

Amharic language (L1) reading ability and English language (L2) proficiency as predictors of grade nine students' reading performance

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Abstract

This study examined Amharic language (L1) reading ability and English language (L2) proficiency as predictors of grade nine students' reading performance at Fitawrari Habtemariyam General Secondary School, Bahir Dar Town, Ethiopia. Fifty grade nine students (n=50) randomly selected and participated using mixed-methods research design. Teacher-made tests and unstructured interview were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Quantitative data analyzed through correlations and regression analyses, but unstructured interview analyzed in descriptions. Findings indicated that students' (L2) reading performance is influenced both by their Amharic language (L1) reading experiences and English language (L2) proficiency, with varying degrees. This implies both the interdependence and threshold level hypotheses contribute to students' English reading performance. Therefore, researcher recommended that students be offered with opportunities on bilingual reading strategies and encouraged to use (L1) strategy use and English language proficiency to learn their (L2) reading. Further research is suggested.

Keywords:

Amharic reading ability, English proficiency, predictors, performance

Introduction

Reading skill is fundamental to learn other language skills and enhanced academic performance (Cummins, 1979; Grabe, 1991). However, Ethiopian students at different levels exhibit weaknesses in their reading in English language (L2) (Chanyalew & Abiy, 2015); The study disclosed that the situation is serious in both primary and secondary schools in which students fail to cope with the reading performances expected of them. There have been a plethora of researches conducted in the areas of literacy and bilingual education apropos whether students' problem is a reading or a language problem. What are the causes for students' failure in reading? Is it a problem of using appropriate strategy or lack of adequate threshold (L₂) proficiency? In response to these questions, scholars fall back on Cummins's (1976) linguistic interdependence and threshold level proficiency theory cited in Cummins's (1979) and Alderson's question (1984) whether problems in reading performance could result from the problem of reading or linguistic capacity. These theories have been an issue of debate. There is thus, a felt-need of investigating their impact on students' L₂ reading yet. This study, therefore, aimed at investigating which of these factors significantly contribute to students' L₂ reading performance. However, this study did not include classroom contexts and other impeding factors.

Teachers and some parents had harbored deep resentment for grade 9 students exhibited low reading performance (Abiy, 2011). Students' insolvency in reading performance may be caused by a multitude of factors among which could be the students' first language reading skill in (L₁-Amharic language, in this case) which should have been transferred to effectively read in (L₂-English, in this case) or their low level proficiency in English (L₂). There are fluid arguments about the role of first language reading skill and students' second or foreign language threshold level in the development of students' learning in general and their reading performance in particular. One of the arguments relates to the lack of

reading experience students exhibit in the target language, English (Abiy, 2011). This view relates to Cooper's (1984) distinction between unpracticed and practiced readers; that is between readers who pursued their previous education through the medium of their first language and those who pursued their education through a foreign language. In support of this view, Alderson (1984), Grabe (1991), and Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) wrote the amounts of print students are exposed to also affect their cognition. The other side of the argument advocates that students' reading skill in L₁ can be transferred to their reading in L₂. A number of researches have been done to respond to which of these were acceptable (e.g. Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Clarke, 1979; Cziko, 1992).

There have been a plethora of researches conducted in the areas of literacy and bilingual education apropos whether students' problem is a reading or a language problem. The researches have unraveled unsettled results. Some of the studies disclosed that students' reading difficulties in general stem from low proficiency in an L₂ (Alderson, 1984; Cziko, 1992). On a similar vein, others also indicated that advanced L₁ readers fail to cope with the required standard because of inept in an L₂ (Carrell, 1991; Clarke, 1979). These researchers posit that students require a certain level of L₂ development to be successful in their L₂ reading. Other researchers, however, postulate those students' L₁ reading ability transfers to L₂ reading (Chu-Chang, 1981, Penfield, 1986). Gudschinsky, as cited in Roberts (1994), reported that in literacy programs run in Peru, Mexico, and Vietnam, L₁ literacy promoted L₂ literacy. Similarly, studies on bilingual education revealed that students who were literate in first language learned English more easily than preliterate bilinguals (Goodman, Goodman & Flores, 1978). The disparate promulgation apropos the role of L₁ reading skills to L₂ reading development and the need of a threshold level in L₂ relates with theories of Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH) and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH) (Bernhardt, & Kamil, 1995; Cummins, 1979; Roberts, 1994)

Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH) and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH)

LIH states that students' reading ability in an L₂ largely depends on their ability in the L₁ reading. The assumption is that since students have acquired the skill of reading in their L₁, they can easily transfer this skill while learning an L₂. Walter (2007:15), however, expressed his dissonance with the term transfer; he rather prefers access.

When L₂ learners do understand L₂ texts, it has been said that they, transfer reading comprehension skills from their L₁ to their L₂....Here I propose that transfer is a misleading metaphor, and that it is better to speak of access to an already existing, non-linguistic skill.

LTH (initially termed as short-circuit hypothesis), on the other hand, advocates the assumption that students' L₂ proficiency is a key for their reading development. The assumption here is that as proficiency grows comprehension ability catches up (Walter, 2007:15). Similar to findings in literacy and bilingual education stated above, different studies indicated inconsistencies, the preponderant purporting the linguistic knowledge as powerful predictor (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). Thus, there is a tendency of researching the consolidation of both LIH and LTH, and focus has been directed to studying cognitive processes in supporting each other for the enhancement of students' L₂ reading performance.

Roles of students' English language grammatical and vocabulary knowledge and reading ability in developing their reading performance

Students' reading ability in L₂ can be influenced by their reading experience in the L₁ (Krashen, 1984). Students gain a wider exposure to the L₂ if they are reading various types of reading texts; and, as result, they expand their vocabulary knowledge, implicitly learning grammar and the organizations of texts, and enrich their ideas in various walks of life. Words carry meanings which help students communicate effectively with the text they read. It was observed that lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge usually impedes communication. Researchers such as Chen and Vellutino (1997) and Urquhart and Weir (1998) asserted that students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge significantly correlate to reading performance. As many agree, vocabulary and grammar knowledge, however, cannot end in accurate and effective reading.

Chen and Vellutino (1997) have also argued that a good part of reading abilities can be related to a combination of word recognition abilities and comprehension abilities. Experts assume a person who has the ability to read for basic comprehension also has the ability to find information in a text (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). This research tried to find out whether or not students' English grammar and vocabulary knowledge as well as their reading ability could significantly predict students' English reading

performance. As indicated in the introductory section of this paper, Ethiopian high school students have difficulties in English language reading (Chanyalew & Abiy, 2015). Therefore, different methods should be devised to alleviate their deficiencies. One method might be having recourse to students' L₁ reading strategy use; and the other could be developing their L₂ proficiency, or focusing on both. Which of these factors better predicts students' L₂ reading performance significantly? Such a study was not conducted in Ethiopia to date.

The causes for failure to meet the standard of reading at grade nine in Ethiopian schools were not yet studied. Thus, this study attempted to investigate which of the variables- students' reading ability in their first language Amharic (L₁) or their English language (L₂) proficiency can predict their reading performance. To date, in Ethiopia, studies were made on readability of texts and comprehension level of secondary school students (Berhe, 1989) and comparison of students with the reading level expected of them at freshman at Addis Ababa University (Mendida, 1988). The effects of the Linguistic Interdependence or the Linguistic Threshold level of general secondary school students in Ethiopia have not yet been taken care of; and this initiated the researcher to make this study. The researcher believes that student reading ability plays the prime role in English (L₂). This is because English is taught as a subject at grade nine and grade nine is the beginning of using English as medium of instruction to learn other subjects. Therefore, investigating the relationship between (L₁) and (L₂) reading may have a problem-solving effect to the pervasive reading and academic problem of the students. Therefore, this study endeavors to respond to the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between students' Amharic language reading ability and their English language reading performance?
2. What is the relationship between students' English language proficiency and their English language reading performance?
3. Which of the variables-students' Amharic reading ability or their English language proficiency significantly predicts students' English language reading performance?

Methods

Design of the study

This study aimed at investigating whether or not students' Amharic language (L₁) reading ability and English (L₂) proficiency (which includes students' grammar knowledge, reading comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge) could significantly predict their English language reading performance. Hence, the researcher employed a regression design and analysis taking students' English language (L₂) reading performance as dependent variable and their (L₁) reading capacity and their English language (L₂) proficiency examination results as independent variables.

Participants of the study The population of the study was two hundred grade nine students (n=200) comprised five sections (Grade 9A-E) who were learning by 2017 academic year in Fitawrari Habtemariam General Secondary School at Bahir Dar Town, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia. Fifty (n=50) students participated in the study. From each section researcher selected ten students (n=10) by simple random sampling. Researcher chose simple random sampling because he assumed that simple random sampling could give equal representation chance to each student. He felt that the total number of students in sections was manageable, and the samples could be representative of group heterogeneity.

Instruments used

Tests

In order to investigate whether or not the predicting variables students' (L₁) reading ability and (L₂) proficiency influences students' (L₂) reading performance, students' Amharic language reading scores and first semester English language final examination (comprising grammar knowledge, reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge-as proficiency test) were used and calculated out of 30%.

Students' first semester English language (proficiency) scores

The first semester English (L₂) scores, which included results of the continuous assessments, mid test and final examination, were taken to assess the students' proficiency level. The examination included

items in Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary, and Grammar sections; and it was assumed to be free of bias in assessing students' proficiency score. The examination, besides evaluating students' performance of the semester syllabus, was assumed to indicate their proficiency in (L₂). The first semester scores were calculated out of 30 by obtaining them from the Record Office of the school.

Students' Amharic language reading ability scores

The reading test comprising comprehension, vocabulary and grammar items was prepared by the Amharic teacher who taught the groups of students selected for the study based on grade level. The test items were similar to the items given in the final (L₁). Then, two other Amharic language teachers in the same school evaluated the tests for validity. This was done because the teachers had the experience and the knowledge about his students' level, the lesson objectives and the contents included in the textbook meant for the level. The reading score was taken out of 30.

Students' English language reading performance scores

There were no standard tests to assess grade 9 students' proficiency. Application of international standard proficiency tests such as TOEFL were considered impractical due to English language learning context in Ethiopia, the general nature of TOEFL and IELTS and their inapplicability as specific at grade 9 level. Therefore, teacher-made tests are used in primary, secondary and higher institutions. Such tests in Ethiopia also serve as diagnostic tests for employment. The researcher was convinced that the English language classroom teacher was well-experienced and deemed to be familiar with the syllabus, contents, student textbook, in general, and reading competencies in particular. Hence, he prepared the reading test which comprises comprehension, vocabulary and grammar items. Three other English language teachers evaluated the test items for validity. The reading score was taken out of 30. Both (L₁) and (L₂) tests were given within a week time gap: the Amharic in the first week, then the English.

Unstructured student interview

The interview questions were only two which focused on whether students feel that they had a good performance in reading in both languages, and whether or not they transfer their reading ability in Amharic to their English. Five students were interviewed randomly having taken the test. The interview took 10 to 15 minutes each. Notes were taken by the researcher while the interviewees were responding to the questions.

Methods of data analyses

Students' Amharic reading ability, English language proficiency and reading performance were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The interview results, on the other hand, were analyzed using description.

As can be seen from descriptive statistics below in Table 1, the students' English reading test performance score was below average; that is, it is only 13.36 mean out of the total 30. Their Amharic reading tests score was little higher than the average (a mean of 16.62 out of the total score of 30). Similarly, the mean of students' English language scores in their first semester aggregate was a little higher than half of the total score of 100. Further computation was made to see whether or not the means of students' Amharic and English reading and English language proficiency scores significantly correlate among themselves. Pearson Product Moment correlation statistics was conducted for the purpose.

Results

Statistical analysis

Pearson's correlation coefficient results indicate that students' Amharic reading test results significantly correlated with their English language reading tests results and their first semester English language proficiency exam results. Likewise, their English language reading results significantly correlated with their first semester English language examination results at 95% confidence level.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of students' English language and Amharic reading tests results as well as their first English results [n=50]

Variable	Mean	Std
English reading test performance	13.36	3.87
Amharic reading test results	16.62	3.53
English proficiency test results	61.34	11.65

Which one predicts students' reading ability in English: their Amharic (L1) reading experience or their English language proficiency? A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using SPSS 20 to respond to this question, the dependent variable being students' English reading performance. The summary of the result is indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Correlations among students' English language and Amharic reading test results as well as their first semester English results

	English reading test results	Amharic reading test results	First semester English test results
English reading test results	1.000	0.516*	0.472*
Amharic reading test results		1.000	0.506*

*P < 0.05

Table 3 shows that the multiple correlation coefficient was 0.571 and the adjusted R² was 0.297, meaning that both the independent variables contributed 29.7% of the variance in students' English language reading performance, and this was significant at p < 0.05. The case wise analysis indicated that each of the independent variables significantly predicts students' reading performance in the English language (Table 3 shows the results); however, the Amharic reading tests results seem to have been stronger compared to their first semester English language exam results. The summary of the results is indicated in Table 3 below

Table 3 shows the summary of the case wise analysis. The Beta in both cases indicate a positive increase, and the t-value is significant at p < 0.05.

Predictors	B	Beta	t	Sig.
Amharic reading results	.408	.152	2.677	.010
English language results	.095	.046	2.049	.046

Dependent variable: English reading performance; Adjusted R² = .297

Interview results

For example, one of the interviewees' responses he gave when he was asked what he usually did while reading was trying to recall his first readings while he was reading his second. For instance, he attempted to recall the ideas in the first paragraph while he read the second. This is a strategy he used to see the unity in ideas between paragraphs in the text he was reading. It is possible from this to gauge this reader as analyst for he wanted to understand the parts of the text rather than looking into the general ideas. The interviewee was also asked whether or not he had taken reading strategy training, and he responded that he did not. He rather tried to follow his own way of understanding the text by focusing on what he called key words in the text. In the actual sense, what he called 'key words' were those words he was unfamiliar. The third question posed was related to his use of reading strate-

gies he applied for L₁. His response clearly showed that he applied all techniques of reading in L₁ (Amharic) to his L₂ reading (English). Additional techniques he used while reading English was underscoring or marking of unfamiliar vocabulary and culturally alien ideas so that he could refer to other sources for more understanding about them.

Discussion

The students had more than average level reading ability in Amharic and low English language reading performance as depicted in the descriptive statistics. This result goes in conformity with the results of (Berhe, 1989; Brendhart & Kamil, 1995; Mendida, 1988). Comparatively, their reading ability in Amharic is better most probably because of their linguistic mastery as it is their L₁ for almost all the students studied. Reportedly, high school students' reading performance in Amharic is poor. In this research; however, they scored a bit higher than the average. The students' English language proficiency was found to be a little higher than the average. This might have resulted from various factors; one could be related to the way marks are given. The first semester final English language result is an aggregate of the continuous assessments comprising group work, class work, and mid-and-final examination. In all the continuous assessments, students were given bits of grammar items, reading included only in the terminal examinations (Abiy, 2011). This might presumably have lifted students' English language scores of the first semester.

The regression analysis has indicated that both students' Amharic reading ability and English proficiency have predicted their English reading performance significantly. This result differs from the findings of Alderson (1984), Brendhart and Kamil (1995), and Carrell (1991) who claimed that students' reading ability in L₁ significantly predicts their reading ability in L₂. The result agrees with Carrell (1983), Perkins and Brutten (1988) who indicated that both L₁ reading strategy transfer and the students' L₂ proficiency could contribute to their L₂ reading. The discrepancy in results might have been caused by the difference in methodology, the context and status of English language in different areas, the level of students' competence and other hosts of factors.

The interview results also complement the statistical findings. The interview results designated that students employ their L₁ reading strategies while they read L₂, in this case English. For instance, the interviewees' response could evidence that they analyze their L₁ reading strategy to apply it in their L₂ reading. This finding supports the statistical (regression) results that the interdependence theory works among these students.

Conclusion

The study showed that students have low English language reading performance. This being the reality, their reading performance, however, is influenced both by their Amharic reading experiences and their English proficiency. In other words, though in varying degrees, both the interdependence and threshold level hypotheses are evidenced that they contribute to students' English language reading performance. Therefore, it is recommended that students be offered bilingual reading opportunities to help them cope with English language reading requirements in schools and beyond. Further research could be conducted to respond to the types of strategies, such as cognitive or non-cognitive are transferred from first language (L₁) to second/EFL language (L₂), and which of the skills and subs-skills of English language are better predictors of students' reading performance.

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