

# Language Awareness in a Bidialectal Setting: The Oral Performance and Language Attitudes of Urban and Rural Students in Cyprus

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This study addresses bidialectism in the context of language education by empirically assessing how explicit knowledge about language influences bidialectal students' linguistic performance and language attitudes. A language-learning programme based on Language Awareness was applied in the bidialectal community of Cyprus with the primary aim of improving oral performance in urban and rural speakers' second variety, the standard. Improvement was defined as a reduction of Cypriot dialectal interference in students' Standard Modern Greek speech. A second aim was to document and subsequently identify changes in students' language attitudes towards their two linguistic varieties. Quantitative analyses of the results reveal that the Language Awareness programme produced a marked improvement in students' oral production of the standard variety and in their language attitudes.

**Keywords:** attitudes, bidialectism, dialectal interference, oral performance

A bidialectal situation is defined for the present purposes as one where the varieties in contact are the standard and a genetically related regional dialect of the same language. Bidialectal learners often have a dialectal mother tongue which is different from the standard variety that the educational system treats as their mother tongue. Because of the close relatedness between the two varieties, the 'school mother tongue' cannot be legitimately treated as a foreign language. Nevertheless, bidialectal learners do need to be taught new language elements if they are to master their second dialect. All of the above statements apply to Cyprus, the community which forms the basis of the present study.

The current study focuses on bidialectal education and combines it with Language Awareness (LA). Garrett and James (1992) divide LA into five inter-related domains: affective, social, power, cognitive and performance. This study proposes an LA bidialectal programme that deals with the performance and affective domains. As James and Garrett note, the performance domain is in dire need of empirical investigation as the LA literature often tends to be more optimistic than informative.

Cyprus is ideal for studying the relation between LA and bidialectism. Two linguistic varieties are used by Greek Cypriots: the Cypriot dialect (CD) (a regional dialect of Modern Greek) and Standard Modern Greek (SMG). The CD is

the Cypriots' mother tongue; it is the variety acquired in the home environment. SMG is the variety learned at school. The two occupy different domains of usage. The dialect is used mainly for oral communication with friends and family whereas the standard is used for written production and formal situations (Karyolemou & Pavlou, 2001; Moschonas, 1996, 2000; Panayotou, 1999; Sciriha, 1995, 1996.) The existence of the dialect is not officially recognised at school. The curricula for primary and secondary education treat the standard as students' mother tongue and exclude their actual dialectal mother tongue. Both teachers and students are expected to use SMG for formal learning within the classroom boundaries. The total absence from the national curriculum of one of the two linguistic varieties that co-exist on the island means that, despite the underlying propensities, Cypriot schools treat students as being monodialectal. It is agreed by academics, linguists and educationists on the island that bidialectism affects speakers' attitudes and performance in the standard variety and causes students to include dialectal interference when using SMG at school. This interference is especially evident in students' oral production (Iordanidou, 1991; Pavlou & Christodoulou, 2001). Educationists are calling for more efficient methods and new syllabi (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1999, 2000). However, no study has investigated the effect that exclusion of the mother tongue from formal education has on learners' performance in the 'school mother tongue' and on their attitudes towards their two varieties. The introduction of bidialectal learning into these schools would thus create circumstances that are exceptionally appropriate for the unadulterated examination of its potential.

The proposed LA bidialectal programme uses urban and rural students' dialectal mother tongue as a comparative/contrastive tool to improve oral performance in the standard variety. Improvement was monitored by measuring reduction in oral dialectal interference. Dialectal interference was measured based on the differences that exist between the CD and SMG as provided in the literature (Contossopoulos, 1994; Newton, 1972, 1983–84; Papapavlou, 1994). It must be emphasised that, in our view, dialectal interference has no negative connotations. In fact, the new learning programme treated the dialect as a valuable linguistic source and formally introduced it for the first time into the classroom. This was done in an attempt to cast light on the relationship between LA and oral performance in the non-native school standard. The programme focused on the standard to be consistent with Cypriots' interests. A number of surveys has suggested that people on the island view SMG as superior to the CD and as the appropriate code for education (Papapavlou, 1998, 2001; Sciriha, 1995, 1996).

The LA programme addresses urban and rural students' language attitudes in addition to their language performance. This second aim was concerned with the identification and possible transformation of students' language attitudes towards their two related varieties after exposure to the LA programme. This was tackled by providing discussions of language equality, differences between dialects and languages, and the contexts of usage of SMG and the CD. The importance of positive attitudes towards dialect in an educational setting is widely recognised (Corson, 1997; Giesbers *et al.*, 1989; Kroon & Liebrand, 1984). It has been demonstrated that children between the ages of four and six make judgements about differences in speech style which are remarkably similar to those made by adult speakers in their communities (Day, 1982; Pavlou, 1999).

The empirical project was based on a quasi-experimental research design known as the non-equivalent control group design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). This design involves an experimental group and a control group that are both given a pre-test and a post-test. This paper deals with the experimental group alone. For a comparison between the experimental and control groups, see Yiakoumetti (in press).

A total of 92 final-year primary-school students (11-year olds) formed part of this study. The students were drawn from two governmental schools, an urban school (53 students: 23 boys and 30 girls) and a rural school (39 students: 18 boys and 21 girls). The reason for choosing to include participants from different geographical areas was to permit the detection of any difference between their oral performance and language attitudes. It must be emphasised that the mother tongue of both rural and urban Cypriots alike is the regional CD and not SMG. Everyone learns Greek at school and all schools follow the same teaching methods. There is thus no *a priori* reason to expect greater dialectal interference in the classroom production of rural students than that of urban students. Any difference between the two groups should be related more to the frequency of dialectal occurrences than to the incidence and prevalence of the various types of interference.

The students received the intervention programme for 45 minutes (one academic period) every weekday for three months. This language intervention replaced 50% of the traditional language classes (90 minutes a day are allocated to language).

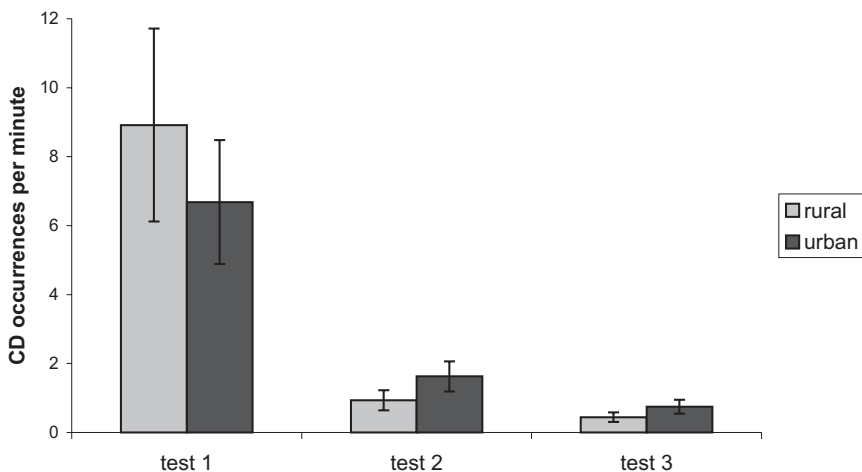
For the purposes of the empirical project, learning material in the form of a short textbook was produced. The textbook, which comprised two parts, drew on elements of the everyday lives of the students, from the Cypriot rather than the Greek reality. The first part was in the form of passages which focused on different topics: languages of the world, differences between languages and dialects, Greek dialects, domains of usage of SMG and the CD on the island of Cyprus, and the linguistic differences between SMG and the CD. The second section involved purely practical activities. The activities, based on the approach of LA and inspired by Hawkins's work (1984), were comparative/contrastive in nature, in that they were concerned with both the learners' mother tongue and the target variety. They trained students to identify the differences between the two varieties, to classify them and finally to transfer production from the local variety (CD) to the standard (SMG). The two parts ensured that social and sociolinguistic information was provided alongside grammatical exercises, in accordance with a suggestion put forward for enhancing skills and facilitating comprehension (Little & Singleton, 1988, 1992). Finally, the core of the textbook was explicit knowledge about language for the language learning process.

Evaluation of students' oral production took the form of a three-minute interview. This oral test was administered by the principal investigator who individually asked (in the target variety, SMG) each student questions about his or her daily life. The three minutes allowed enough time for students to express themselves freely. Each incidence of a CD feature (i.e. dialectal interference) in students' SMG was recorded. The incidences were classified as phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. This paper does not deal with these four performance indicators individually but groups all CD features together. For an

elaborated analysis of these indicators, see Yiakoumetti (in press) which identifies morphological occurrences as the most common prior to the commencement of the intervention programme, followed by phonological, lexical and syntactic occurrences. Post-intervention tests revealed that the LA programme significantly reduced CD features from all four categories. Some examples of CD occurrences are: morphology – the use of final /-n/ in the accusative singular (e.g. *kripton*, meaning ‘hide and seek’); phonology – the sound /ɟ/ (e.g. *ɟe*, meaning ‘and’); lexicon – SMG: *kuvas* / CD: *sikla*, meaning ‘bucket’; syntax – post-position of clitics (e.g. *ayapo se*, meaning ‘I love you’). Interviews took place in three different periods: before, mid-way through, and after the intervention programme. For the analysis, a repeated-measures GLM was conducted, with test as a within-subjects factor and location as between-subjects factor.

The overall effect of location was not significant ( $p = 0.888$ ). Both urban and rural children had a similar amount of CD interference in their speech. However, in the pre-test, urban students committed less CD interference ( $p = 0.041$ ) (Figure 1). This finding was in accordance with what is generally believed on the island. Cypriots do believe that people from rural areas speak more ‘horiatika’ (village-tainted speech) than people from towns. Teachers, too, apply the same opinion to students.

The most notable finding was that the effect of test was strongly dependent on location (test  $\times$  location interaction,  $p = 0.008$ ). This means that the extent of improvement over the three tests was greater for rural than urban students. By test 3, students from both regions were committing a similar amount of CD interference in their oral production. Rural students’ greater improvement in relation to their urban counterparts is testament to the usefulness of LA. The observed difference may also indicate that learning methods in bidialectal contexts based on LA are especially effective on those who have a more comprehensive knowledge of the non-standard dialect because they use it more actively. In short, LA may have an even greater effect on learners who need it.

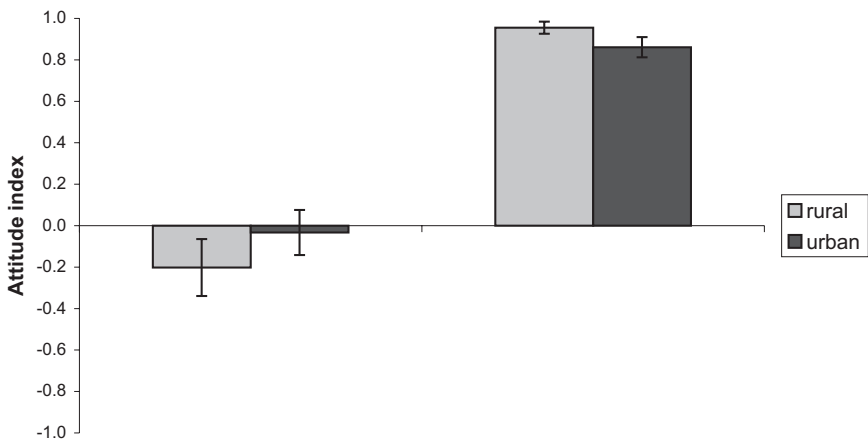


**Figure 1** Performance of rural and urban students over three oral tests, measured as the number of CD occurrences per minute

To address the second aim of the intervention programme (i.e. to monitor changes in language attitudes), a questionnaire was produced to gauge students' attitudes towards SMG and the CD. This questionnaire pertained to the dialect's value in sentimental dimensions, the dialect in relation to the standard, and the comparison between dialect- and standard-speakers. The subjects were required to respond with either 'Agree', 'Don't know', or 'Disagree'. To avoid the 'halo' effect, negatively worded statements were included. The questionnaire contained the following eight items: (1) Cypriot is a beautiful dialect; (2) I feel ashamed when I speak Cypriot; (3) Cypriot is as good as Greek; (4) Greek is a superior language to Cypriot; (5) Cypriot should be eliminated and replaced by Greek; (6) the Cypriot dialect is used by 'horiates' (village speakers); (7) the Greeks sound better than the Cypriots and (8) educated Cypriots speak both Greek and Cypriot. The questionnaire was administered twice: before and after the intervention programme had taken place. The aim was to reveal whether students' attitudes, and any prejudices they might have held towards the CD or SMG, remained the same. For the analysis, a repeated-measures GLM was conducted, with test as a within- subjects factor and location as a between-subjects factor.

Analysis of students' language attitudes revealed that the effect of location was not significant ( $p = 0.323$ ) (Figure 2). Students' responses to the attitudinal questionnaire placed both urban and rural students' attitudes on an approximately similar level ( $p = 0.059$ ). Prior to the application of the programme, both groups held negative attitudes towards the CD. After the completion of the intervention programme, both groups responded positively towards the CD and SMG. Once again, the most notable finding was that the effect of test was strongly dependent on location (test  $\times$  location interaction,  $p = 0.004$ ). By the end of the programme, rural students were holding more positive attitudes towards the CD in comparison to their urban counterparts.

To summarise, the current study primarily drew on the relationship between LA and the performance domain and empirically applied a bidialectal programme



**Figure 2** Language attitudes towards the CD of rural and urban students as measured by an attitudinal questionnaire before and after the intervention programme

to assess the effectiveness of this relationship. The project quantified and statistically compared urban and rural Cypriot students' linguistic performance before and after the application of an LA learning programme. Prior to the intervention, the subjects included a large number of CD occurrences in their SMG speech, which accords with previous suggestions (Papapavlou, 2004; Pavlou, 1999; Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004) but had not (until now) been empirically demonstrated. The students who received the LA learning programme exhibited a statistically significant improvement in their linguistic performance.

The results of the empirical study indicate that there is good reason for doing LA work and that it can be the key to effective bidialectal learning. The use of students' dialectal mother tongue in the classroom was shown to enhance their linguistic production in the standard. LA, manifested as awareness of the linguistic structures and sociolinguistic functions of the two related varieties, did lead to improvement of performance in the target variety.

In conclusion, comparison between students' pre- and post-tests suggests that LA can be conducive to the success of second-dialect development in bidialectal educational contexts. The current study has therefore succeeded in its goal of beginning to bridge the empirical gap that exists for the issue of LA and performance in bidialectal contexts.

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