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# Identifying the Domain and Level of Bilingualism Amongst Saudi EFL Learners

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**Abstract**--Human language processing in the context of bilingualism poses many questions. The centre of inquiry, however, still remains the nature of interaction between the bilinguals' two language systems. The Saudi higher education learners and society are bilinguals with English taking the place of L2 in practically all walks of life. However, dominance of the mother tongue and prevalent pedagogy and coursebooks can be detractors in their acquisition of native-like proficiency. This study evaluates the role of the two language systems (Arabic and English) in the lives of 93 sophomore students of language, College of Arts and Literature, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia Saudi Arabia at Hail University, Saudi Arabia. Using a questionnaire, the study gathered data that loaded onto specific domains, and the level of bilingualism for the respondents. Results indicate that professional use, academic advancement, using English at the college meetings, and to communicate with their teachers at college are the domains where students frequently use English. Findings also showed that students perceived their level of bilingualism as being high. In other words, they scored high in the items which indicated that they could talk without thinking and were comfortable during their talk. The findings are relevant to course planners, teachers and learners and appropriate recommendations are made for the best learning outcomes.

**Keywords**--bilingualism, compound bilinguals, coordinate bilinguals, language dominance, language systems, proficiency, subordinate bilinguals.

## Introduction

Linguistic behavior in the case of bilingual language users shows variation across the lifespan. The factor that affect L2 acquisition, the use of each language and the interplay of L1 and L2 are large. Of perceptible importance is the factor of the

environment in which the L2 is learnt, in a formal classroom setting or through informal communicative channels, and whether either of the languages has been in use in specific domains. In the field of second language acquisition, as far as adult bilinguals are concerned, the communicative strategies used by them and the reasons for non-nativeness of the final L2 outcome are of keen interest (Yassin & Razak, 2018). Even though Saudi Arabia has a recent tradition of bilingualism, today's young Saudis frequently take this for granted. At the same time, with the definition of bilingualism being full of complexity especially in the Arab sociolinguistic scenario, arriving at an appropriate definition first will help us understand our society better.

Bilingualism is essentially the proficiency of a user in more than one language. Whereas, till a decade or so earlier, or more precisely, till Saudi administration began framing policies targeted to free the economy of petro-dependency, it was believed that monolingualism or the use of one language was the norm in the country, in fact, it was almost a matter of pride for the Saudi people. However, new thoughts in the field of language use and changes in the Saudi socio-economic scene have identified bilingualism as a natural phenomenon and not as an aberrant or unusual happening or as a threat to tradition. The truth is, there is now a realization amongst academicians that societies are essentially bilingual because even in the so-called monolingual frameworks, more than one style, registers, and dialects of the same language are discernible. Strictly speaking, however, the term bilingualism is used to refer to language situations where more than one distinct languages are at play. Further, bilingualism is being used as a blanket term to cover multilingual language systems, covering all aspects of language acquisition such as learning, proficiency, and use of two or more languages. Though mainly an individual accomplishment, it may characterize entire groups, communities, or societies.

Bilingualism has been variously defined by different thinkers. Bloomfield (1953) characterises bilingualism as "a native-like control of two languages", Weinrich (1953) calls it "the practice of using two languages simultaneously", while Diebold (1961) refers to it as "the ability to use two languages in the environment of the native language". Each of these definitions focus on a unique dimension and perspective of bilingualism. Carrying this knowledge forward to the L2 or foreign language classroom, pedagogical choices and materials design are largely guided by the learning outcomes that the institution has in mind. The level of proficiency that can be attained by learners of L2 depends on the quality and kind of learning, support and feedback that are available. It may be noted here that as early as 1978, UNESCO stated with regard to bilingualism: "(It) is not an absolute state, not an 'all-or-none' phenomenon, but a relative state". In the context of the Saudi language learners, however, as stated and derived from the tenets of the national development document, Vision 2030, the nation looks forward to being on what Bloomfield identifies as 'a native-like competence' as far as English proficiency is concerned, a vital step to ensure the fulfilment of the other goals stated therein.

## **Literature review**

An evaluation of current literature linked to any research is an important aspect of every research publication, and it is necessary to place the research effort in context, link it with previous studies done on similar problems, and figure out the collective aptitude and knowledge gained by past scholars working in the same field. It considerably boosts the worth of any study article and opens the doors for comparative research and better results on similar studies. Linguistic proficiency is a practice of linguistic understanding that speakers of a certain dialect possess. The relationship between how students learn their mother tongue and how they pick up their second dialect and succeeding foreign languages has captivated the interest of language researchers all around the world since it became an autonomous study in the late 1960s. This served as the motivation for this study.

For many previous decades, linguistic academics have focused on the process of learning English as a foreign language and the elements that may influence it (Razak et al., 2019). Research on English as a foreign language and the success of bilingual EFL learner's competence and the impact of mother tongue (first language) have piqued the interest of researchers all around the globe (Ortega, 2010, 2013; Soo & Monahan, 2021; Tsimpli, 2014; Yilmaz & Schmid, 2018). Transfer in linguistic education is defined by Odlin (1989, 2003), as described in the research of Atetwe (2015), as "the effect arising from similarities and contrasts between the target language and any other language that has previously been acquired." Bosch (2001), investigated evidence of early language discrimination abilities in infants from bilingual environments and concluded that the mother tongue has a positive influence on language learning in early childhood and which later impacts learners' ability in learning a second language positively.

Adebayo (2008) examined the effect of mother tongue (first language) on English linguistic competence in the Junior School Certificate Examination in Western Nigeria in one instance using a questionnaire survey. He found that the student's native language has an impact on how well they perform in English during the Junior School Certificate Examination in Western Nigeria. To boost performance, he recommends that English be used as a medium of communication both within and outside of the classroom and that students and instructors both endeavour to improve their linguistic competence. Adebayo's study does not explicitly specify how much the mother tongue influences performance; this research sets out to fill in the gaps that Adebayo (2008) overlooked by analysing the impact of the mother tongue on English performance. While FL learning (or acquisition) predominately takes place in a formal - classroom context, L2 acquisition occurs predominantly in immersion - naturalistic - contexts. A significant distinction between the two types of learning settings is the quantity of TL input that learners are exposed to in a naturalistic environment, which is significantly more.

Haznedar (2013) studied second language acquisition in children from a generative perspective and concluded that the first language or mother tongue influences a child while learning a second language or in the acquisition of English as a foreign language. Using one's mother tongue or first language during conversation results in poor English proficiency, based Eslit (2019) research. Then, Mwangi (2009) recommends parents help their kids speak English at home and in school. In

addition, Mwangi (2009) lists their mother tongue or first language as one of the obstacles affecting English proficiency. Eslit (2009) conducted a general study on the subject of first language acquisition and its effects on students' proficiency in the (English) language. Karayayla and Schmid (2017) summarized how Catalan-Spanish bilinguals exhibit remarkable fluency in L1 and L2; consequently, linking competence and language dominance in this setting of balanced bilingualism may be ineffective. Later, they investigated both qualitatively and quantitatively the development of language in Heritage Speakers.

A vast corpus of research on early childhood bilinguals looks at the development of linguistic competence during the acquisition process, frequently concentrating on how bilingual acquisition is qualitatively comparable or different from monolingual acquisition during the formative period of language learning. Several studies (e.g., Benson, 2002; Dutcher, 2004) have found that teaching children in their first language in the early grades improves their total educational achievement. A vast corpus of research on very young bilinguals looks at how language competence progresses during acquisition, and qualitatively compared acquisition of bilingualism with acquisition of monolingualism in early years of language development (Meisel, 2011; Nicoladis, 2018; Serratrice, 2013). Furthermore, studies on adult second language acquisition or first language attrition typically focus on comparable processes; yet, they do so in fundamentally distinct situations in terms of age of onset and other deterministic factors (White, 2018; Yilmaz & Schmid, 2018) for updated reviews from various paradigmatic approaches). Thus, the emphasis is on acquiring a second language beginning in adulthood and the developmental effects, such as attrition, on preserving previously learned languages. The study on heritage speaker (HS) bilingualism is a striking exception to the tendencies in the preceding literature (Montrul, 2008, 2016; Benmamoun et al., 2013; Polinsky, 2018). So far, heritage speaker bilingualism has mainly focused on the steady-state grammars of adults (at least), the minority (heritage) language learned in infancy. The legacy language is one of the HS's L1s, acquired either concurrently with the social majority language (2L1) or as the sole L1 in the instance of child L2 acquisition when immigration happens before or during school age.

### **Language dominance**

The role of language dominance in the success of bilingual EFL learners' acquisition of global English competence is an emerging field of study and many past researchers has published their research observations on similar studies (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Chondrogianni, 2018; Fuentes, 2012; Fuentes & Marinis 2009; Hopp & Schmid, 2013; Meisel, 2011). These studies focused on First and Second Language Acquisition and concluded that mother tongue helps in learning second language and also influence in learning and speaking structure of learners while attaining second language. According to the findings of Soo (2021), language dominance is a significant component in explaining auditory translation priming outcomes, and sequence of learning also plays a role in bilingual lexical processing. Stover et al. (2021), a recent study on the effects of Language dominance on L1 relative clause processing, investigated how language dominance affected the bilingualist understanding of family member speeches. They tried to observe if language dominance, operates as a continuous variable, and whether or not Spanish-English

bilinguals have a relative clause subject-object processing imbalance in their first language (Mother tongue, Spanish). A language dominance feedback form and an eye-tracking experiment with auditorily communicated Spanish relative sentences were administered to highly skilled bilinguals of varied ages. According to the findings, more Spanish dominance resulted in greater processing irregularity when hearing in the case of both the relative sentence and the matrix predicate. This asymmetry, however, was predominantly driven by a late negative effect in object relative constructs rather than a facilitatory effect in subject relations. We hypothesize that increasing dominance in the first-learned language leads to more active online syntactic structure construction, resulting in a larger no of an expected parsing fails, when the integration cost increases.

Puig's (2018) research showed that the performance of bilinguals and their language output in adult life are affected by language dominance. This study investigated the impact of linguistic dominance (LD) on language competence consequences in two groups of young bilinguals: (i) child L2 Catalan learners (L1 Spanish-L2 Catalan) and (ii) child Spanish L2 learners. Most child L2 research concentrate on linguistic growth throughout childhood, with an emphasis on either L1 or L2 progress. These kid L2 learners are often absorbed in the second dialect. Puig (2018) worked on Catalonia's unique circumstance by assessing the Spanish and Catalan of both bilinguals, where dominance in Spanish and Catalan is feasible. They investigate the co-occurrence of Sentential Negation (SN) with a Negative Concord Item (NCI) in pre-verbal position (Catalan only) and Differential Object Marking (DOM). The findings indicate that being dominant in the L1 leads to the preservation of target-like performance in the dialect.

The concept of language dominance and the ways and means of measuring the same have been the subject of debate (e.g., Bialystok, 2007; Montrul, 2008, 2016; Unsworth, 2015). This investigation entails following Unsworth's (2015) notion that language exposure/use patterns might be used as a proxy for LD, dominance refers to patterns of favored use and usage frequency in daily life. As a result, no judgments concerning proficiency should be made. As noted and assessed below, all individuals are extremely talented, performing on the standardized examinations for both languages with no numerical distinction (Grosjean, 1989).

### **Research questions**

The study is guided by the aim to answer the following questions:

- In which domains do bilingual EFL learners at Hail University use English?
- How do EFL learners at Hail University perceive their level of bilingualism?

### **Methods**

#### **Research design**

Quantitative research design was applied in this study. It gathered the perceptions of EFL students at Hail University, Saudi Arabia. The study used a close-ended self-report questionnaire to 93 sophomore students. The study took place in the first semester for the academic year 1440AH.

## Instrument

This study used a 15 item self-report questionnaire to collect data along two constructs: (1) the domain of L2 (English) use by the participants; (2) the level of bilingualism amongst the participants. The questionnaire was piloted on a group of 27 sophomore learners at the same university, they were not included in the final sample. Inter-item correlation of the tool was computed to verify its reliability. This was as follows: Construct (r)= 0.48 which is considered moderate.

## Sample

The final study sample comprised 93 sophomore students of language, literature, and linguistics at Hail University, Department of English Language, College of Arts and Literature, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire was administered online during class hours though on two different days due to administrative reasons. However, authenticity of responses was not questionable as learners across colleges normally do not have any reason to interact. Participation consent was duly sought from the sample and confidentiality of information shared was assured. All reverts were coded to indicate participant's enrolment number, name of the college, and date of responding.

## Results

*RQ1: In which domains do bilingual EFL learners at Hail University use English?*

Table 1 indicates the domains where participants use English in bilingual contexts. The most frequently cited purpose of learning English in this study are: Professional use (f=85, 91.39%), academic advancement like reading books etc. (F=82, 88.17%), Academic advancement (F=79, 84.94%). Students also reported that they used English at the college meetings or the college library (f=67, 72.04%). of the respondents cited academic purpose as being the driving force in their use of English. The last item that added to this construct was item 17, once again indicating the need to communicate, which (F=71, 76.34%) of the respondents cited as the purpose of learning and using English. Finally, they revealed that they used English to communicate with their teachers at college (f=61, 65.59%).

Table 1  
The domain of using English by Saudi students

No.	Statement	Frequency	Percentage %
1.	I use English to access both print and electronic media	79	84.94
2.	Our college mandates using English for communicating with teachers and administrative staff	61	65.59
3.	I speak in English at the college meetings or the college library	67	72.04
4.	English is useful to me for interacting with L2 speakers formally	14	15.05
5.	I use English to interact informally with native speakers of English	9	9.67

6.	My academic advancement such as reading books etc. is dependent on English	82	88.17
7.	The neighbourhood is where I mostly interact in English	22	23.65
8.	English is useful to me in the practice of Islam	9	9.67
9.	English is important to me for professional use	85	91.39
10.	I use English the most when I interact with my family	6	6.45

*RQ2: How do EFL learners at Hail University perceive their level of bilingualism?*

Table 4 indicates that the majority of the participants have a high level of bilingualism. The frequency of occurrence of items 11 and 15 is remarkably high at 84 and 74 which show that the respondents are coordinate bilinguals as they 'think' in English rather than resorting to word-for-word translation.

Table 2  
Saudi EFL students level of bilingualism

No.	Statement	Frequency	Percentage %
11.	I translate between Arabic and English word for word	12	12.90
12.	I am comfortable in communication which moves from Arabic to English and vice versa	84	90.32
13.	When I need to speak or write in English, I first form the syntax in Arabic and then, think what it would be in English	9	9.67
14.	I sometimes think in English but at others I need to translate word for word	13	13.97
15.	When I need to respond in English, I do so without consciously thinking	74	79.56

## Discussion

This study reported that Saudi EFL learners at Hail university use English in Bilingual context for professional use, academic advancement, academic purpose and communicating with their peers. These results indicate that they perceive the use of English in other fields than academia. The finding of this study also supports this fact in addition to responses pertaining to professional success. Many students recognize that in the new geopolitical dynamics of the world, professional life is highly dependent on one's ability to communicate across linguistic boundaries. It is obvious from the above that L2 serves extended purposes relating to social academic, professional and general purposes in the context of bilingualism. The study reported that Saudi EFL students perceived that they had achieved a good level of bilingualism whereas the majority reported that they were comfortable when they talked in English and they talked without thinking. This finding indicates the improvement in English teaching in Saudi Arabia and the increasing level of the use of English in the Kingdom. This finding matches the idea that the mother tongue is not widely used at the university because some teachers are of non-Arabic background. Many studies reported the reason of achieving low proficiency levels in English to the interference of the mother tongue. Eslit (2019) and Mwangi (2009)'s research indicates that speaking in one's native tongue or first language

during a conversation results in low English performance. The next point of advice from Mwangi (2009) is for parents to encourage their children to speak English at both home and at school.

### **Conclusions**

The study concludes that the Saudi college learners use English range from restricted domains, like professional use, academic advancement, using English at the college meetings, use English to communicate with their teachers at college. Finding also reported that students perceived their bilingualism as being quite advanced. They scored high in the items which stated that they can talk without thinking or they feel comfortable during their talk. Limited use like interacting with others, or acquiring knowledge for academic and professional applications, to more extensive and habitual use. It is, similarly, worthwhile to summarize which domains of life of the Saudi bilinguals L2 (English) enters and which it does not. Lastly, a majority of learners at Hail University are coordinate bilinguals which points towards their being at the intermediate level of proficiency in using English.

### **Implications of the study**

Grammar-translation has long been the method of imparting L2 (English) in Saudi educational institutions. This was almost a compulsion with few proficient English teachers and zero contact with non-Arabic speakers, prominently, the native English speakers or ESL speakers. Social media had as yet not made an outreach and few learners left their homes for attaining higher education in English-speaking countries. In the past decade however, a conscious policy of opening-up to opportunities and cultures other than 'own', and the massive investment in foreign education through hefty scholarships, not to mention the expanded role of social media further boosted by the Coronavirus pandemic, have all contributed to a changed outlook to the need to learn English, not as a school or college 'subject' but as a language of communication. Consequently, the need for pedagogical change being powered by the prevalent proficiency of the learners (Alahdal & Al Ahdal, 2019), this study is perhaps one of its kind in the Saudi EFL panorama as it firmly establishes the need for phasing out the conventional instructional practices and materials and introduction of the same based on renewed learner needs and abilities.

### **Recommendations**

Teachers and learners of English in Saudi Arabia should, finally, be motivated to become compound bilinguals, language users who operate with a fused or single semantic base and set of referents, with complete control over the two linguistic codes, L1 and L2. This is an advanced stage of language learning, one in which learners have 'native-like competence in the two languages', with an equal degree of comfort in their use. It is therefore, recommended that teachers at Saudi educational institutions view bilingualism as a healthy phenomenon and not enforce rules such as 'English-only' in formal and informal settings since the foregoing shows that use of L1 use is supportive rather than detrimental to L2 acquisition.

## Limitations

Little research has been conducted on the differences between monolingual and bilingual EFL learners and their perceptual learning styles, a dimension of learning styles. This has been a shortcoming of the current study too, given its limited scope. Future research, however, can arrive at more reliable results if this factor is also kept in focus. The other limitation here has been the absence of qualitative data as it is felt that direct observation of bilingual speakers may have added a new dimension to the study.

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