Shiraz University

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

M.A. Thesis in Teaching English as a Foreign Language-TEFL

Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement: A Comparison of Iranian Students in Monolingual and Bilingual Schools

By

Nafiseh Javidi Azad

Supervised by

Dr. S. Mehrpour

February ٢٠١٤

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In the Name of God

Declaration

The undersigned, Nafiseh Javidi Azad (٩٠٠٤٧٤) the student of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Shiraz University, College of Literature and Humanities, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research, and wherever, in this thesis other peoples' sources have been used I have given their exact address and specifications in the reference section. I also assert that my research and its topic are not the repetition of other peoples' works, and I commit myself not to publish or let others have access to the achievement of the thesis without the prior permission of the university. In conformity with the regulations of mental and intellectual ownership, Shiraz University reserves all the rights of the present work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Upon finishing my research, I feel a need to express my deep gratitude to all the people without whose helping, doing this job would have been impossible.

First and foremost, I thank Dr. Mehrpour, my supervisor, for his helpful guidelines, brilliant ideas, and continuous support in all the steps of the study. His patience and manners were encouraging and supportive for me.

Deep thanks also goes to my advisor, Dr. Ahmadi, for taking his truly valuable time, reading each word I had written and generously telling his ideas which indeed have been helpful.

I also thank all my professors at Shiraz University who taught me valuable things and supported me in the process of my M.A studies.

Thanks and gratitude also go to all the participants i.e. students, teachers and school principals who let me collect the data necessary for the study.

Last but not least, I need to tell my family and my husband how much I owe them, in doing my research, for their continuous love, encouragement and support.

ABSTRACT

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: A COMPARISON OF IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS IN MONOLINGUAL AND BILINGUAL SCHOOLS

BY

NAFISEH JAVIDI AZAD

This study aimed to compare the academic achievement and language proficiency of Iranian EFL students in monolingual and bilingual schools in order to investigate the effectiveness of Iranian partial immersion programs. To this end, from among the existing junior high schools in Shiraz, three schools were randomly selected, two monolingual and one bilingual. Seventy female students participated in this study. To collect the necessary data, two tests were designed based on third grade junior high school English, Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Geography books and these tests were administered to the participants of the study. Independent sample t-tests were used to analyze the data and to identify the differences between the academic achievement and language proficiency of the two groups of students. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between students in the monolingual and bilingual schools regarding their language proficiency, that is, students in the bilingual school outperformed their counterparts in the monolingual schools. However, no statistically significant difference was found with regard to their academic achievement which means that the students in the bilingual school were the same as those in the monolingual schools. This study reveals that partial

immersion programs in Iran can be effective, at least, in improving students' language proficiency and they deserve more attention to be paid to by the educational system of the country.

Key words: language proficiency, academic achievement, bilingual education, monolingual education

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List of Abbreviations

AA	Academic Achievement
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
L١	First Language
L٢	Second Language
LP	Language Proficiency
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

١،٠. Preliminaries

This chapter begins with an introduction on bilingualism and bilingual education. The focus is on immersion programs. Some theories related to bilingualism are presented. The chapter ends with statement of the problem, objectives of the study, research questions and the significance of the study.

١،١ Bilingual and immersion programs

Bilingualism is a situation in which people speak two languages and bilingual education is the cause and at the same time the consequence of bilingualism. The term bilingual education refers to the use of two (or more) languages of instruction at some point in a student's school career (May, ٢٠٠٨). Bilingual education can be traced back to Greek and Roman times when a non-native language was used to teach the subject matter.

One category of bilingual education is immersion education or program in which instruction is conducted through the medium of an L^2. This L^2 may be a foreign, minority or majority language. The languages are the medium of instruction rather than being the subject of instruction. Subjects are academic subjects such as mathematics, sciences, etc. The main purpose of this program is to foster bilingualism, in other words, to develop learners' communicative competence or language proficiency in their L^2 in addition to their first or native language (L^1).

Johnson and Swain (۱۹۹۷) summarize eight core features of immersion programs as follows:

۱. The L۲ is a medium of instruction.

۲. The immersion curriculum parallels the local L۱ curriculum.

۳. Overt support exists for the L۱.

٤. The program aims for additive bilingualism.

٥. Exposure to the L۲ is largely confined to the classroom.

٦. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L۲ proficiency.

۷. The teachers are bilingual.

۸. The classroom culture is that of the local L۱ community.

Immersion programs take on different types with respect to how much time is spent in L۲. There is a continuum of total immersion on one side and partial immersion on the other side. In total immersion programs, almost ۱۰۰٪ of the class time is spent in the L۲ and academic subjects are taught in L۲ in total immersion. On the other hand, in partial immersion, about half of the class time is spent on learning the subject matter in the L۲. It is aimed to make students become communicatively proficient in the second language, as well as to master subject content taught in the L۲.

Iranian immersion programs in bilingual schools are regarded as partial immersion programs. In this type of program, students take part in usual L۱ classes to study different subject matters such as mathematics, natural sciences, geography, etc. This system is the same as that of monolingual schools. Both schools hold

classes four hours a day, five days a week in the morning. The difference between bilingual schools and monolingual schools is that students of bilingual schools also have to take part in the afternoon classes for three hours a day, five days a week and all the classes are held in English. That is, the same morning courses are repeated in English in the afternoon classes and the students are not allowed to speak Persian in the afternoon classes

Examining Iranian immersion programs with respect to features established by Johnson and Swain (۱۹۹۷) shows that immersion programs in Iran are unique to its context. The first feature, which states that L۲ should be the medium of instruction for at least ۵۰٪ of the class time, is realized in a different way in the Iranian bilingual schools; that is, all the morning classes are held in the L۱(Persian) and all the afternoon classes are held in L۲ (English). Thus, in sum, L۲ is used for ٤۰٪ of the time as the afternoon classes are a bit shorter in time and the subject matters are discussed more briefly than in the morning classes. As such, the immersion curriculum does not exactly parallel the local L۱ curriculum. What is more, students are not allowed to use L۱ while they are studying in the immersion program. Finally the teachers are not really bilingual. Still, Johnson and Swain (۱۹۹۷) stated that "The term 'immersion' can be legitimately and usefully applied beyond its purely historical origins in Canada to a wide range of programs despite differences in their socioeconomic contexts, and manner of implementation" (p. ۱).

١.٢. Theories of bilingualism

The issue of what exactly constitutes language proficiency has long been studied. Oller (١٩٧٩) claimed that "there exists a global language proficiency factor which accounts for the bulk of the reliable variance in a wide variety of language proficiency measures" (p. ٤١٣). This factor is closely related to IQ and other aspects of academic achievement and can be measured by listening, reading, writing and speaking tasks.

However, in contrast to Oller's notion of language proficiency, Cummins (١٩٧٦) hypothesized that language proficiency can be classified into Cognitive Academic Language Skills (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). He defines CALP as a higher-level language skills required for literacy and for cognitively demanding content; BICS is the conversational proficiency level often achieved in beginning ESL classes. In other words, CALP is that higher-order competence required to survive in academic circles or similar environments. Therefore, BICS proficiency is the surface language, which is used to engage in social communication. Students who reach BICS proficiency, develop a basic vocabulary of concrete objects, but have not yet developed the cognitive skills necessary to understand the academic terms. According to Cummins, BICS is acquired through interpersonal interaction and involves the ability to negotiate meanings between interlocutors, such as a teacher, or a writer of the text. CALP is, however, the language of academic subjects that involves more abstract concepts and

vocabulary. Students who reach CALP proficiency demonstrate the ability to draw complex meanings in oral and/or written language without paralinguistic cues, and the input they receive is context- reduced. It correlates highly with general I.Q. and academic achievement. Cummins (٢٠٠٠) also explained this difference by stating:

> Native-speakers of any language come to school at age five or so virtually fully competent users of their language. They have acquired the core grammar of their language and many of the sociolinguistic rules for using it appropriately in familiar social contexts. Yet schools spend another ١٢ years attempting to extend this basic repertoire into more specialised domains and functions of language , CALP or academic proficiency is what schools focus on in this endeavour. …the language which they (children) need to use effectively if they are to progress successfully…. (p. ٥٩).

However, some scholars criticized Cummins for this distinction. For example, the conversational/academic language distinction reflects an autonomous perspective on language that ignores its location in social practices and power relations. Also, CALP or academic language proficiency represents little more than "test-wiseness", that is, it is an artifact of the inappropriate way in which it has been measured. In addition, the notion of CALP promotes a "deficit theory" insofar as it attributes the academic failure of bilingual/minority students to low cognitive/academic proficiency rather than to inappropriate schooling; in this respect it is no different than notions such as "semilingualism" (Edelsky et al., ١٩٨٣).

In school settings, the relationship between BICS/CALP and academic achievement can be explained in relation to the language demands of each dimension, and their situational contexts. Cummins offered a model that provides a contextual framework for language use within an educational context. He examined these two aspects of language proficiency from two perspectives. Firstly, in terms of contextual support available for expressing and receiving meaning, and secondly in terms of cognitive involvement. The degree of contextual support is described as a continuum ranging from "context-embedded" on the one hand to "context-reduced" on the other, and the degree of cognitive involvement is described as a continuum ranging from "cognitively undemanding" to "cognitively-demanding". These demands are conceptualized within a framework made up of the intersection of two continua, one relating to the range of contextual support available for expressing or receiving meaning and the other relating to the amount of information that must be processed simultaneously or in close succession by the student in order to carry out the activity. The extremes of the context-embedded/context-reduced continuum are distinguished by the fact that in context-embedded communication the participants can actively negotiate meaning (e.g. by providing feedback that the message has not been understood) and the language is supported by a wide range of meaningful interpersonal and situational cues. Context-reduced communication, on the other hand, relies primarily (or, at the extreme of the continuum, exclusively) on linguistic cues to meaning, and thus successful interpretation of the message depends heavily on knowledge of the language itself. In general, context-embedded communication is

more typical of the everyday world outside the classroom, whereas many of the linguistic demands of the classroom (e.g. manipulating text) reflect communicative activities that are close to the context-reduced end of the continuum. By the term "cognitively undemanding," Cummins refered to the conceptual and linguistic tools that are "automatised" (i.e. mastered); Vygtosky refered to them as a "cultural tool." Once internalised, these tools will contribute to the intellectual development by developing skills such as abstraction, recognition and the ability to compare. From "cultural tools," he refers to logical and analytical tools of thinking. Moreover, once they are acquired, they do not require active cognitive involvement for appropriate performance (Cummins ١٩٨١, p. ١٣). In essence, these tools are communicative tasks and activities in which the linguistic tools have become largely automatized and thus require little active cognitive involvement for appropriate performance. At the lower end of the continuum are tasks and activities in which the linguistic tools have not become automatized and thus require active cognitive involvement. Thus, the context-embedded/context-reduced distinction is not one between oral and written language. The dimensions of contextual embeddedness and cognitive demand are distinguished because some context-embedded activities are clearly just as cognitively-demanding as context-reduced activities. Contextual support involves both internal and external dimensions. Internal factors are attributes of the individual that make a task more familiar or easier in some respect (e.g. prior experience, motivation, cultural relevance, interests, etc.). External factors refer to aspects of the input that facilitate or impede comprehension; for example, language input that is