THE IMPACT OF PLURILINGUALISM ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. A ROMANIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of plurilingualism on the academic performance of Romanian students enrolled in the 12th grade where they study three languages: English, French and Italian at different levels. The research consists of two parts. The first part of the study investigates the Romanian curricula and the conventions of the Common European Framework for Languages for the three foreign languages as a knowledge support for the first and second language learners in acquiring academic language. It focuses on the existing resemblances and differences in writing skills and their impact on the academic performance. The second part analyzes the language proficiency in the academic written performance and studies the outcomes regarding the written skills of the students.

Keywords: plurilingualism, languages proficiency, academic performance, writing skills

Introduction

A growing cultural diversity characterizes our contemporary societies shaped by globalization and migration. This diversity is necessarily reflected in education systems and requires the introduction of intercultural approaches to education that can improve learning processes and the quality of education.
In this context, learning more than one foreign language can be beneficial in many ways.

The aim of this study is to investigate the correlation of plurilingualism and the academic performance of Romanian students enrolled in the 12th grade where they study three languages: English, French and Italian at different levels. We seek to find out whether plurilingualism proves an advantage in the context of acquiring academic language in writing skills. From a comparative point of view, we will analyze in which way the Romanian curricula can be an efficient knowledge support for the three foreign languages. The language proficiency in the academic performance and the outcomes regarding the written linguistic qualities of students will be measured by the rate of success to Romanian Baccalaureate (RB) and the international language evaluation assessments in English, in French and in Italian in the last two years.

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Generally, in Romania, foreign language learning begins from the primary school; it continues to the end of high school and covers the A1 to B2 levels.

In high schools, for example, the students can study two foreign languages. They are mostly Romanians and their mother tongue is Romanian. However, there are many bilingual high schools where students learn foreign languages at different levels in order to have access to international learning programms and pass the international examination assessments.

The Romanian students enrolled in the 12th grade in our high school study English, Italian and French as foreign languages.

Based on a post-facto analysis, this research aims to document and explore the extent to which the plurilingualism proves an advantage in the context of acquiring academic language in writing skills in the case of bilingual students who study Italian as first foreign language and English as second foreign language.

Our specific goals include: It also presents the learning supports for the first and second language learners in writing skills and their results of acquiring written skills in English and Italian as first foreign languages and French as the second foreign language. Finally, it determines the edge of acquiring academic language through the rate of success in the international examination assessments that this high school students had in the last two years.

1. Literature Review

The literature review gathered and analyzed the findings and observations of earlier and recent studies, reports and publications on the subject of the impact of plurilingualism on high school students' academic performance (Kovalik, 2012; Corcoran, Englander, Karen and Mureşan 2019; Robu and Mureşan, 2018; Mureşan and Pérez-Llantada, 2018).

Kovalik (2012) investigated the association between plurilingualism and academic success measured by GPA among 305 undergraduate students. The researcher administered a survey to discover the number of languages that the participants were fluent in and their overall grade point averages. The findings revealed that students who spoke more than one language had no necessarily obtained lower or higher GPA. However, in the study, the sample size representing those who spoke two or more languages was too small (i.e., only 12.43% out of total sample), which might have skewed the results (after Martirosyan, Hwang and Wanjohi, 2015: 63). It was also not clear which language was each respondent's first language. It is therefore hard to conclude that international students who are multilingual, but do not have English as a mother tongue, have cognitive advantages or disadvantages in predominantly English speaking institutions. Hence, in addition to investigating the relationship between self-perceived English language proficiency and academic performances of international students, this study also examined how GPA is related to the number of languages spoken by international students (*idem*).

European educational resources (frameworks, statistics, linguistic programs and portfolios) support the development of learner autonomy, intercultural awareness, language competences and learning achievements and encourage international mobility.

The review of literature considers two distinct frameworks for describing levels of students' language proficiency: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and the Equals-ALTE European Language Portfolio (2000-2007). There are also studies that describe the training that teachers have to implement in the classroom in order to help students to become proficient in language learning (among others Komorowska, H. 2012, The Equals framework for language teacher training and development, 2016; Towards a common European framework of reference for language teachers, 2016-2019, a project which is still in discussion).

Many of these studies (especially frameworks) are centered on the linguistic skills to be acquired in a foreign language in an institutionalized learning system (such as schools and high schools) and offer scales to be used in order to assess the academic language performance of these learners.

Or, there is a broad consensus that there is a specific style of speaking and writing which is appropriate for the school context of academic learning and academic achievement (Ballantyne and Rivera, 2014; Bardi and Mureşan, 2014; Rossner, 2017).

Although researchers and theorists disagree on the exact nature of this language style, it is widely accepted that students who are studying two or three foreign languages require support in acquiring the academic language of the classroom and also out of the classroom (Anstrom, 2010; Bailey, 2007; Dicerbo, Anstrom, Baker and Rivera, 2013; Ballantyne and Rivera, 2014).

In this regard, a current open question is the language level and the academic language proficiency required for success among the Romanian high school students who study English, Italian and French as foreign languages.

In order to show how could our students achieve an academic level in writing skills as a result of school language learning, we consider both Romanian curricula for the three languages (i.e. the curriculum for the Romanian Baccalaureate) and the European distinct frameworks and scaled reports for describing levels of language proficiency in languages assessment (i.e. Cambridge for English, DELF for French and CELI/CILS for Italian).

2. Hypotheses

a) There is no difference in academic performance between high school Romanian students who speak one language and high school students who are bilingual.
b) Or, high school Romanian students who are at least bilingual have higher rate of academic performance in international language assessments than the students who only speak one foreign language.

3. Method and data

The current research covers two areas of interest: it presents a comparative approach on the subject of the compatibility between the Romanian curricula (RC) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) in terms of developing writing skills for the first and second language learning and analyzes the results of a case study represented by Romanian students who study three foreign languages in a bilingual school in Bucharest and their rate of academic performance in written skills throughout the international examination assessments.

3.1. The Romanian curricula (RC) vs. CEFRL

The comparative approach was guided by two areas of inquiry:
a) to what extent the RC for English, Italian and French are tailored to the European Framework requirements for acquiring writing skills?
b) can the RC offer enough learning support for the first and second language high school learners in acquiring academic language in writing?

The comparative approach has shown at least two aspects. First, the production written competences requirements from the RC are guided for the European Commission documents on the development of key competences and to CEFRL level's descriptors. Second, the RC's requirements in written production might correspond to B2 level from the CEFRL in L1 language learning (i.e. English and Italian), to B1 level from the CEFRL in L2 language learning (i.e. French) and to A2 level from the CEFRL in L3 language learning (i.e. Italian).

In fact, there are some significant differences in the use of terminology and the typology of writing productions for acquiring writing skills for high school students in the three curricula, despite the attempt to adjust the Romanian school syllabus to the requirements of the European framework.

These differences are synthesized in the Table 1.

		The Romanian Curriculum (2006) (production written descriptors)	The CEFRL (2001) (production written descriptors)
Differences	**In terminology**	*Production written* is not treated in terms of *descriptor*s, but as ”specific skills”. It is used a general term, less clear than ”the user CAN” write/produce”.	*Production written* is treated in terms of ”the user CAN write/produce” various types of written messages, structure that clearly leads to the meaning of ”skill” in the production of written messages.
	In types of requested written productions	*Requested written productions* are presented globaly, in terms of ”forms of contents presentation” without any concrete descriptions. They are mostly concentrated on wtiting dialogues, letters, descriptions, opinion essays.	Two types are clearly mentioned: *overall written production* and *creative writing*, each one accopanied by specific scale descriptors.
	Reports and essays writting	Are mentioned together with those from the criteria above . Few references are mentioned about the kind of reports and essays should be written.	Specific scales are clearly mentioned for reports and essays with focus on the argumentative essay.
Similarities		Are organized taking into account the names of CEFRL's reception and production levels of competences.	

Table 1. *The RC vs. CEFRL*

3.2. Conclusions of the comparative approach

The terminology used in the Romanian syllabus for English, Italian and French for the written productions is not clearly described as it is in the CEFRL. Neither its form, nor its content is compatible with the CEFRL conventions. Therefore, it becomes uncomfortable for teachers in their practice because they have to do a continuous work of how to be in keeping with the CEFRL's requirements during the writing learning process in order to guide students who want to pass the international examination assessments. Sometimes, it is also hard for students to understand it. If they are willing to prepare themselves for achieving an academic performance in writing in two or three languages or to pass the international language assessments, they have to do complementary practice and to be aware of the requested skills for this kind of examinations.

Or, only the acknowledgment of the Romanian curricula is not enough for acquiring academic performance in writing in the 4 years of high school studies.

So, at least for the Romanian students, teachers who guide them to prepare for the international examinations in English, Italian or French do serious complementary work together to achieve an academic performance in writing in classroom and out of the classroom.

4. Case study design and instrumentation

4.1. Participants and Data Collection

The participants of the study case are 415 Romanian students enrolled in the 12th grade in a bilingual high school located in Bucharest. They are distributed in 7 classes, in different educational structures. The research time period covers the last two years. They are studying three foreign languages during 4 years of high school courses, but at different levels, as shown in table 2 and the chart bellow.

	Students in Maths and IT	Students in Sciences	Students in Philology	Total
Italian (L1) English (L2)	0	44	65	**109**
English (L1) French (L2)	120	46	70	**236**
English (L1) French (L2) Italian (L3)	0	0	70	**70**

Table 2. *L1 and L2 language learning distribution per specializations*
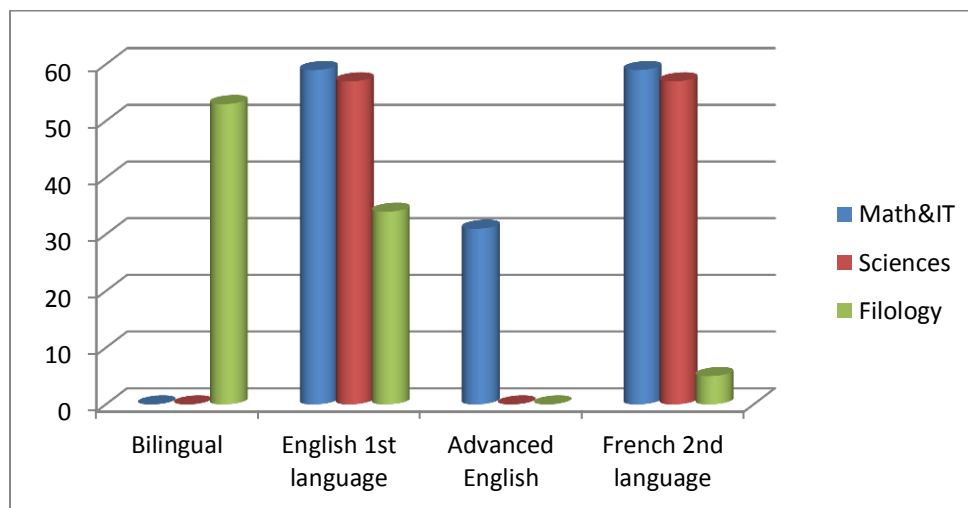
4.2. Case study analysis

For the case study analysis we took into account both advantages and difficulties that students and teachers could encounter during the learning process of written skills.

From the point of view of students' interest in language learning in this particular high school, we can say that all students have the opportunity to study at least two foreign languages. Their interest in learning English as L1 and French as L2 is higher than learning Italian L1 and English L2, especially in Maths & IT and Philology. The L1 and L2 language learning is compulsory for all students no matter their educational structures, but Italian as L3 is optional for students in Sciences and Philology.

Student's difficulties in acquiring an academic performance in writing skills could be influenced by several factors: their different target of proficiency in learning three foreign languages, the incompatibilities in syntax, semantics and rhetoric level between the Romance languages (Italian and

French) and English (Bennet and Mureşan, 2016) when dealing with the academic writing and the limited students' implication in writing contests at a national and an international level.

From the teacher's side, the major difficulties are due at least to the absence of clearness in the three Romanian curricula (2006) with regard to the description of production written skills and its adaptation to the CEFRL instructions and then in the number of classes dedicated to the first language learning (e.g. from 4 to 6 classes/week for the Italian and English) and the second language learning (e. g. 2 classes /week for French) in the Romanian curricula which is not enough for students to achieve an academic language level.

The major challenges for teachers in teaching writing skills to students in our high school are, on a one hand, the absence of interest in some students in acquiring an academic writing level in Italian or English. On the other hand, implementing the CEFRL's recommendations in production written messages in the teaching class is hard to be achieved in the absence of compatibility between the European documents and teaching clear requirements in the Romanian syllabus. As for the second language learning (in this case, French) it is almost impossible to teach students production written skills without sustaining complementary preparation.

In the end, it is obvious that only the classroom courses are not enough to prepare students for academic performance in order for them to pass the international assessments provided by the CEFRL's scored grids. Teachers are supposed to provide complementary appropriate support by incorporating various pedagogical strategies in order to help students improve their Italian/English/French academic written skills (Andrade, 2006; Shapiro, Farrelly and Tomaš, 2014).

5. Results

Despite the difficulties mentioned above, our students have each year significant outcomes regarding the written production skills in L1 and L2 language assessments.

For this research, we synthesized in table 3 the rate of our students' academic writing performance, measured by their success in the international language assessments in the last two years in the international assessments in English: Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL, in Italian: (Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Staniera (CILS) and Certificazione della Lingua Italiana (CELI) and in French: Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française (DELF).

	English international assessments	Italian international assessments	French in international assessments
IELTS (B2)	15		
IELTS (C1)	6		
CAE (B2)	13		
CAE (C1)	8		
FCE (B2)	16		
FCE (B1)	23		
FCE (C1)	2		
CPE(C1)	2		
PET (B1)	9		
TOEFL(B2)	15		
CELI (B2)		23	
CILS (B1)		35	
DELF (B1)			11
DELF (B2)			7
Total Score	109	58	18

Table 3. *The rate of academic written performance – candidate's distribution per types of international assessments*

These results had shown that from the 415 students participants to the case study, almost a half of them had succeeded to achieve an academic level in writing skills as a result of participating to the international examination assessments. They had the higher rate of success in English and Italian examinations (the L1 language learning). However, they were also interested to pass the French international assessments even if it was their L2 language. All these results could be a confirmation of our hypothesis that high school Romanian students who are at least bilingual have higher rate of academic performance in international language assessments than the students who only speak one foreign language.

6. Summary of Findings and Discussion

This study intended to contribute to existing research on the relationship between foreign language learning and academic performance in written skills of Romanian 12th grade students and to fill the research gap on the relationship between the number of languages acquired in school learning system and their proficiency in writing.

Based on the results, it is concluded that the academic performance in writing is significant to students who study two L1 foreign languages (e.g. Italian and English).

Moreover, one of the characteristics of studying Italian in L1 language in this particular high school is that students who obtained the B2 CILS or passed the Professional Language Certificate (a specific Romanian assessment for bilingual students) are allowed to teach Italian to primary schools and do translation and interpretation.

Even if there are few students who obtained the French language certificate (DELF), it could be an advantage for the 12th grade students in finding a job in multinational companies.

All this concerned, there are significant differences in terms of academic performances between the Romanian students who have proficient multiple language knowledge (Martirosyan and Hwang, 2015: 67) and those who had just one.

7. Implications of the Current Study

For the Romanian 12th grade students, language written proficiency solely measured by scored written examinations might not be a good predictor of academic success because other influential factors might be omitted in the investigations (Light et al. 1987; Fox 2004).

In fact, the standardized test scores commonly used in the European Union offer only a valid assessment for the Romanian 12th grade students to study at an international level, but their opportunity to continue their linguistic training abroad is not restricted to these tests scores. Other possibilities to practice their English, Italian or French language skills are the Erasmus projects and the International Mobility Programs (Manafi, Marinescu, Roman and Hemming 2017).

8. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, it was limited to one bilingual institution. It is recommended for further studies to include more than one bilingual institution in order to have a larger sample size.

Second, this study examined the extent to which the plurilingualism proves an advantage in the context of acquiring academic language in writing skills. Future studies may consider examining the other three language skills (reading, listening and speaking) in order to have a global view on academic performance of high school students.

Third, this research was limited to a quantitative survey. Future research could employ a mixed-method approach in order to obtain more comprehensive information on Romanian students' perceptions on challenges associated with their academic endeavors in a foreign country.

Finally, more research is needed on the relationship between plurilingualism and the academic performance of Romanian students. This is a study area we will explore further.

9. Conclusions

In today's world, speaking one foreign language is not enough. Students who use several languages in speaking and writing will increase their chances of finding a job, whether at home or abroad. Learning three languages enriches the mind and opens up new horizons, both personal and professional.

Or, a foreign language cannot be studied and memorized only from books. Teachers must raise students' awareness on the fact that being proficient in a language means having developed a skill and treated the language like a skill to be acquired and not like a subject to be studied.

Therefore, teachers must encourage high school students to travel abroad and take part to international projects for them to develop their language skills and become truly plurilingual.

Without pretending to have exhausted such a vast subject as analyzing the academic performance of high school students in writing, we hope that we have managed to draw attention to the phenomenon, which corresponds to both the dynamics of languages and the evolution of societies, to a degree capable of opening new ways of research.

Plurilingualism is a nowadays reality and it will become more and more pregnant at least in the European societies.

In this respect, we share the opinion that plurilingualism "cannot only help to bridge gaps in communication, but it can also lead to more respect among people of different backgrounds. This shared respect for others of different cultural and social backgrounds can create cohesion within the world that has the potential to result in a better society" (Kovalik, 2012: 142).

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