Applied Linguistics AP review of language threshold effect

It is laudable that the authors have attempted empirical exploration into Cummins’ (1979) Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis. Unfortunately, my feeling is what conclusions they come to are 1) not substantially new enough to merit publication, and 2) arguably not justified by the data.

I believe that the problem begins with the questionnaire. As we all know, one’s data will necessarily be an artifact of the instruments and procedures employed, and if the methodology is flawed, then the data is likely to be as well. The authors draw a number of their conclusions based on students’ self-assessment of statements such as “I thought about what I knew to help me understand what I was reading” and “I tried to picture or visualize information to help me…” I believe there are potential validity and reliability issues underlying these questions that are being obfuscated by the careful statistics reported by the authors. If a participant in such a study is asked about strategic behaviors in this fashion, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the responses are reflective of true metacognition or merely a rough acknowledgement by the respondent that the strategy in question is probably one that learner deploys. Even if a learner has a clear understanding of the wording of the stimulus, it is difficult to believe that students can reliably answer a Likert scale eliciting if a strategy was “not used at all” or “used most of the time.” (And if the participant did use the strategy but not consciously?) So, the question is, how reliable is a learner’s memory of what s/he does when s/he reads?

Speaking of memory, clearly there must be at least one more key variable that should be discussed here beyond (but related to proficiency) – working memory. It seems common sense that if one has a lower level of proficiency then reading fluency will be compromised, and so will access to certain aspects of metacognition otherwise available in L1 (e.g. Walter, 2004). This key variable does not receive much (if any) attention in this submission, and many of the effects discussed in the paper need to be considered with at least this in mind. “Do reading strategies make an independent contribution to L2 reading comprehension after controlling for the effect of L1 reading competence?” Maybe. But working memory definitely does, and working memory capacity is affected by language proficiency.

A question can even be asked regarding the heterogeneity amongst the participants themselves. For example, the 217 students, it is presumed, have all had a good deal of instruction (“at least ten years” p. 6). If that is the case, it is also not a stretch to presume that some may have received some explicit strategy training, and some not, or some just more than others. That awareness alone could affect the validity of the data from the study.

The authors state (p. 9) that “the participants used reading strategies more often when reading an L2 text than an L1 text.” Really? How do they know that those participants, who have learned that L2 formally, institutionally, and not naturalistically acquired, are not simply more aware of what they do in the L2 than what they do with more automaticity in the L1? The authors cite an example of “I tried to recite sentences to help understand difficult parts” as an example of a strategy deployed more often in the L2 than the L1. This in itself does not seem to be an important insight, since it is unlikely that people reading in the L1 would encounter many difficult parts to begin with.

In the end the authors conclude that “regardless of the presence or absence of the language threshold effect, the L2 reading strategy use had a significant effect on L2 reading independent of readers’ L1 reading competence.” In other words, reading strategy instruction is probably a good thing regardless of threshold effect? I’m not convinced that this conclusion contributes much to the extant literature in this area, and even if it did, in my view, too many questions can be asked regarding the methodology. I therefore feel I should refrain from endorsing this paper for publication.

REFERENCE

Walter, C. (2004). Transfer of reading comprehension skills to L2 is linked to mental representations of text and L2 working memory. Applied Linguistics, 25(3), 315-339..