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Bilingualism: Mental Well-Being and Learners' Cognitive Abilities

1 Introduction

Six decades ago, both common opinion and scientific data agreed that exposing children to many languages was potentially detrimental. Saer (1923) and Smith (1923) were the first to research the topic of how bilingualism affects the brain, and they stated that bilingual children must be undergoing "mental confusion" (p.14), while Pintner (1923) even referred to bilingualism as a language handicap when seen from the larger scale of language usage. Here, it is important to state the distinction between early or simultaneous and consecutive bilingualism, and according to Laurent and Martinot (2010) these earlier writers mostly referred to consecutive bilingualism, even though they often did not clarify this. However, these ideas were refuted by later research studies, proving that bilingualism not only does not harm one's brain but brings significant benefits. Still, it was only in the 1960s that these theories started to flourish, when Peal and Lambert (1962), in an experiment with French youngsters, proved that bilingual students had greater mental adaptability because of code-switching.

An increasing number of studies indicate that both simultaneous and consecutive types of bilingualism are linked to one's cognitive abilities and well-being. Duff (2007) and Mercer (2011) argue that second-language learning is a key factor associated with "self-related constructs (self-confidence, self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and identity)" (p.4). Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) share the same view, as they discovered that learning Chinese can support students' self-discovery and enhance pleasant feelings related to activity involvement, "relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (p.5). To put it another way, learning a second language can be seen as a profound life experience that fosters receptivity to a new culture, its members, its history, its principles,

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and its artistic representations. Additionally, highly strategic language learners may find that the experience has positive effects on their overall well-being, such as hope and resilience (Oxford, 2014, p.5). Forsman (2010) adds that because language is a means for understanding culture, students who learn a second language and immerse themselves in its culture are better able to comprehend and appreciate other cultures. As a result, bilinguals are more accepting of cultural and linguistic diversity than their monolingual counterparts. This recognition of difference and variety may help to reduce stereotypes and implicit bias between groups of individuals (p.7). Moreover, research has shown that cognitive flexibility is associated with the academic advantages of bilingual children (Bialystok et al., 2004). Besides positive effects on the brain, academic advantages, employment opportunities, cultural awareness, psychological growth, and other benefits, bilinguals have been proven to be able to learn additional languages much more easily. This is because language skills reinforce each other, and the skills in the second language do not diminish or weaken the first language (Hosoda et al., 2013). Despite these findings, the topic of bilingualism's effect on cognitive abilities and well-being is an ongoing debate. Relatively recent research, including Antoniou (2019), Bialystok (2021), and Barac et al., (2014), discussed later in this article, offer evidence that in some cases the situation is not so black and white.

The present paper presents data on cognitive abilities and well-being in bilingual and monolingual Kosovan adolescents. The scope of the study was to examine how bilingualism affects well-being and cognitive abilities or functions based on subjective assessments.

A) Measuring Bilingualism

Most of the world's population is now bilingual or even multilingual, and more than a decade ago Baker (2011) estimated that about half to almost three-quarters of the global population are bilinguals, with internationalization in almost every sphere meaning that this number is certain to keep growing. Throughout history people have found themselves speaking two or more languages for different reasons. In order to communicate with one another among tribes, they had to speak another language rather than their own. Although at present the reasons for speaking more than one language are many and varied, one cannot deny that knowing a second language is now almost indispensable for most people, and this bilingualism can be found in every country, across all classes of society (Marian and Hayawaka, 2021).

Grosjean (1997) defines bilinguals as "those people who use two (or more) languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives" (p.164). Other researchers, for example, Peal and Lambert (1962) define them as equally fluent in two (or more) languages. However, bilingualism has no absolute measure, and "attempts to quantify an indi-

vidual as more or less bilingual using a single quotient are therefore meaningless without specifying a particular dimension of interest" (Marian and Hayawaka, 2021, p. 6). Despite this, scholars have set some boundaries in their studies, such as one parent having another nationality to that of the country they are living in and addressing their child or children in their own mother tongue, as well as daily communication in a second language (Kovacs, 2009). The latter is in line with the current study, since dual language learners are considered to be bilinguals (Barac et al., 2014).

B) Mental Well-Being of Bilingual Learners

Mental well-being is a broad term, and scholars have had a hard time finding a consensus on what might be considered well-being and how can be viewed. According to Rayan and Deci (2001), optimal psychological experiences and functioning are referred to as well-being. The first perspective on well-being, referred to as the hedonic view or hedonism, contends that happiness and pleasure are what constitute well-being (Kahneman et al., 1999). The second view is the eudaimonic one, according to which well-being is determined by factors other than happiness. Many researchers – supporters of the hedonic view – have relied on what is called subjective well-being (SWB) to measure the quality of life in terms of happiness and pleasure (Diener et al., 1997). SWB takes into consideration the subjective perspectives of individuals and how they perceive well-being. This paper follows this approach as well, considering that, according to SWB, it is rather subjective. In Ferizaj, where this research was conducted, all students are of Kosovan nationality, but since Kosovo is a multiethnic country it is home to many different nationalities. Moreover, with globalization English is viewed as a *lingua franca*, with youngsters using it fluently, and it has also served as a bridge language in Kosovo since the 1999 conflict between Kosovo and Serbia (France 24, 2019).

C) Cognitive Abilities of Bilingual Learners

How bilingualism helps brain development and how it affects cognitive ability are topics of particular interest to both linguists and neuroscientists, especially over the last few decades, and there is an ongoing debate with plenty of data presented for both sides. Executive function is a collection of critical mental skills, with the three main areas being working memory, flexible thinking, and inhibitory control. (1) Working memory is the ability to recall and use information. On an English test, for example, a student might use this skill to read a text, retain the information, and then apply it to answer questions. (2) The ability to think about a topic in many ways is known as cognitive flexibility. This ability could be used by a student to find linkages between concepts or to solve a problem in two different ways. (3) Inhibitory control is the ability to filter out extraneous information from a distracting

stimulus (Belsky, n.d.). The terms "cognitive control", and "executive control" are frequently used interchangeably. Research has shown that cognitive flexibility is associated with the academic advantages of bilingual children (Forsman, 2007). However, this is not a settled issue, since there is an ongoing debate that will be highlighted below.

Cognitive abilities refer (but are not limited) to the use of language, thinking, remembering, and the ability to learn (Crosby & Prescod, 2009, p. 18). Chinnsuwamy (2015) claims that bilingualism significantly impacts cognitive functions, which roughly include the way we think, see the world, solve problems, and make decisions. Bilingualism has also been shown to influence brain development. Pliatsikas et al.'s (2020) study, which included a large dataset of individuals aged three to 21 years old, found that bilinguals had more grey matter or less developmental loss during late childhood and adolescence in comparison to monolinguals, and concluded that the bilingual brain does indeed differ from the monolingual brain, and this difference can be seen even in the early stages of development. Later studies also suggest that people who speak two languages have more grey matter in the executive control region of the brain. Although bilingualism has been shown to benefit grey and white matter in adult brains in prior research, Ullman et al. (2020) was the first to show conclusive evidence for similar benefits in children and adolescents

None of these research papers claim that bilinguals suffer from mental overload or that speaking two languages leads them to process information inefficiently. Indeed, the very fact that so many people are bilingual suggests that the human brain evolved to be able to communicate in numerous languages. Bialystok (2011) adopts the Stroop task, which is generally considered a classic test of executive control, and finds that monolinguals required more time to complete, or resolve, the task than bilinguals in both age groups (p.231). Similarly, in another study by Friesen et al. (2014), young adults, both bilingual and monolingual, completed a visual search task in which they had to determine whether a target shape was present among distractor shapes. The findings show that although monolinguals and bilinguals performed equally on the feature searches, bilinguals were considerably quicker than their monolingual counterparts "in identifying the target in the more difficult conjunction search, providing evidence for better control of visual attention in bilinguals" (p.1). Likewise, Bialystok et al. (2012) found that bilingual children were superior on most tests, specifically those that required symbol manipulation and reorganization (Biyalstok et al., 2012, p.240). The bilinguals thus outperformed monolinguals in both tests.

Bialystok (2021) maintains that executive control in children is crucial for academic achievement, and academic success is a key indicator of long-term health and well-being. Earlier work by Bialystok et al. (2014) also indicated the influence of bilingualism on working memory. Moreover, Mishra (2018) states "alerting, orienting, and executive control networks appear to differently subserve cognitive control in bi-

linguals. However, it is hard to say based on current findings whether these networks develop in bilingual children differently or if there is a different maturational time course compared with monolinguals" (p.33-34). She adds that children learn to direct their attention to important stimuli and to dismiss their attention as necessary.

Sefedini (2018) conducted a study with Kosovan students and measured their language achievement with regard to a foreign language, with forty of the students attending a public school and not involved in any formal bilingual process, and the other forty students attending a private institution and being taught in both Albanian and English. The students in both groups were given the identical evaluation tool, which was used to examine differences in terms of misspellings, grammar errors, repetition, learning strategies, and expression of thought. The author found that the bilingual students had better results on executive control, communication, creativity, awareness, learning strategy, and time management, and showed more positivity and self-confidence. The present study took into account the impact of bilingualism on the cognitive abilities and well-being of young learners, without differentiation, and targeted another age group of students, 13-18 years old. This was done with reference to Antoniou (2019) and the ongoing debate on such issues, age is a crucial factor when it comes to bilingual advantage, as such the claimed benefits cannot be generalized due to research bias and other issues, this is the reason the evidence is not clear in some studies. More specifically, several studies – such as Gathercole et al. (2014), de Bruin et al. (2015), and Paap and Greenberg (2013) – have not succeeded in finding a positive relationship between bilingualism and cognitive advantages.

I. Methodology

A) Participants

Voluntary responses were drawn from four different elementary and high schools in Ferizaj municipality. In total, 200 Albanian teenagers participated in this study (Table I). The participants' ages ranged from 13-18 years old, with the majority (54%) being 15 or 16 years old. There were also more females (59%) than males. In addition, most of the participants were bilinguals (67%), with their second language being English. In order to prove the level of bilingualism, either teachers or parents had to bring written proof that the student is capable of understanding, writing, and communicating without problems in the second/foreign language. On the other hand, monolingual participants were self-declared sole Albanian speakers, who do not speak any other language. In order to prove this, the LEAP-Q test was used. Most of the bilinguals were exposed to the English language from the early stages of development (from birth on), but 21 participants were exposed to the English language only between the ages of eight to 12.

B) Procedure

The initial plan was to include eight schools from the Ferizaj municipality, but in practice the study could only be carried out in four schools. The schools that participated in this study are the elementary schools "Gjon Serreqi" and "Jeronim de Rada", and the gymnasiums "Kuvendi i Arberit" and "Shaban Jashari". The researcher met with one teacher in each school and asked them to inform the students about the study and its purpose, then those students who were either bilingual or monolingual and wanted to participate presented themselves to the teacher and received this information. Consent was obtained from each of the voluntary participants and their parents. The researchers then agreed a time with the participants, and a classroom was provided by each school in which to administer the questionnaires. All measures were translated into the Albanian language with the procedure of translation and back-translation. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

C) Measures

Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ; Broadbent et al., 1982) is a self-reported measure that aims to assess a person's cognitive failures, including those related to perception, memory, and motor function. CFQ consists of 25 items and each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from cognitive mistakes never (0) happening to very often (4) in the past six months. Higher scores reflect lower cognitive performance, concentration problems, memory loss, and decreased perception, and *vice versa*. As Rast et al. (2008) noted, CFQ consists of three factors: Distractibility, Forgetfulness, and False Triggering.

The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q; Marian et al., 2007) is a self-reported questionnaire aimed at gathering data about the proficiency and experience of bilinguals and multilinguals. LEAP-Q was adapted for this study with three items being left out (e.g., data on immigration to the US). The number of items depended on whether the participants were bilinguals or multilinguals. LEAP-Q measures self-reported levels of proficiency in speaking, understanding, and reading the second or third language. A proficiency rating of 3 (on a 10-point Likert scale) or below on an individual item contributed to identifying participants as monolinguals, while an overall rating of 4 or above confirmed that the participants as bilinguals . Furthermore, the monolingual group included those students who reported Albanian as their L1 and dominant language, and we also took into consideration the letter from the teachers (as described earlier) and the fact that they were not exposed to L2 or did not use it.

LEAP-Q also gathered data about factors that contributed to learning a second or third language or the exposure to that language at the present. Each item was scored on an 11-point scale with 0 being never, any, or not a contributor, and 11 being perfect, always, and the most important contributor.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al., 2007) is a self-reported, brief, and psychometrically reliable scale that assesses the mental well-being of participants. This scale consists of 14 items measuring affective-emotional aspects, cognitive-evaluative dimensions, and the psychological functioning of a person. Participants ranked each item (e.g., 'I've been feeling useful') on a 5-point scale ranging from none of the time (1) to all of the time (5). Higher scores indicated better mental well-being.

D) Statistical Analysis

At the beginning, descriptive statistical values for the main variables were calculated. Next, one-

way ANOVA was conducted to check if there are differences between bilinguals and monolinguals regarding cognitive skills and mental well-being for each group. Finally, correlational analyses were executed to investigate the relationship between the level of proficiency of the learners' second language and their cognitive abilities and mental well-being. Statistical analyses were conducted with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Mplus.

I. Results

Table 1: Study Participants' Demographic Characteristics.

Gender and Age					
		N	Percentage	N of bilinguals	N of monolinguals
Gender	Male	82	41	53	29
	Female	118	59	81	37
Age	13-14	58	29	44	14
	15-16	109	54	72	37
	17-18	33	16	18	15

The one-way ANOVA results show that there was a statistically significant difference between groups regarding Mental Well-Being ($F(1,19) = 22.02$, $p = .000$) and Cognitive Failures ($F(1,19) = 118.83$, $p = .000$).

Table II shows the results of One-Way ANOVA regarding three constructs of the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire: Forgetfulness, Distractibility, and False Triggering, and there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups for all of these.

Table 2: The Results of One-Way ANOVA for Forgetfulness, Distractibility, and False Triggering

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Forgetfulness	Between Groups	5,412.364	1	5,412.364	102.958	.000
	Within Groups	10,303.500	196	52.569		
	Total	15,715.864	197			
Distractibility	Between Groups	5,823.576	1	5,823.576	116.637	.000
	Within Groups	9,686.240	194	49.929		
	Total	15,509.816	195			
False Triggering	Between Groups	5,456.818	1	5,456.818	101.812	.000
	Within Groups	10,505.045	196	53.597		
	Total	15,961.864	197			

The Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between English proficiency level, cognitive abilities, and mental well-being. The results in Table III show that the correlation between the level of proficiency and cognitive failures was negative, moderate in strength, and statistically significant [r (131) = -.61, p=.000]. In addition, there was a positive relationship between the level of proficiency and mental well-being, which was also moderate in strength and statistically significant [r (131) = .64, p=.000].

Table 3: Correlations

Correlations				
		Level_of_ Proficiency	Cognitive_ Failures	Mental Well-being
Level of Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.611**	.641**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	133	131	131
Cognitive Failures	Pearson Correlation	-.611**	1	-.441**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	131	198	196
Mental Well-Being	Pearson Correlation	.641**	-.441**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	131	196	198

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

II. Discussion of Findings

This study is the first to explore Kosovan adolescents who are bilinguals and monolinguals and the relation between their language proficiency and their mental well-being and cognitive abilities.

Most of the adolescents in this study were bilinguals. This result is in line with previous studies such as Marian and Hayawaka (2021), which states that bilingualism is present in every country, as well as Baker (2011), which claims that the majority of the global population are bilinguals.

One of the two main findings of this study is that the bilingual adolescents reported better cognitive abilities than their monolingual counterparts. Moreover, the monolinguals, compared to bilinguals, tended to forget information quicker, were more easily distracted or absentminded, and had more interrupted processing of sequences of cognitive and motor actions. These findings are in accordance with those reported by Foresman (2010) and Chinnuswamy (2015) stating that the advantages for bilingual children include greater cognitive flexibility and brain power.

The second main finding of the present study is that bilinguals showed better mental well-being, meaning more positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, better relationships with others, and a sense of more personal control and life purpose. These results are in accordance with the findings described previously in this paper. Moreover, Sefedini (2018) stated that bilingual students showed better results in terms of positivity and self-confidence.

Another very important finding is that the more proficient bilinguals had better cognitive abilities or were less likely to have cognitive failures. Moreover, the level of proficiency is positively related to mental well-being, which means that the more adolescents understood and were proficient in their second language, the better their mental well-being was.

A) *Strengths, limitations, and future directions*

This study is the first of its kind in Kosovo and as such it offers insights into the impact that learning a second language has on the development, overall well-being, and functioning of a person, especially during adolescence when mental well-being is crucial. We hope that this study will encourage initiatives and projects specifically to teach new languages, especially in those places in Kosovo where learning new languages is limited.

Despite the strengths of this study, some limitations have to be acknowledged. First of all, this study was conducted only in one city in Kosovo. That said, the wide sample of this study includes a lot of demographically diverse adolescents. Moreover, all of the bilingual participants of this study had English as their second language, because it was not possible to find students that understood or spoke another language.

For this reason, future studies should focus on Kosovan adolescents who speak a second language other than English and compare the results, taking into consideration that the features of the native-speakers can impact the personality traits of L2 speakers (Dewaele, 2012).

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Dvojezičnost: duševno blagostanje in kognitivne sposobnosti učencev

Ključne besede: dvojezičnost, kognitivne sposobnosti, blagostanje

Obstaja vedno večji »trend« dvojezičnosti in dvojezični posamezniki so že zdavnaj presegli enojezične, kar je vodilo v različne razprave in polemike. Prispevek preučuje vpliv dvojezičnosti na blagostanje in kognitivne sposobnosti kosovskih mladostnikov. Vzorec 200 kosovskih mladostnikov je bil ocenjen z uporabo Vprašalnika o jezikovnih izkušnjah in znanju (LEAP-Q), Vprašalnika o kognitivnih napakah (CFQ) in Warwick-Edinburške lestvice duševnega blagostanja (WEMWBS). Podatki so bili zbrani s pomočjo anketnega vprašalnika v šolah. Od 200 udeležencev (starost: 13-18) je bilo 82 (41 %) moških in 118 žensk (59 %). Rezultati potrjujejo, da so imeli dvojezični ljudje boljše kognitivne sposobnosti, manj kognitivnih napak in boljše duševno blagostanje. Poleg tega je bila raven znanja drugega jezika v pozitivni korelaciji z duševnim blagostanjem in v negativni korelaciji s kognitivnimi napakami. Obe razmerji sta bili statistično pomembni. V prispevku so obravnavane tudi prednosti, omejitve in prihodnje raziskovalne usmeritve.

Bilingualism: Mental Well-Being and Learners' Cognitive Abilities

Keywords: bilingualism, cognitive abilities, well-being

There is an ever-growing "trend" of bilingualism, and bilingual individuals long ago outnumbered monolinguals, which has led to different discussions and debates. This paper studies the impact of bilingualism on the well-being and cognitive abilities of Kosovan adolescents. A sample of 200 Kosovan adolescents was assessed using the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q), Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ), and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). Data were collected through the physical administration of questionnaires in schools. Of the 200 participants (age: 13-18), 82 (41%) were males and 118 were females (59%). The results confirm that bilinguals had better cognitive abilities, fewer cognitive failures, and better mental well-being. Moreover, the level of proficiency in the second language was positively correlated with mental well-being and negatively correlated with cognitive failures. Both of these relationships were statistically significant. Strengths, limitations, and future research directions are also discussed.

O avtoricah

Rezarta Ramadani je doktorica znanosti s področja uporabnega jezikoslovja. Trenutno dela kot asistentka na Oddelku za angleški jezik in književnost Univerze »Ukshin Hoti« v Prizrenu na Kosovu. Je avtorica več znanstvenih člankov in sodeluje v mednarodnih projektih, katerih namen je prepoznavanje in izboljšanje razmer na kosovskih visokošolskih institucijah.

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