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Abstract

The in-depth analysis of the 2006 PISA data sets in "Knowledge and Skills for the New Millennium: Results from PISA 2006 for Qatar" suggests that the comparatively low scores of students in Qatar on scientific literacy reduces basically to their weak performance on reading literacy. The analysis which examines the combined effect of Quality of instruction, Appropriate level of instruction, Time on task, Attitudes to learning, and Resources invested confirms that the school's average score in reading literacy, as an indicator subsumed under the appropriate level of instruction, should receive the primary attention. With these caveats in mind, the question arises as to what might explain the low scores of Arab students in reading literacy. In this paper, I suggest a linguistic approach to analysing the role of diglossia in determining low performance on reading literacy. Linguistic arguments and statistical analyses from PISA and Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment (QCEA, for short) are given which justify that the comparatively low scores of students in Qatar on reading literacy are reducible to their being assessed in Standard Arabic as a High domain coexisting with a Low domain known as colloquial Arabic, a phenomenon going under the name of **diglossia**, in the extant linguistic literature.

Introduction

-Several analyses of the 2000 and 2006 PISA results, particularly those published by OECD have attempted to provide a set of descriptively and explanatorily adequate analyses of what might explain the low performance on reading literacy.

-Most of these analyses are statistical in nature and do offer an understanding of why performance in reading is in some cases below expectation.

-The literature on reading performance in PISA, as approached from a linguistic point of view; however, is characterized by paucity.

-This paper offers a description of low performance on reading literacy from a linguistic perspective.

-**Diglossia**, as a phenomenon characterizing the Arab linguistic communities, is the chief determinant of low performance on reading literacy.

-**Diglossia**, is a sociolinguistic situation where two genetically related linguistic domains coexist in a speech community.

-In **diglossic** situations, speakers use two forms of linguistic domains: a **High domain & a Low domain**

-The **H domain** is usually the literary dialect.

-The **L domain** is characterized with "intimacy" and "informality."

PISA with an eye to diglossia

With the caveats diglossia poses in relation to assessment in mind, the following questions arise:

-What is the effect of being tested in a linguistic code other than the one used in daily life?

-How can we claim a feasible comparability as well as an appropriateness of inferences and consequences among the participating countries if exposure to the tested linguistic code or variety is variable, in other words if diglossia is commonplace?

-How could such an assessment framework as PISA crystallize into a more distinctive approach by incorporating an in-depth analysis of the linguistic context of the participating countries?

-Should cultural inclusiveness be envisaged as the sole pre-determinant of the validity of the comparability of the PISA results?

Methods

-A methodological approach which introduces the elements of comparative assessment results, in this case comparing the low performance of Qatari students on reading proficiency in:

- 1- PISA and
- 3- QCEA (Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment)

- A methodological approach which introduces the elements of comparative phonology and syntax, particularly as it pertains to the parameter settings transferred from the Low domain to the High domain.

Reading Results from PISA

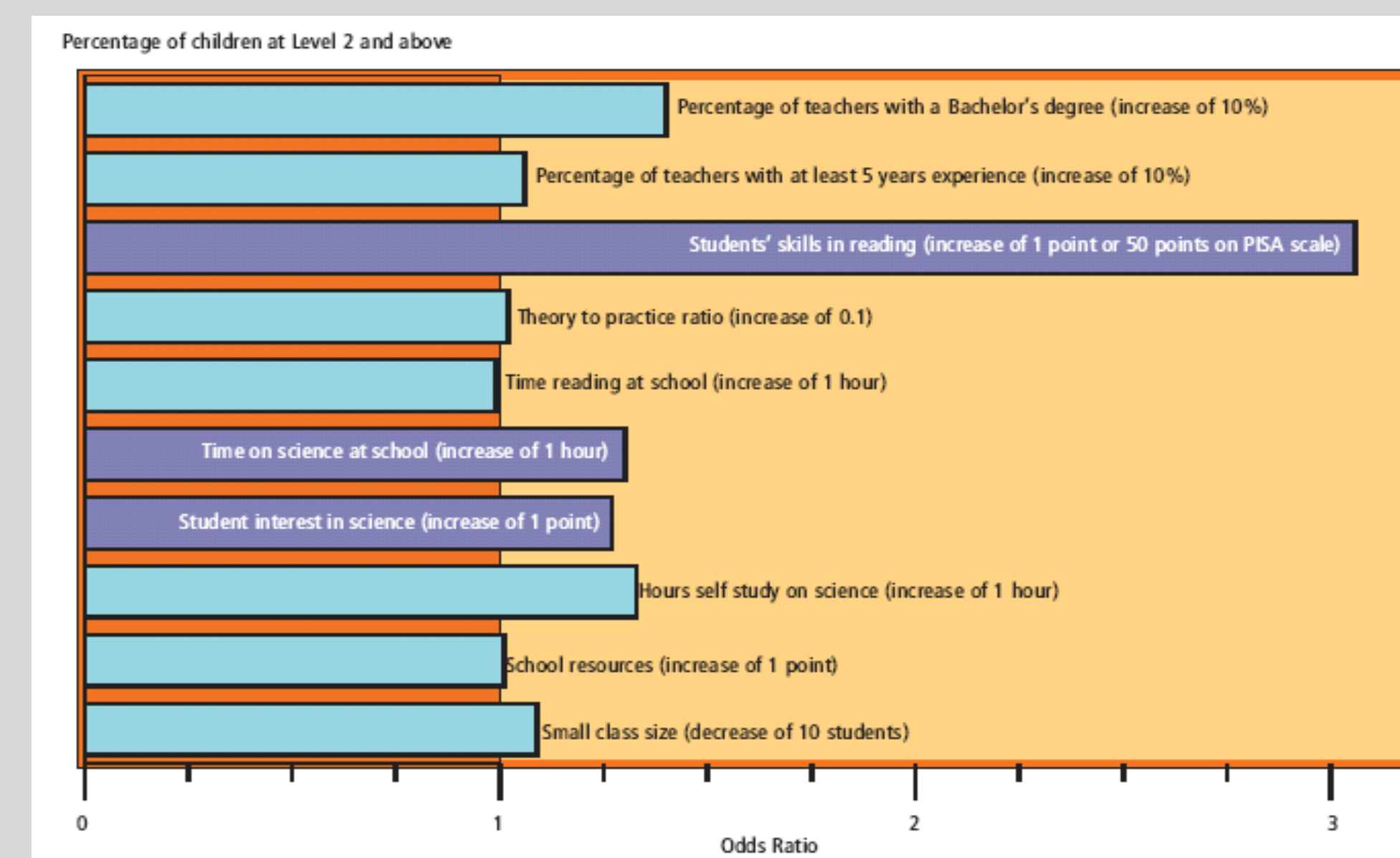


Figure 1: Odds-ratios For The Relationship Between Science Performance And Ten Factors Related To Learning

Figure 1 summarizes the results with bars that indicate the 'odds-ratios' associated with specific increases in each factor. Odds-ratios greater than 1.0 are most important for Qatar. By far the most important factor is students' proficiency in reading, which has an odds-ratio of about 3.0

Reading results from QCEA

Percentage of Students in Performance Levels for Reading- Total Population			
Grade	N	Meets	Not Meet
4	3073	3%	97%
5	2944	9%	91%
6	2990	5%	95%
7	4052	5%	95%
8	4109	4%	96%
9	3527	2%	98%
10	3438	5%	95%

Examples of Interference from the L domain

Examples of Colloquial Qatari Arabic Interference Reducible to Diglossia		
Level of interference	Example	Explanation
Phonology	- "Dejaj" (meaning chicken) pronounced as "deyay". - "Kabid" (i.e. liver) pronounced as /Cabid / instead of /kabid/.	- Instance of overlapping distribution.
Syntax	1- "thahebtu suq" (I went market), instead of the grammatical sentence "thahebtu ila suq" (I went to the market). 2- "Akeltu fi tabaqin" meaning "I ate in a tray" Instead of: "Akeltu min tabaqin" meaning "I ate from tabaqin"	1- Preposition incorporation as a result of L-domain interference. Thahebtu ila suq { before incorporation} I went to the suq Thahebtu lisuq { after incorporation} I went market 2- Preposition dropping

Conclusions

-Students in Qatar, and more generally in the Arab linguistic communities, meet the criterion of age eligibility, linguistically; however, the PISA eligible students have differing probability of responding correctly to the PISA reading items because of being exposed to a **diglossic** context.

-In the case of Arab students, and by extrapolation to any student who happens to be in a diglossic context, PISA acquires more the status of a language proficiency test than a competency based assessment, assessing, inter alia, reading literacy.

-The guided and formal resetting of the parameter settings transferred from the low variety (i.e. colloquial Arabic) to the high variety (i.e. Standard Arabic) is not a facile one. This builds on the following hypothesis:

"Just as the Arab learners of English as a second language may form a linguistic system (i.e. an interlanguage) which draws on their vernacular as L1, the linguistic system they construct when learning FuS-Ha may deserve regard as an **interlanguage** since their FuS-Ha is subjected to L1 interference, with the only exception being that in the first situation the linguistic domains are genetically unrelated (i.e. English versus Arabic), whereas in the second situation they are genetically related (i.e. FuS-Ha versus colloquial Arabic.)"

-Because **diglossia**, creates a gap between the language of testing and the language of orality, the comparatively low performance of the Arab examinees on such competency-based assessments as PISA is then better explained or predicted from linguistic factors, particularly from a lack of language knowledge.

-In other words, where students are tested in a linguistic code different from the one they use out of classrooms, the effect of **diglossia**, in relation to the appropriateness of inferences and consequences of test decisions is evident.

-In order for PISA to yield meaningful comparisons of differences across organizational, ethnic and cultural groups, we should posit that measurement equivalence should hold and for this to be possible we should further postulate that the linguistic testing environment must be comparable.

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