

# Successful application of a Language Awareness learning model designed to improve performance in a second dialect

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The present study addresses the issue of bidialectalism and language education with reference to the bidialectal community of Cyprus. It has commonly been observed that Cypriots underachieve in Standard Modern Greek which is the official linguistic variety for education. The study assesses the effects of a bidialectal language model applied to primary schools to improve linguistic performance in the standard. Improvement is defined as a reduction in dialectal interference in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. The language model has its basis in Language Awareness and uses the dialectal mother tongue (the Cypriot dialect) to provide explicit comparison with, and subsequent improvement in, the target standard variety (Standard Modern Greek). A quasi-experimental design was used for the model's application and evaluation. Quantitative analyses of the results reveal that the model produced a marked improvement in oral and written production of the standard.

## 1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The present study investigates the issue of bidialectalism and language education with respect to the bidialectal community of Cyprus<sup>1</sup>. Two linguistic varieties are used by Greek Cypriots – the Cypriot dialect (a regional dialect of Modern Greek) and Standard Modern Greek. The dialect is the Cypriots' mother tongue; it is the variety acquired at home. Standard Modern Greek is the variety learned at school. The two varieties occupy different domains of usage (the most distinct one being the use of the local dialect at home and the use of the standard at school). In written production, it is the standard variety which is mainly used; in oral production, the dialect is more prominent. More specifically, Standard Modern Greek (SMG) is used for legal and administrative documents, and in daily newspapers. Oral production of written material (e.g. television broadcasts, school lessons, lectures, announcements and political speeches) is also provided in the standard. The Cypriot dialect (CD) is used for communication with friends on daily or personal informal issues and in exchanges and transactions (e.g. shopping). SMG is not used in daily interactions unless mainland Greeks are present, or when the discussion is rather serious, or when the interlocutors want to appear of high status. (For information on the domains of usage of the two varieties, see Karyolemos and Pavlou 2001; Moschonas 1996, 2000; Panayotou 1999; Sciriha 1995, 1996.)

The dialect has no official place at school. The curriculum for primary education treats the standard as students' mother tongue and excludes their actual dialectal mother tongue altogether. This policy has recently attracted a great deal of attention from academics, linguists and educationists in Cyprus who agree that the phenomenon of bidialectalism has an effect on students' linguistic performance in the standard. The experts' opinions follow a unanimous pattern. They agree that the dialectal variety interferes with students' production of the standard.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cyprus' refers to that part of the island which is recognised as such by international law; the one under Greek administration.

This study addresses this issue in terms of production in the school environment. To date, no studies in Cyprus have empirically researched students' actual linguistic performance. This project studied students' performance in terms of dialectal interference when using SMG (both for oral and written production). Their linguistic performance was measured before and after an intervention programme which aimed to reduce dialectal interference. Dialectal interference was categorised as phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical.

## 2 BIDIALECTAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS MODEL

The intervention programme has its basis on Language Awareness (LA). LA is an approach to teaching the mother tongue, second or foreign languages and dialects as part of a comprehensive language education that draws upon common and divergent elements of diverse linguistic varieties (Hawkins 1984). A bidialectal LA model was prepared which aimed to improve students' production in the standard (improvement was seen as reduction of dialectal interference). This model drew on the differences and similarities between the CD and SMG and consisted of two stages:

(i) Unconscious first-dialect (D1) and second dialect (D2) knowledge converts into conscious D1 and D2 knowledge: the process by which this occurs is self-reflection. Learners reflect on their already-existing knowledge, thereby analysing it. The assumption is that, due to the nature of the varieties (i.e. they are dialects of the same language), learners have a great degree of access to unconscious knowledge of the targeted features.

(ii) Conscious D2 knowledge is transferred in D2 performance: the model aims to show that learners who are equipped with explicit/conscious D2 knowledge of specific language features do perform better in D2 compared to learners of the D2 who do not possess conscious D2 knowledge.

It must be stressed that the programme placed primacy on the standard to be in accordance with the current educational policy on the island. To argue for the opposite would have been inconsistent with the present interests of the speakers. (For information on Cypriots' language attitudes towards the two varieties, see Papapavlou 1994, 1998, 2001; Pavlou 1997; Pavlou and Papapavlou 2000.) Despite maintaining the primacy of the standard, the importance of the dialectal mother tongue was emphasised and was used as a facilitating tool for the improvement of the former.

## 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A quasi-experimental design was used for the model's application and evaluation<sup>2</sup>. 182 students participated in the study, 92 serving as the experimental group and 90 as the control group. The model was applied for three months on a daily basis for 45 minutes a day. The intervention programme replaced 50% of the traditional language classes. During this time, the control group continued with the traditional language classes. Both the oral and written performance of students was measured. The oral took the form of a three-minute interview with the researcher and the written took the form of a language essay.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For information on the application and evaluation of a quasi-experimental design, see Campbell and Stanley (1963); Cohen *et al.* (2000); Seliger and Shohamy (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the present project, a pilot study was undertaken to confirm the feasibility of the model (Papapavlou and Yiakoumetti 2003).

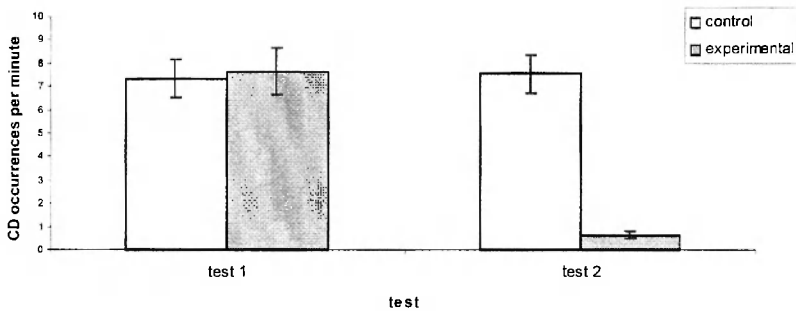
## 4 RESULTS

Quantitative analyses of the results revealed that the model produced a marked improvement in oral and written production of the standard.

### 4.1 Oral performance

The performance of the control group and the experimental group (i.e. classes in which the new bidialectal language model was applied) was compared over two periodic tests using a repeated-measures GLM (with test as a within-subjects factor and treatment as a between-subjects factor) (Figure 1).

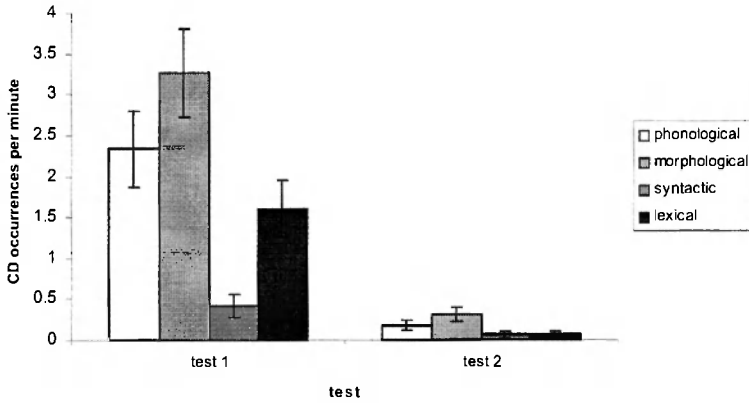
**Figure 1.** Performance of students (means  $\pm$  95% confidence limits) of the control and experimental groups over two oral tests, measured as the number of CD occurrences per minute.



The experimental group showed significant reduction in CD occurrences between the first and second tests ( $P = 0.000$ ). There was no significant change in the performance of the control group ( $P = 0.483$ ).

The performance of the experimental group was then analysed with respect to type of CD interference (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Performance of students of the experimental group over two oral tests in terms of four linguistic categories, measured as the number of CD occurrences per minute.

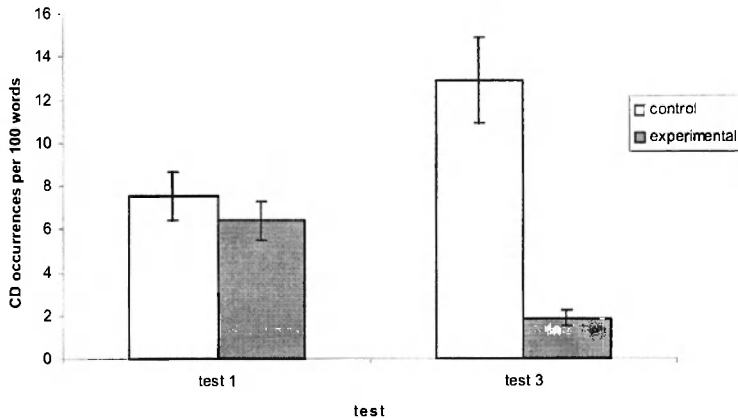


Significant improvement was found in all four categories: phonology ( $P = 0.000$ ), morphology ( $P = 0.000$ ), syntax ( $P = 0.000$ ) and lexicon ( $P = 0.000$ ).

#### 4.2 Written performance

The written performance of the control and experimental groups was again compared over two periodic tests (Figure 3).

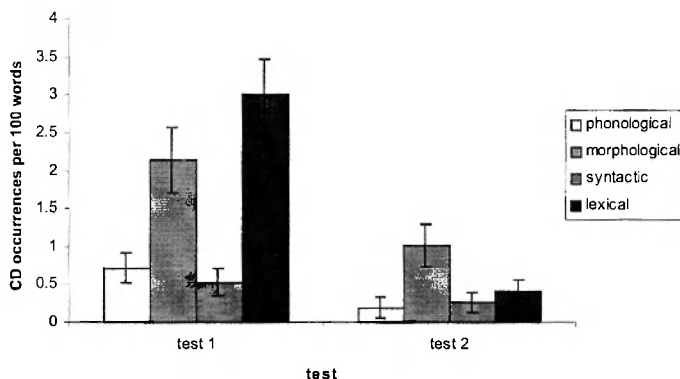
**Figure 3.** Performance of students of the control and experimental groups over two written tests, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.



The experimental group showed significant reduction in CD occurrences between the first and second test ( $P = 0.000$ ). The control group, however, showed a significant increase in CD occurrences between the first and second test ( $P = 0.000$ ). A possible explanation of this might be that for test 2 students did not know they were being assessed. Test 2 might therefore have provided a better reflection of the general written performance.

The performance of the experimental group was then analysed with respect to type of CD interference (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Performance of students of the experimental group over two written tests in terms of four linguistic categories, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.



Significant improvement was found in all four categories: phonology ( $P = 0.000$ ), morphology ( $P = 0.000$ ), syntax ( $P = 0.011$ ) and lexicon ( $P = 0.000$ ).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicated that there is good reason for doing LA work and that it can be the key to effective bidialectal learning. The project confirmed that the ability to consciously identify mismatch between two varieties enhances performance in the variety which is targeted for improvement.

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