

Metalinguistic Awareness and Language Dominance: How Do Bilingual Saudi Graduate EFL Learners Use These in Learning?

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Abstract

The present study addresses the research gap in studies on the role of metalinguistic awareness and language dominance amongst EFL learners in the Saudi context. It empirically contributes to the research context on metalinguistic awareness and its association to the phenomenon of language dominance in the language development of EFL learners. The study was conducted in the English Department of Hail University, Saudi Arabia. Using systematic random sampling set at 95% level of confidence with proper observance of the assumptions in inferential statistics, results revealed that most of the respondents were Bilingual English Dominant (BED). Moreover, there is a highly favorable level of metalinguistic awareness on learning L2, knowledge and regulation categories were registered among the respondents. In like manner, the respondents reported a medium level of language dominance on use and exposure which is a sign of their departure from the full dominance of their L1 into mastering English language. Further, test of correlation showed a high direct and positive interaction between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance ($r = .923$) indicating that the higher the level of metalinguistic awareness the more the students manifest a favorable adherence to their dominant language. Findings positively contribute on how curriculum and language experts may adopt English language teaching strategies to prepare Saudi EFL learners become proficient speakers to participate in the global market and set them firmly on their career path.

Keywords: bilingual, language dominance, metalinguistic awareness, Saudi EFL learners

1. Introduction

Metalinguistic awareness

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'metalinguistic awareness' as "the ability to think on and modify the structure of language without separating oneself from the subject matter of communication." According to Hofer and Jessner (2019), the ability to speak many languages demands a high level of metalinguistic awareness, which distinguishes multilingual speakers from those who can only converse in one or two languages. Language awareness is the ability of a speaker to approach and see language in abstract terms and as a system or phenomenon that can be handled.

'Metalinguistic awareness' is a technique in cognitive psychology which enables a person to be conscious of and control how they use language. The ability to recognize and control one's own knowledge and cognitive processes, which might be viewed as a type of cognitive awareness and self-regulation, is what defines it (being able to think about thinking). According to Altman et al. (2018), metalinguistic awareness is developed in the later stages of language acquisition, around the age of 5 to 6, and built on prior linguistic knowledge. Metalinguistic awareness requires the speaker to pay attention to the structure and form of the language. The ability to conceive of language as tangible, to assess language as a process or even a system, and to successfully utilize language in a range of settings are all skills that learners may gain with the help of metalinguistic awareness. The importance of metalinguistic awareness to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has been highlighted by several scholars from across the world (Alahdal & Al Ahdal, 2019; Bae, 2015; Candry et al., 2017; Roehr-Brackin, 2018). Metalinguistic awareness, according to Dong et al. (2020), is an essential part of cognition which uses word recognition and linguistic decoding at the level of one-word or one-character as cognitive processes which predict reading.

Izadi and Yarahmadzahi (2018) reported in a study on metalinguistic awareness among students that grammatical error detection and correction in English was higher and more frequent amongst Baluch respondents than their

Persian counterparts. Additionally, the former focused more diligently on grammatical correction of errors than the latter, who focused more on content. In other words, the Baluch participants adopted a more grammar-oriented approach with explanation of errors than the Persian participants, the difference though, was not statistically significant. By comparing and contrasting factors among the three languages, these disparities were discovered.

Fernandez-Dalona and Dalona (2020) investigated the metalinguistic awareness of multilingual first graders, and the findings revealed that the students' metalinguistic awareness is average. In order to succeed academically, Grade 1 multilingual learners still need to improve their language proficiency in English and Filipino, particularly in identifying syntactic errors. The study asserts that early elementary school students' understanding of the metalinguistic features of Cebuano helped them complete tasks in Filipino and English.

Woll (2019) examined how people in France perceive their native tongue. In the metasemantic section of the exam, more than a third of participants reached the highest level of metalinguistic analysis, compared to just 5% in the metagrammatical section. This trend may be caused by the fact that, in the metagrammatical section, but not in the metasemantic segment, explicit reference to grammatical categories was necessary to get the highest results.

Language dominance

The term 'language dominance', relates to the users' relative competence in two languages; it may also be defined in terms of language usage, i.e., how frequently bilinguals use their languages and how these are spread throughout different domains. Determining language dominance is crucial since it is clear that bilinguals' level of proficiency in each language and each language's relative strength affect how well they perform on activities (Treffers-Daller, 2019). The development of child bilingual literature, on the other hand, has been significantly influenced by language dominance, which has been defined in a variety of ways, including relative proficiency, the language that is developing more quickly than the other, and the relative size of the vocabulary in each of the two languages (Treffers-Daller & Silva-Corvalán, 2016). The exact concept of linguistic dominance is still up for controversy, despite the fact that it is generally accepted that bilingual children, even if they are exposed to both languages from birth, are more proficient or dominant in one of their two languages. The fact that language dominance is a multidimensional construct made up of multiple, distinct yet linked components, such as language usage, language intake, and language competence, all of which are challenging to quantify, contributes to the difficulty in defining it (Unsworth et al., 2018).

Language dominance is an important individual factor that may be connected to the level of EF experienced by bilingual children. Most bilingual young users show more proficiency in one of their two languages—often referred to as their dominant language—than in the other. The difficult idea of linguistic dominance has many different components. According to Nicoladis and Wiebe (2018), more balanced bilinguals than those who exhibit a strong dominance in just one language will likely need to reduce interference from that language more frequently. Numerous studies have shown that bilinguals who have a better-balanced command of both languages benefit more from their executive functions.

Schmid and Ylmaz (2018) affirmed that language dominance is a large topic with several elements. The first group of linguistic features contains observable events that are related to a bilingual's understanding, usage, and processing of all languages at all linguistic levels. These elements of language are typically utilized as outcome measures or dependent variables in linguistic research. The second set of measurements focuses on factors related to an individual's background, such as age, education, and language proficiency, as well as language use and habits, as well as linguistic and cultural identity. The independent variables determine how a speaker will grow with respect to the first set of factors. In light of this, language dominance "takes into account the two languages of a bilingual individual, biographical traits, and the language-external conditions in which bilinguals acquire or use both languages."

Robinson Anthony and Blumenfeld (2019) examined the link between various language dominance markers (self-reported competence, self-reported exposure, expressive language knowledge, receptive language knowledge, and a hybrid) and performance on linguistic and cognitive tasks based on the measure of language dominance and variable type. The study showed a link between dominance profiles and cognate and nonlinguistic strop effects, with somewhat distinct patterns emerging (continuous, categorical). Poeste et al. (2019) examined the potential connection between code-mixing and language dominance in a cross-sectional study of 122 children raised in Spain or Germany. The main conclusion of their study is that code-mixing is rare in monolingual contexts, which suggests that bilingual, trilingual, and multilingual children can behave monolingually. Although domain-specific language dominance can explain the comparatively high mixing rate in the Catalan tests, no connection was found between the children's codemixing and language (un)balance on the dimensions of language dominance.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of ICT revitalized the physical learning environment into a virtual learning environment (Alanya-Beltran et al., 2021; Arcinas, 2021; Arcinas et al., 2021; Hazaea et al., 2021; Rad et al., 2022; Veluri et al., 2021). The best feature of ICT is its adaptability as it can be adapted to the demands of each individual student by giving them the chance to investigate knowledge and steer their learning as a result of its interactive and dynamic character (Magulod, 2018, 2019). ICT can make learning any topic, especially English, much easier for students specially in a non-native language environment. It is without doubt that ICT will play an increasingly important part in the 21st century's worldwide trade. Therefore, it is pertinent that in today's classrooms, teaching and learning be conducted with the aid of ICT. With its utilization, educators and students have the opportunity to improve instruction and achieve the standards set by the contemporary knowledge society (Magulod et al., 2020). The use of ICT has become a crucial instrument for changing and reforming education.

Research objectives

In general, the association between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance of bilingual Saudi graduate EFL learners was investigated in this study. Its specific goals are to:

1. Measure the metalinguistic awareness of bilingual Saudi EFL graduate learners;
2. Test the level of language dominance among Saudi EFL learners;
3. Determine the correlation between bilingual Saudi EFL graduate learners' metalinguistic awareness and language dominance.

Significance of the study

Saudi EFL learners are firmly on the road to achieving bilingual language proficiency with the massive academic and financial input in the field of English education. However, there are many questions that need answering such as, when and in what circumstances does the learning of L2 take place, and what are the factors of the learners' sociolinguistic background that support the learning of a new language. Research into such questions is expected to positively contribute to the development of a conducive learning environment for EFL learners. Moreover, the target of the institutions is to help users achieve balanced language ability and metalinguistic awareness and language dominance theories and trends play a central role in this. Hence, the significance of this study which evaluates what dominates the learning experience of the Saudi EFL learners, metalinguistic awareness or language dominance. It is evident that results of this study will act as a guiding light for policy makers, curriculum designers, learners, and teachers.

2. Methods

Research design

In this study, a cross-sectional survey was used. The data were obtained in order to draw inferences about a certain population (universe) at a particular period. To acquire a view of the individuals for whom data are being collected, cross-sectional surveys are performed. Cross-sectional survey respondents from earlier times are not deliberately sought for later polls; rather, they can be chosen at random. Cross-sectional surveys are distinct from panel surveys in this regard since they track specific respondents across time. In order to monitor population changes over time, panel surveys are frequently utilized.

Participants

Two hundred and ten Saudi EFL learners participated in this survey. Sampling was done using Raosoft software with 95% level of confidence, 50% response distribution, and 5% margin of error from a total population of 458 learners in one Saudi University. The female population in the sample was larger (57%) compared to the males (43%) as Table 1 shows. As to the language classification experience of the respondents, majority of them belonged to the bilingual English Dominant (BED) category, hence the Saudi EFL learners are capable to express themselves in two languages namely English and Arabic.

Table 1. Sampling characteristics

Sex	Frequency (n=210)	Percentage
Male	90	43
Female	120	57
Language Classification Experience and Dominance		
Functional Monolingual English (FME)	50	24
Bilingual English Dominant (BED)	80	38
Balanced Bilingual (BL)	43	20
Bilingual Other Dominant (BO)	29	14
Functional Monolingual Other (FMO)	8	4

Instrumentation

The best method for examining beliefs is through the use of a questionnaire. Furthermore, prior research on epistemic beliefs has demonstrated that problems with social desirability arise when interviews are used. We adapted Bessy and Knouse (2020) to assess Saudi EFL students' metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, and Pena et al. (2011) to evaluate language dominance, thus covering the two aspects of EFL learners at the Saudi university under study. The tool reliability results were obtained using Cronbach's alpha. Table 2 shows that both the variables have high reliability value. The metalinguistic awareness was $P = .78$, while internal consistency of language dominance tool scored $P = .89$.

Table 2. Reliability of the measure

Variables	Cronbach's alpha
Metalinguistic awareness	0.78
Language dominance	0.89

Data analysis

The data were scored and interpreted using descriptive statistics, which include frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Moreover, the correlation between bilingual Saudi graduate EFL learners' metalinguistic awareness and language dominance was examined using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Inferential analysis was performed to calculate the correlation between the two variables. The (r) measures the linearly related two variables (Kankaew et al., 2021). SPSS (Version 23) was used for data analysis.

3. Results**Metalinguistic awareness**

Table 3 presents the level of metalinguistic awareness of Saudi EFL learners. Results showed that a highly favorable level is manifested by the respondents. n metalinguistic awareness the participants achieved a general mean score and standard deviation of ($M=4.19$, $Std=0.47$). This means that their ability to recognize and control own knowledge and cognitive processes is high, which might be viewed as a type of cognitive awareness and self-regulation. Further the data showed that awareness on the foreign language learning ($M=4.23$, $Std=0.48$) and its benefits ($Std= 4.20$, $Std=0.53$) are also very high showing an indication that the respondents are capable to appreciate the usefulness of English as a foreign language as a tool in their career prep. In like manner, they have a high level of knowledge ($M=4.19$, $Std= 0.47$), and awareness on the regulation and cognition ($M= 4.19$, $Std=0.43$). This satisfies the result of the study that Saudi EFL learners are very much capable to learn English as part of their career preparation.

Table 3. Level of metalinguistic awareness of Saudi EFL

Statements	Mean	Std	Description
Awareness on Foreign Language Learning	4.23	0.48	Very High
Awareness on the Benefits of Foreign Language	4.20	0.53	Very High
Awareness on the Knowledge of Foreign Language	4.19	0.47	High
Awareness on the Regulation of Cognition	4.13	0.43	High
Total	4.19	0.47	High

Language dominance

Table 4 indicates that the Saudi EFL students' language dominance mean score is moderate at ($M= 3.42$) with standard deviation ($Std=0.39$). As to the Self-Assessment of the language dominance of the respondents, they scored highly in the Bilingual English Dominant (BED) factor. This shows that the Saudi EFL learners are capable to express themselves in two languages namely English and Arabic with the mean score ($M= 4.36$, $Std=0.43$). In like manner, they assessed themselves to have moderately applicable language Dominance of Functional Monolingual English (FME), they scored ($M=3.47$, $Std=0.23$). Further, they scored moderately in Balanced Bilingual (BL) at

($M=2.69$, $Std=0.32$), again moderately in Bilingual Other Dominant (BO) at ($M=3.24$, $Std=0.45$). Generally, it can be inferred that the Saudi EFL learners are English language speakers but still need further nurturance through appropriate English language curriculum intervention.

Table 4. Saudi EFL learners' level of language dominance

Statements	Mean	Std	Description
Functional Monolingual English (FME)	3.47	0.23	Moderate applicable
Bilingual English Dominant (BED)	4.36	0.43	Very high applicable
Balanced Bilingual (BL)	2.69	0.32	Moderate applicable
Bilingual Other Dominant (BO)	3.24	0.45	Moderate applicable
Functional Monolingual Other (FMO)	3.36	0.56	Moderate applicable
Total	3.42	0.39	Moderate

Correlation

Table 5 indicates the level of correlation between the metalinguistic awareness and language dominance of the study sample. Table 5 shows a high correlation between the two variables which means that the higher the students' level of metalinguistic awareness the more they manifest a favorable adherence to their dominant language. The correlation between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance came to ($r= .923$). It indicates that the correlation is direct, positive and significant. The probability value is ($p=.042$).

Table 5. Correlation between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance of Saudi EFL learners

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Person correlation coefficient	P value
Metalinguistic Awareness	4.19	0.47	.923	.042*
Language dominance	3.42	0.39		

4. Discussion

This study probed the level of metalinguistic awareness of Saudi EFL learners. The study found that the sample had high level of metalinguistic awareness ($M=4.19$, $Std=0.47$). This finding pointed to the competence of Saudi students of English. This finding is consistent with Al-Ahdal and Almarshedi (2021) which reported that Saudi EFL students were satisfactorily proficient in various areas of metalinguistic abilities including grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading comprehension, etc. Furthermore, they reported that participants could identify the syntactic mistakes. In the same context, Almarshedi (2022) studied the impact of metalinguistic strategies on Saudi EFL learners' reading comprehension. The study reported that metalinguistic awareness developed in both the control and experimental group. Furthermore, assessment and monitoring were found to have developed in the experimental group due to the use of metalinguistic awareness strategies.

Furthermore, Izadi and Yarahmadzahi (2018) found that Baluch participants exhibited a greater proportion of error explanations and a more grammar-focused approach to error explanation than their Persian counterparts, despite the differences not being statistically significant. Fernandez-Dalona and Dalona (2020) who investigated the metalinguistic awareness of multilingual first graders found that students' metalinguistic awareness was average. This is confirmed by the fact that metalinguistic awareness is developed at a later age. Likewise, Woll (2019) examined how people in France perceive their native tongue. In the metasemantic section of the exam, more than a third of participants reached the highest level of metalinguistic analysis.

Additionally, this study indicated that the Saudi EFL students were affected moderately as far as language dominance goes, with a total mean score of ($M= 3.42$) and standard deviation at ($Std=0.39$). This finding shows a level of mastery that students achieved in the English, so the Arabic dominance over English is still moderate and not high. Robinson Anthony and Blumenfeld (2019) examined the link between various language dominance markers (self-reported competence, self-reported exposure, expressive language knowledge, receptive language knowledge, and performance on linguistic and cognitive tasks, based on the measure of language dominance and variable type. The study showed a link between dominance profiles and cognate and nonlinguistic Strop effects, with somewhat distinct patterns emerging (continuous, categorical). Poeste et al. (2019) found that code-mixing is rare in monolingual contexts, which suggests that bilingual, trilingual, and multilingual children can behave monolingually.

Finally, the study measured the correlation between Saudi EFL metalinguistic awareness and language dominance. The correlation between metalinguistic awareness and language dominance came to ($r= .923$). It indicates that the correlation is direct, positive and significant. The probability value is ($p=.042$). It may be added here that according to Robinson Anthony et al. (2020), when the dominant language was mastered, knowledge of grammatical structures and syntactic awareness were transferred from the dominant language to the nondominant language. Moreover, Cokely (2012) carried out a case study of two bilingual children (ages 6-7) and looked at how the participants

perceived their language ability, language dominance, and language preference, as well as how much metalinguistic awareness was present in their statements. The results on lexical richness, were conflicting, nevertheless. In conclusion, the participants show that very young multilingual children are capable of reflecting their language skills properly.

5. Conclusion

The present study addressed the research gap that exists in studies focusing on metalinguistic awareness and language dominance of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. The study was conducted in the English Department of Hail University. The results reached herein open new horizons for further studies on the impact of metalinguistic awareness on EFL learners' ability and first language dominance. As far as the specific sample of the study is concerned, there is a highly favorable level of metalinguistic awareness on learning L2, and registering of knowledge and regulation categories among the respondents. In like manner, the respondents reflected moderate level of language dominance on use and exposure. Further, test of relationship showed that the higher the students' level of metalinguistic awareness the more they manifested a favorable adherence to their dominant language. The results of this study have significant implications for curriculum and language experts who may offer English language teaching strategies to prepare Saudi EFL learners become proficient speakers which, in turn, could eventually help them develop their English language functional skills to participate in the global market as they march on their career path.

6. Implications for Language Teaching

Metalinguistic awareness enables learners to make right choices in language use by selecting need-appropriate processes and strategies in the classroom. It also heightens their awareness of the listeners attuned to their choice of language. Further, learners who are more balanced language users develop a higher sense of metalinguistic awareness, leading to maximized utilization of the skills acquired via the dominant language in the learning of the second or foreign language. Moreover, metalinguistic awareness enables learners to acquire and use new vocabulary as much as the prosodic features of the L2. In this background, the current study is significant to the teachers of EFL as it measures the correlation between Saudi EFL metalinguistic awareness and language dominance.

7. Recommendation

Basing on conclusion of the present study, the following are recommended to help improve English language instruction in the Saudi Context.

First, intensification of training of teachers on the use of ICT in English language teaching in such a way that Saudi EFL students will be able to become communicatively competent in the target language.

Second, strengthening English language competence of learners at home starting with home-related factors. Hence, stronger link of school with parents may help shape the language competence and dominance of the learners in English.

A distinct perspective places more emphasis on variations in the frequency with which two languages are used or on the domains for which they are used, but the majority of scholars define the notion as the relative skill in two languages. It is obvious that usage and proficiency—two factors that are similarly crucial to the bilingual experience—are connected, although the strength of the relationship differs among studies. Due to typological variations across languages and the potential for varying test difficulty levels, operationalizing language dominance in terms of direct measures that tap into the features of linguistic competence is challenging. Although they may not always substantially correspond with direct measurements, indirect measures that evaluate exposure patterns have the potential to be more effective. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that indirect measures of language dominance are accurate substitutes for direct measures of language dominance.

8. Limitations

This study's major focus on strategies for combating linguistic dominance in academic settings poses a restriction. In a variety of fields outside of academics, such as public policy, education, business, and therapeutic settings, language dominance is also significant. In educational contexts, it's crucial to provide math or language exams in the child's native language, and in clinical settings, the patients' familiarity with and usage of the two languages has an impact on how well tests and treatments work. An important direction for future study is to gather data from bilinguals from many continents to inform theory development in the field because most of the research into language dominance has been done in European or North American contexts. We know relatively little about the distribution of language knowledge in this population, thus research conducted in Asia and Africa is likely to yield a lot of information

concerning language dominance among multilinguals in these regions. Future studies should examine dominance in the many facets of language proficiency. Most research in the field concentrate on grammar or vocabulary, but we know very little about language dominance in bilinguals' sociolinguistic or pragmatic knowledge.

Bio:

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