, a fairly large data base – which can enhance the

generalisation of finding (Balsley, 1970). However, as a representative of quantitative method, the questionnaire may also bring certain limitations, for example: 1) lacking of in-depth analysis so it's hard to interpret the story behind the numbers and answer "why" question in this research; 2) the questionnaire in this article is participants self-select and self-report, so it's not easy to control the participant group and cannot make sure whether the participants report the truth, which may lead to enhanced heterogeneity (Dewaele, Wei, 2013).

Another vital element in the research approach design is the ethical clearance, because this is much more than a practical issue – it's more about the conduct and how you think of your research (Thomas, 2013, p. 85). It is good that this article has clearly stated the questionnaire received ethical clearance from appropriate committee.

Instrument and Questionnaire design

The questionnaire includes part 1 background information and part 2: Five-point Likert scale on 11 questions measuring TA.

The first part is designed fairly good, as it well serves the purpose of testing the hypotheses. For example, it includes many hypotheses-related questions in the background information form, such as whether have been living abroad and if yeas, for how long. This fits for hypothesis 4.

Moreover, in order to tackle the problem of non-standardisation of self-

perceived information of global language proficiency which in relates to answering hypothesis 2, and also to distinguish the multilinguals who speak limited words in various languages to those who speak well but in fewer languages, the authors introduce a way of scoring participant's oral and written proficiency and divide them into three group – high, medium and low -- so that authors can only focus on the middle group to avoid systematic bias. I believe this is an innovative way to understand the real picture of the participants, and at the same time make the data more justifiable.

The questions in the second part were adapted from Herman's TA measurement model (Herman et al., 2010, p.64). The designed questions in this model are aimed to evaluate participant's TA level from 4 dimensions including 1) valuing diversity; 2) change; 3) challenge perspectives; and 4) unfamiliarity. The original Herman's TA evaluating model has 12 questions in total with 3 questions reflecting each dimension. However, the authors delete one question from this model, making one dimension represented by one less question, and such uneven distribution may not comprehensively reflect all qualities related to TA.

The questionnaire uses five-point Likert scale which is a range from 1 represents minimal to 5 represents maximum and ask participants to score their most true feelings. This can be a very good way of transferring from qualitative answer into quantitative variables, and at the same time, letting people feel easier by not giving a definite yes-or-no answer. However, there are worries about

cultural difference in Likert scale, for instance Asians tend to avoid extreme responses (Wang, et al., 2008), which may then result in data bias.

Participants

There are a total of 2158 participants, including about 1600 females and covering 204 nationalities, and the mean age was 34.5 and the average educational level was fairly high. The people surveyed consist 41 monolinguals, 399 bilinguals, 566 trilinguals, 557 quadrilinguals, etc.

The participants profile is generally acceptable: a large data base and a large variety in global language. Though the proportion of women and highly-educated people is a bit high, it's not much a problem, and the authors even argue that this is the strength as the kinds of people they need for filling this form are the ones possess high level of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness (Dewaele, Wei, 2013). However, there was only 41 monolinguals, this number is too small compared with the total number, and lack of data base may bring some statistical problem.

Data collection

The authors had pilot test run before the formal distribution of questionnaire, which is very necessary. This is a web-based questionnaire that lasting for 4 months online, and compared with traditional pen-and-paper ones, it has more advantages, such as reaching to a larger survey base in less time, reducing transcription errors, being efficient in sampling in software, and sometimes the

anonymity nature of it can bring enhanced honesty in participants (Dornyei, 2007). Whereas at the same time, we also need to be aware of the possible limitations of it, for example, it will be not easy to control the participants group since participants will all be self-selected, and sometimes reliability would also be a concern since it's hard to check whether the information is true (Wilson and Dewaele, 2010).

Analysis and Results

In the data analysing process, the authors use certain statistics methods to successfully refine the calculation and interpretation of the data, and the rationale of using certain statistics method is very clear. For example, a Pearson correlation analysis was run to check the correlation between different variations, revealing a strong positive relationship between participant's age and TA score (Dewaele, Wei, 2013). That's why the authors opt for one-way ANCOVAs instead of one-way ANOVAs, in order to remove the variance due to the correlation between age and TA.

After reviewing this article, we believe it has clearly answered the research questions and tested relevant theories. The authors confirmed the first two hypotheses, that's to say, knowing more languages and having higher level of language proficiency will truly lead to higher TA. However, the hypothesis 3 was rejected since the results show no link between bi-or multi-lingual growing up environment and TA score. The hypothesis 4 was accepted after modification. So, staying abroad of more than 3 months would help increase individual's TA

level, but such effect would level off after one year.

Practical implications

The direct findings of this article can be well applied to the second language acquisition and practical work of simultaneous interpretation. Because these two scenarios would both encounter much ambiguity, for example, from unfamiliar accents, unknown words or grammar, scattered information, etc., especially the simultaneous interpreters who quite often have to start interpreting even before they are able to get a clear picture of the meaning of one full sentence. or dealing with speeches with unfamiliar topics. Therefore, improved tolerance of ambiguity would be vital for improving students' or interpreters' language skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after critically reviewing this article, we believe in general it is logically clear, theoretically comprehensive and well-organised in its research design using quantitative method, and ultimately lead to well-grounded argument. Meanwhile, we also point out some certain limitations in its hypotheses and questionnaire design, as well as practical implications, and hope the research can shed light on the future development of applied linguistics.

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