

*In the Name of God*  
*the Compassionate the Merciful*

۱۳۸۲



**URMIA UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE**

**MA Thesis Entitled**

**THE POSSIBLE EFFECT OF LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND ON  
IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' METALINGUISTICS AWARENESS**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master  
of Arts in English Language Teaching (ELT).**

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**May, 2009**

۱۳۸۹/۵/۱۸  
دانشگاه ارومیه  
فصلنامه علمی و پژوهشی  
مجله علمی و پژوهشی

۱۳۸۹



دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی

گروه زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی

عنوان پایان نامه :

بررسی تاثیر احتمالی پیشینه زبانی بر روی دانش فرا زبانی

زبان آموزان ایرانی

برای اخذ درجه کارشناسی ارشد

آموزش زبان انگلیسی

نگارنده:

فریده قلیزاده

استاد راهنما:

۱۳۸۹/۴/۸

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اردیبهشت، ۱۳۸۸

۱۳۸۶۳۷

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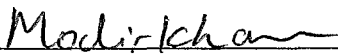

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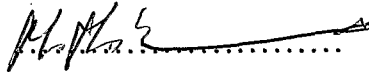
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# *Dedicated to*

*My father, for his encouragement and support*

*My mother, for her endless and unconditional love*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been exceedingly fortunate to have the intellectual supervision, mentoring, and guidance of Professor Sima Modirkhamene. She is one of the most thoughtful, compassionate and caring people that I am ever likely to have the good fortune of knowing. Her moral support and patience eased my study. I shall always be grateful for her guidance, support and encouragement.

I am also grateful for my professors at the English Department, Urmia University.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance, mentorship and support I obtained from my sister Dr. Leila Gholizadeh who was always generous with her time.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the study participants who graciously gave up their time to participate in this research.

## ABSTRACT

### **Thesis Title: The Possible Effect of Iranian EFL Learners' Linguistic Background on Their Metalinguistic Awareness**

The concern of this study was to investigate the possible effect of linguistic background on metalinguistic awareness of Iranian EFL learners. It was hypothesized that learners' different linguistic backgrounds (i.e. bilingual vs. monolinguals) does not have any effect on their metalinguistic awareness as far as their performance in syntactic, spelling, and lexical awareness tasks are concerned. A total of 130 students from the universities of Urmia and Marand participated in this study. However, since the participants' motivation, English language proficiency, and linguistic backgrounds were to be controlled, this number was reduced to 87 (27 male and 60 female) when participants completed the background questionnaires, including sections on demographic data, linguistic background, motivation, etc. The participants, who were within 18-24 years of age, consisted of 59 Azeri-Persian bilinguals and 28 Persian monolinguals. Data was collected through metalinguistic tests of syntactic, spelling, and lexical awareness. Data subjected to a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed: a) no significant effect of linguistic background on performance of subjects in ungrammaticality judgement test (error correction), b) a significant effect of linguistic background on performance of subjects in ungrammaticality judgement test (error noticing), spelling awareness (error noticing & correction) with monolingual participants having higher scores, and c) a significant effect of linguistic background on performance of subjects in terms of their lexical awareness, with bilingual participants having higher scores compared to monolinguals. The findings are discussed in relation to the threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 1976) and levels of bilingualism proposed by Bialystok (1988).

**Keywords::** metalinguistic awareness, bilingual, monolingual

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CUP	Common underlying proficiency
DMM	Dynamic model of multilingualism
EFL	English as a foreign language
L1	First language
L2	Second language
MA	Metalinguistic awareness
SLA	Second language acquisition
SPSS	Statistical package for the social sciences
SUP	Separate underlying proficiency
TLA	Third language acquisition
UJT	ungrammaticality judgment test
BICS	Basic interpersonal communication skills
CALP	Cognitive academic language proficiency
H	High variety in diagonal context
L	Low variety in diagonal context
GPA	Grade point average
MANOVA	One- way between- groups multivariate analysis of variance

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

A considerable amount of evidence has been concerned on the issues connected to the acquisition of second language (L2), and not much prominence is given to issues regarding third language acquisition (TLA). Nowadays, the teaching and learning of a foreign/second language is rarely centred around teacher preferences but much more on the learner's interests, needs, strategies, linguistic backgrounds, etc. For this propose, over the last few years, research on TLA and multilingualism to use Jessner's (2008) terms has been increased. These studies describe multilinguals' language learning to investigate differences and similarities between second and third language acquisition, otherwise stated, the possible differences existing between monolinguals and bilinguals who are learning an additional language, English in most cases.

One of the learner's characteristics, thus, which needs due attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research is their linguistic repertoire introduced in the literature through terms like bi/multilingualism, trilingualism, plurilingualism, etc. (Jessner, 2008).

Bilingualism which is a variant of multilingualism is a norm all over the world. Seventy percent of the world's population are bilingual (Trask, 1999). In the past, a number of scholars have described bilingualism as two monolinguals and direct their theoretical and methodological insights into monolingual norm, or focus on the unique population of learners i.e. monolinguals (Jessner, 2008). Researchers like Grosjean, (1985); Jessner (2008), and Modirksamene (2008), however, have more realistic views and conduct their studies on bilingual norm and believe that SLA differs from TLA in various ways. In this respect, Mc Carthy (1994) states that the use of bilingual norm or bilingual awareness provides the necessary prerequisite for successful further language learning. Linguists, psycholinguists, and sociolinguists investigate bilingual population from different perspectives in order to understand how bilingualism affects cognitive abilities (e.g.,

Cummins, 1991; Herdina & Jessner, 2002); how it is related to additional language learning (Modirhamene,2006); and how it affects metalinguistic awareness (MA) (Jessner, 1999; Bahrainy, 2007). These studies propose that language development is a complex and dynamic process and with an increase in the number of languages involved in multilinguals the complexity, dynamics, and changes of language learning become more evident.

Most studies on bilingualism and multilingualism consider it as a psycholinguistic system which is an underlying process facilitating and enabling the learning of a new language. For example, Cenoz (2003) suggests positive effects of bilingualism on TLA in terms of learning strategies, MA, and communicative ability, especially when the languages in contact are typologically close. In this regard, one can propose that a rich linguistic background benefits bilinguals by affecting their psycholinguistic system, particularly metalinguistic abilities, while learning a third language. However, one should bear in mind the proposal made by Cummins (1976) that not every type and context of bilingualism leads to positive effects. There are certain circumstances (Lambert, 1955) that a rich linguistic background may put the learners in an advantage. Hence, this system or the multilingual factor, to use Jessner's (2008) terms, that accelerates and increases communicative strategies under certain circumstance needs to be further explored as recommended by some scholars ( e.g., Jessner, 1999, 2008).

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

In language teaching contexts, especially in multilingual setting, linguistic background of language learners should be taken into consideration. Cummins (1996) emphasizes that in third language teaching it is very important to be aware of bilinguals' proficiency in their language systems including (first, second, and possibly third). According to him, if these factors are met in the classroom, they will be more interested and motivated to learn. He adds that, if bilinguals feel alienated and their needs and preferences are not met, they'll be regressed in the class.

Most studies on the effects of bilingualism on additional language learning, according to Cenoz (2003), relates to the influences of bilingualism on cognitive development and specifically to MA.

Taking a cognitive perspective seems to be a challenging endeavour, especially for providing new teaching methods. Cognitive linguists pave the way for humanistic approach by shedding light on the process of learning and teaching a foreign/second language in bilinguals (e.g., Jessner, 2008). Considering the importance of linguistic background in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and evidences from humanistic approaches to language teaching, this study sheds some light into the issues of bilingualism in the context of Iran where less attention is paid to EFL learners with various linguistic backgrounds (Hameedy, 1999). Therefore, this study aims at contributing to the findings on bi/multilingualism, by scrutinizing the possible effects of linguistic background on three MA subcategories, i.e. syntactic, spelling and lexical awareness.

### **1.3 Rationale of the study**

Research on bilingualism and TLA is a rather young area, with an increasing interest over the recent years. It is reflected in a number of researches that involve different aspects of this phenomenon (e.g., Jessner, 2008; Modirhamene, 2008). A lack of appropriate educational programmes for bi/multilinguals in Iran persuaded the researcher to investigate some aspects of this phenomena.

Furthermore, what is especially noteworthy is the fact that most studies on bilinguality and its possible effects on third language learning have been undertaken on children. As Edwards (1994) believes, older learners have some cognitive experiences and advantages lacking in children. Therefore, further research is needed to know those experiences and find out possible differences in adults' language learning.

In addition, most studies have been carried out among bilinguals who are equally and fully fluent in two languages, i.e. balanced bilinguals. Therefore, sufficient studies of the effects of various types of bilinguality on the acquisition/learning of a foreign language, as Galambos & Goldin-Meadow (1990) recommend, need to be conducted.

Besides, , to the authors knowledge, there is a paucity of research in and out of Iran examining the degree to which linguistic background affects each of the three MA subcategories, i.e. syntactic, spelling, and lexical awareness all at a time. In other words, as Jessner (2008) asserts, most of the studies in this filed have investigated only one variable at a time.

This study provides further evidence from a rarely touched and different context, i.e. northwest Azerbaijan in Iran as a diagonal bilingual region, by examining bilinguals and monolinguals in three MA tests of syntactic, spelling and lexical awareness.

#### **1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study aims to investigate the possible effects of EFL learners' linguistic background on their MA in terms of syntactic, spelling and lexical awareness. To this end, five questions are posed by the researcher:

1. Does linguistic background have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' syntactic awareness as far as noticing is concerned?
2. Does linguistic background have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' syntactic awareness as far as correction is concerned?
3. Does linguistic background have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' spelling awareness as far as noticing is concerned?
4. Does linguistic background have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' spelling awareness as far as correction is concerned?
5. Does linguistic background have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' lexical awareness?

The following null hypotheses are formulated for the posed questions:

1. Linguistic background doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' syntactic awareness as far as noticing is concerned.
2. Linguistic background doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' syntactic awareness as far as correction is concerned.
3. Linguistic background doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' spelling awareness as far as noticing is concerned.
4. Linguistic background doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' spelling awareness as far as correction is concerned.
5. Linguistic background doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' lexical awareness.



## 1.5 Definition of key terms

*Bilingualism* is social and psychological phenomenon in which individuals know or use two languages actively at different levels according to the demands of the speech community.

*Linguistic Background*: refers to the linguistic repertoire of the learners, including Persian and Azeri languages.

*Metalinguistic Awareness* refers to the conscious knowledge about the nature of language and manipulation of it in oral and written tasks.

*Monolingual* refers to those individuals who have neither sufficient receptive nor productive abilities in a language other than their first language. They may be familiar with a few words or general expressions in another language; they should be considered monolingual unless they are able to use languages other than their first language in actual communication actively.

*Multilingualism*: throughout the study, this term is used as a term to refer to those who know or learn more than one language.

*Second Language*: the term 'second language' refers to learning a language other than the first language.

*Third Language*: In terms of order, refers to a language which individuals know or learn after the first and second languages.

## 1.6 Organization of the thesis

In addition to chapter one, i.e. introduction, the rest of this thesis is organized in four other chapters as follows,

Chapter two: Review of the Related Literature which includes:

- a. definition and categorization of the concept of bilingualism;
- b. theories of bilingual proficiency, i.e. separate underlying proficiency (SUP), common underlying proficiency (CUP), the threshold hypothesis, and dynamic model of multilingualism (DMM);
- c. distinction of two types of English language proficiency, i.e. basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP);
- d. definition of the concept of MA in two approaches of psycholinguistics and educational linguistics;
- e. theoretical research on the relationship between bilingualism and MA;
- f. empirical research on the relationship between bilingualism and MA;
- g. concluding remarks; and
- h. chapter summary.

Chapter three, Method that involves

- a. describing the context as well as the design of the study,
- b. introducing the participants,
- c. describing the instruments used in the study, and
- d. elaborating on the procedure used to collect and analyze the data.

Chapter four, Findings and Discussions which:

- a. presents the findings and describes them through related tables & figures, and
- b. interprets the obtained findings and uses justifications through relating the findings to the suggestions made by other researchers.

Chapter five, conclusion which:

- a. presents an outline of the content of this chapter, a restatement of the problem & the proposed hypotheses and a brief description of the main findings,
- b. discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the findings,
- c. discusses briefly the limitations of this study,
- d. presents the researcher's suggestions for further research in order to reach to more accurate conclusions, and
- e. provides the conclusion based on the findings.

The final chapter is followed by a list of references and appendix, which consists of a linguistic background questionnaire and the MA tests.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The introductory chapter established the background, objectives of the study, rationale, and the research hypotheses and questions. The present chapter is a review of literature on bilingualism and related issues as far as additional language learning is concerned. It begins with the definition and categorization of bilingualism, theories of bilingual proficiency (SUP, CUP, and DMM), distinction of two types of English language proficiency (BICS & CALP), and definition of the concept of MA in two approaches of psycholinguistics and educational linguistics.

The review, then, moves on to the second section, which deals with the theoretical research on the relationship between bilingualism and MA. This section represents opinions of different scholars about the possible effects of linguistic background on different types of MA awareness.

The next section provides a survey of literature related to empirical research studies on the relationship between bilingualism and MA. This section also describes the gaps that exist between this study and the previous studies. Finally, a summary of the findings of the previous studies are represented in this section.

### **2.2 Theoretical reviews**

#### ***2.2.1 Bilingualism***

Bilingualism is a phenomenon increasing in all over the world. Nowadays, bilingualism is a normal and unremarkable necessity for the majority in the world, Trask (1999). According to Trask, seventy percent of the world's population is bilingual. The investigation of bilingualism is a broad and complex field. Over the last few years, research on TLA or bi/multilingualism has been increased. However, studying the issues related to bilingualism demands the definition and categorization of bilingualism.