MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE IN HUMAN SERVICES: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING

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Abstract— A survey study analyzes the relationships among the levels of language and cultural-linguistic professional competences in 483 professionals in counseling, psychology, and human services. The results support the need for culturally-embedded, non-native language use training to increase cultural-linguistic competences among human service providers.

Index Terms— bi(multilingual) competence, cultural professional competence, human services.

I. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has been an essential component of professional training in the areas of counselor education, psychology, and the human services professions (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008). Regardless of a conceptual model (Celinska & Swazo, 2015, Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Marbley, Steele, & McAuliffe, 2011; Swazo & Celinska, 2014) multicultural training programs have neglected multilingual competence preparation (Hurley, Gerstein, & Egisdóttir, 2013; Peters, Sawyer & Guzman, 2014). Yet, language constitutes the primary tool in providing diagnostic and treatment human services (Shoeman, Chiliza, Emsley, & Southwood, 2008; Swazo, 2013) as critical details are anchored in contextual and cultural experiences not transferable across languages (Costa & Dewaele, 2014; Espín, 2013; Kokaliari, Catanzarite, & Berzoff, 2013; Pérez Rojas, Gelso, & Bhatia, 2014; Shoeman, et al., 2008). The provider's multilingual competence for effective counseling, psychological and human services to bi/multilingual clientele is an important element that has not been extensively researched and yet is of critical importance given frequent language-based mismatch between the predominantly monolingual providers and the linguistically diverse clientele. To address this gap in the existing literature, this study aims at understanding the relationship between the level providers' language competence and their ability to provide professional services in the client's' native language. As a result, the current results may offer valuable, research-based recommendations for language-based training for human services professionals.

II. METHOD

A. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The Multilingual Competence in Counselor Education and Allied Disciplines (MCCEAD) questionnaire was developed to measure the levels of language competence and cultural-linguistic professional competence. The participants who opted to participate signed a written consent and were subsequently given questionnaire anonymously. Out of those approached, 95% consented to participate and completed all items on the MCCEAD.

Language Competence is measured based on the responses to the MCCEAD items at three levels: (1) Bilingualism, (2) Academic-Based Second Language, and (3) Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism. Bilingualism is indicated by the participant's endorsement of one of the specified degrees of bilingualism. Academic-Based Second Language is designated when the participant marks at least one year of instruction in second language at middle/high school and/or college. Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism represents the social bi/multilingual interactions with others and media (e.g., music, TV, printed materials), the use of native language of the ancestors when visiting their homeland, and the readiness to emigrate to a foreign country based on the knowledge of this country's language and customs. Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence is measured as the total number of endorsements of items indicating comfort and competency to provide in more than one/native language professional services (e.g., individual and group counseling/therapy, rendering clinical diagnoses, and conducting professional trainings).

B. Participants

A total of 483 participants were recruited and responded to the MCCEAD, 411 students and 72 licensed practicing professionals. The students included 111 undergraduates and 300 graduates who were enrolled in 3 universities in the U.S.A. The participants represented counseling (n=193), psychology (n=146), social work (n=61), and family

services (n=83). The participants represented various ethnicities, with majority being Euro American (71.5%), Hispanic/Latino (15%), and African American (5.8%). Among all participants, 84% were females and 16% were males. The participants' age spanned from young to mature adults.

III. RESULTS

Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence (dependent variable) is comprised of four items pertaining to the respondent's comfort and competency to provide professional services in more than one/native language. The internal consistency of this set of items was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The value of alpha coefficient of .937 indicates that these items have high internal consistency, and, therefore, represent a closely related set of professional competencies.

To evaluate whether the levels of Language Competence, as a group of independent variables, reliably predict the dependent variable, standard multiple regression was conducted. The value of F (4, 421) of 174.84, p=.000 indicates that Language Competence is a statistically significant and reliable predictor of Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence. The overall strength of the prediction is measured by R of .790 and Adjusted R-Squared of .621. Based on the latter, 62.1% of the dependent variable variance is predicted by the independent variables.

The unique contributions of each level of Language Competence (independent variables) to Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence were evaluated using standardized regression coefficient (Beta). Two out of three levels of Language Competence significantly influence Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence by increasing its degree: Bilingualism (Beta=.135, t=22.25, p=.000) and Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism (Beta=2.041, t=4.10, p=.000). These results indicate that Bilingualism is a stronger predictor of Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence as compared to Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism. Academic-Based Second Language is a non-significant contributing variable to the Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence (Beta=.022, t=.718, p=.473).

To further explore the relationships between Language Competence and Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence, each level of Language Competence was correlated separately with Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competency. The values of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients indicate that two levels of Language Competence, Bilingualism and Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism, correlate positively and significantly with Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence. Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism correlates stronger (r=.703, p=.000) than Bilingualism (r=.430, p=.000). Importantly, these two levels of Language Competence are significantly but very weakly correlated (r=.134, p=.005). In contrast, Academic-Based Second Language is not significantly correlated to Cultural-Linguistic Professional Competence (r=.091, p=.059).

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current results imply that language competence of counselors, psychologists, and human services providers may significantly impact their ability to provide professional human services. A provider' language competence accounts for up to 62% of his/her confidence and comfort in providing professional therapeutic and psycho-educational services in another (non-native) language. Therefore, the current results support the need for the language-based professional training for providers involved in delivering counseling, psychological, and human services to linguistically diverse clientele. Ideally, professionals should achieve the level of language competence that allows culturally-embedded use of another (non-native) language, an assertion stemming from the current results pointing out that only bilingualism and culturally-embedded bi/multilingualism significantly and positively influence and are significantly correlated with cultural-linguistic professional competence.

This level of language use could possibly be facilitated through full language immersion, "micro-practicum activities" (i.e., short-term, highly focused field experiences), and/or partnerships within study abroad programs.

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