Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes toward Bilingual Education: Context and Proficiency Level Explored

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A B S T R A C T

In the era of information and communication, the relation between people of different cultures and languages has expanded widely. Meanwhile language as a first factor in establishing these relationships has been the focus of attention for many scholars. Considering the popularity and importance of bilingual education in the language learning subject, the present study investigated EFL learners' attitudes towards bilingual education. A total number of 184 EFL learners were randomly chosen from private language institutes and university. The learners comprised of two different proficiency levels (i.e., beginners vs. advanced). A questionnaire was utilized to find out the learners' attitude about bilingual education. The results of the independent samples T-test indicated that there was not any significant difference among learners' attitudes in different proficiency levels with regard to bilingual education. However, it was found that EFL learners of language institute had more positive attitudes towards bilingual education than their counterparts at university. The findings of this study will help curriculum developers and syllabus designers to adapt their teaching materials to learners' demands.

Introduction

Attitudinal and motivational factors playing a significant role in Second /Foreign Language Learning, have always attracted second language researchers' attention. The first stimulus of motivational and attitudinal research in foreign /second language learning originates from social psychology as learning a new language (foreign/second) is always intertwined with learners' attitudes toward the speech community of foreign/second language. (Ghazvini & Khajehpour, 2011).

In other words, a group in a society is usually distinguished by its language, cultural values and norms which are transmitted via its language. The identity and pride of a cultural group are expressed through its language as well. The learner's attitude toward the language in use depends on whether he/she is identified with the language or not, therefore, the learner's attitudes are usually inward-centered (Mukhuba, 2005) affecting his/her use of language.

Bilingualism has been defined differently by various scholars, however, in all of the definitions; it is considered as being able to speak two languages.

Demeanors toward bilingualism differ among individuals around the globe. People who live in bilingual/ multilingual societies might hardly believe that people in other parts of the world have debated the pros and cons of bilingualism because, for them, bilingualism is the norm, and speaking only one language means exclusion from a meaningful portion of their lives (Umbel, Pearson, Fernandez, & Oiler, as cited in Hayashi, 2005). Even people living in monolingual contexts are eager to learn other languages, maybe surprised to find that people, who have the opportunity of being bilingual, wish to remain monolingual.

Iran as an example of a multilingual country and setting Persian as its official language is a good context to explore multilingual and bilingual attitudes of the learners. Using Persian as the official language at academic and educational settings, though may have different political benefits as unity in the country, at the same time, it may have its own disadvantages regarding different native languages (i.e., Azeri, Kurdish, Lori…), which may cause gradual language attrition of native languages.

On the other hand, in the academic setting, students'

levels differ based on their language proficiency. It should be taken into account that, as students progress to higher levels, their views concerning books, methodology, target language, first language use, and the context may change gradually. They may grow positive ideas or vice versa, develop negative views concerning the above mentioned issues. As students` awareness increases, it gives rise to criticizing all factors, whether negatively or positively. Step by step, students find out more about their own real needs. Consequently, students analyze critically whether their needs are met or not. However, it is difficult to get insight into students` views about all the above-mentioned factors.

In this vein, contexts of learning in the language setting differ in several aspects as well. In the Iranian universities, the constraints that are put by the policy of educational program lead to rigidity of the academic setting. One of the main concerns is the language as a medium of instruction in bilingual/multilingual countries. This issue goes back to the standard and nonstandard language discussions. It is the policy of the country which sets standards without considering the whole society of the learners having different native languages. Since people of one society have accepted the use of Standard language in formal settings, they consider it as a ladder to achieve their success, ignorant of the value of their mother-tongue. Moreover, students' views are never asked about the language they are taught. Therefore a fossilized and implied view is carved in their brains that since our language is not the standard one, it should not be used in academic settings.

On the other hand, language institutes as another context of learning in Iran are counted as sub branches of the university settings with the difference that less authority is put regarding methodology, books, use of different languages at class. In addition, as several semi-structured interviews with teachers revealed, students can voice their views more freely at language institutes compared to the university setting. Therefore, students' feeling of freedom to express their ideas in these two different contexts can impact teaching methodology and curriculum development as well.

Literature Review

In very general terms, bilingual education implies the use of two or more languages as the medium of instruction in educational settings. However, within this broad definition, it is obvious that, vastly different types of programs and program goals can be and are being pursued (Fishman & Joshua, cited in Yunus & Hern, 2011).

Recent technological developments and globalization have changed our view of the bilingualism toward a dynamic process, though still the linear types of bilingual education exist alongside the new types. However, it is important to note that, all bilingual educational programs have many advantages over monolingual ones for children, societies and the social ecology of the world as well. It is also noteworthy that bilingual education programs aiming to make learners proficient bilinguals rather than monolinguals are much more effective in developing languages.

To mention some of the advantages of bilingualism, bilinguals appear to have greater mental flexibility, the ability to think of words independently and a more diversified set of mental abilities. They also demonstrate superiority in concept formation, whereas the monolingual children appear to have more unitary cognitive structures, which limit their verbal problem-solving ability (Baker, 2011).

It can also be said that, bilingual education is a tool for spreading world languages, and this is seen very much in the international popularity of English in bilingual programs and second language courses. At the same time, bilingual education is a vehicle for language maintenance programs where children's home languages are reinforced through literate study at school. "Furthermore, bilingual education can be a critical mainstay in language revitalization programs where children are educated in a threatened language, offering a means of language regeneration" (Lotherington, 2004, p. 700).

Therefore, in a multilingual society where several languages have distinct and various societal functions, individuals, in order to be effective and efficient, must achieve mastery of more than one variety of languages within the appropriate social contexts. Similarly, in the diverse global communities of today, governments must attempt to develop language repertoire of their people from the official and national languages of their respective countries to the more valued, world accepted language or languages (Yunus & Hern, 2011).

To mention the importance of bilingual education in a nutshell, as Garcia (2009) declares, "bilingual education should be the only option to teach all children in the twenty-first century in equitable ways" (p. 378).

A body of research has been carried out regarding bilingual education. One of the studies, carried out by Merisuo-Storm (2007), investigates the effects of bilingual teaching on the development of children's literacy skills and attitudes towards language learning. At this examination, 20% of the direction of the bilingual

classes were given in English. Understudies' proficiency abilities in the bilingual classes were altogether superior to in the monolingual classes. It was discovered that when observing pupils who started first grade with either a pitiful or an excellent layer of school readiness, there was no substantial difference between bilingual and monolingual groups. In summation, the pupils in bilingual classes showed significantly more positive attitudes towards foreign-language learning than the students in monolingual classes. However, students` attitudes rarely are asked concerning their preferences of the language through which they are taught.

In a similar study, considering learners' attitudes toward using L1, in different levels and contexts, Prodromou (2002) conducted a survey on 300 Greek participants of three levels (i.e., Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced levels). The researcher found out that, students at higher levels of study show negative attitudes toward the use of L1 in the classroom, whereas lower level students had more positive attitudes toward using L1 in their classroom. Similar studies carried out by Schweers (1999), Burden (2001), Tang (2002), and Levine (2003), reflect the importance of L1 use in a classroom, concluding that L1 can be a facilitating factor, oiling the wheels of L2 learning, and simultaneously indicating the positive attitudes of both learners and teachers toward the use of native language in a classroom context (Nazary, 2008).

However, findings of Nazary (2008) on Iranian students in elementary, intermediate, and advanced level students indicated that all these students were reluctant to use L1 in classrooms and reject it to be able to have more exposure to L2. Moreover, it was found that intermediate students in comparison with the other two groups indicated less tendency in using L1 and did not expect their teachers to use L1 either.

Although, a body of research has been carried out to consider the learner's attitude toward bilingual education, many variables as age, gender, level, and context may influence the learner's attitude toward using L1 in educational settings.

A previous study by the author (presented in an international conference) revealed that at the learners' age increased, their attitudes toward using their mother tongue in educational setting increased as well (i.e., the attitudes became more positive). However, it was found that males and females' views toward using mother tongue did not differ significantly from each other. In this vein, the following research set out to explore EFL learners' perceptions regarding the use of their mother tongue in different levels of proficiency and in different learning contexts, mainly university and private language

school (institutes) settings. Accordingly the following research questions were raised in this study:

1. Is there a significant difference between institute and university students with regard to their attitude towards bilingual education?

2. Is there a significant difference between beginner and advanced institute EFL learner's attitudes towards using their mother tongue in an educational setting?

3. Is there a significant difference between MA and BA students' attitudes toward bilingual education?

Method

Participants

A total number of 184 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners participated in this study. The EFL learners of both genders were chosen from among university and institute students. Two levels of proficiency (i.e., advanced and beginners) were studied to see if there was any significant difference in their perceptions toward using native language in class. From among 184 participants, 86 students were studying English at language schools, whereas, 98 of them were university students.

Each group of students was later divided into two groups based on their proficiency levels. In other words, the students who were studying English for more than four years in language school and were considered as advanced level students with the proficiency test administered by the language school, composed our advanced level participants, whereas the students who had just recently started learning English were considered beginners. Regarding the university context, the freshman students were considered as beginners, whereas MA students were regarded as advanced level students. A language proficiency test of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) was also utilized to check the university students' language proficiency levels. Therefore, considering these two proficiency levels, 46 students were beginners at the institute and 40 of them were studying English at an advanced level at the institute, whereas 43 of the participants were freshman at university (beginner level) and 55 were MA students (advanced level), studying English at university.

Instruments

In this study, the survey research method which incorporates the use of questionnaire was utilized as it is the most common form of research method engaged by educational researchers to gain qualitative, descriptive as well as quantitative data (Abdul Ghafur, as cited in Yunus & Hern, 2011).

A standard language proficiency test (CEFR) was used to divide the students into appropriate language proficiency levels. Later, a previously piloted questionnaire, containing 20 questions was distributed among 184 EFL learners. In order not to be affected by students' language knowledge, the questionnaire was translated into Persian (Iranian official language). The questionnaires were filled out by participants in order to find out their views toward bilingual education, maintaining native languages, and language policy in Iran. Cronbach's alpha (0.93) was estimated for checking the reliability of the questionnaire.

Results

$H_0 1$: There is not a significant difference between institute and university students with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism.

In order to check the first null hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was needed. Before carrying out the analysis, it was necessary to make sure of the normality of the distribution. For this purpose, one-sample K-S test was used in order to check the normality of the distribution. The following table shows the final results.

Table 1. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test		
		Total attitude
N		184
Normal parameters	Mean	50.73
	Std. Deviation	5.09
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.11
	Positive	.09
	Negative	-.11
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.51
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.08
a. Test distribution is Normal.		

Since the p-value for the distribution is more than 0.05 (p-value = 0.08), the null hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there is a normal distribution of the data.

After checking the normality, t-test was run in order to answer the first research question.

Table 2. Independent Samples Test							
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
total attitude	Equal variances assumed	.88	.35	3.51	182	.00	2.56
	Equal variances not assumed			3.45	159.73	.00	2.56

Since the significance level for the Levene's test was more than 0.05, therefore, there was equality of variance. Consequently, the first row of the t-test table was used for checking the null hypothesis.

As it is clear in the above table, the p-value for the t-test was less than 0.05 (sig. = 0.00) which means that the null hypothesis was rejected. In other words, there was a significant difference between the two groups with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism:

t (182) = 3.51; p < 0.05.

The following table shows the mean scores of the attitudes for both groups. The mean score of the institute students (m = 52.09) was more than the mean score for university students (m = 49.53). In other words, institute students had more positive attitudes toward bilingualism compared to university students.

Table 3. Group Statistics					
	context	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
total attitude	Institute	86	52.09	5.56	.60
	university	98	49.53	4.32	.44

$H_0 2$: There is not a significant difference between beginner and advanced institute students with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism.

The t-test was run in order to answer the second research question.

Table 4. Independent Samples Test							
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
total attitude	Equal variances assumed	.20	.66	1.56	84	.12	1.86
	Equal variances not assumed			1.58	83.38	.12	1.86

Since the significance level for the Levene's test was more than 0.05, therefore, there was equality of variance. Consequently, the first row of the t-test table was used for checking the null hypothesis.

The p-value for the t-test was more than 0.05 (sig. = 0.12) which means that the null hypothesis was accepted. In other words, there was not a significant difference between the two groups with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism:

$t(84) = 1.56; p > 0.05$.

Table (5) shows the mean scores of the attitudes for both groups which are very high (out of 60) and very close to each other. This shows that institute students had positive attitudes toward bilingualism.

Table 5. Group Statistics					
	Participants' level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
total attitude	institute beginner	46	52.96	6.06	.89
	institute advanced	40	51.10	4.82	.76

Therefore, there was not a significant difference between beginner and advanced institute students with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism.

H$_0$3: There is not a significant difference between BA and MA students with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism.

T-test was run in order to answer the third research question.

Table 6. Independent Samples Test							
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
total attitude	Equal variances assumed	.12	.73	-1.90	96	.06	-1.65
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.89	88.14	.06	-1.65

As it is obvious in table (6), since the significance level for the Levene's test was more than 0.05, therefore, there was equality of variance. Consequently, the first row of the t-test table was used for checking the null hypothesis.

The p-value for the t-test was more than 0.05 (sig. = 0.06) which means that the null hypothesis was accepted. In other words, there was not a significant difference between the two groups with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism:

$t(96) = -1.90; p > 0.05$.

Table (7) shows the mean scores of the attitudes for both groups which are close to each other. This shows that institute students had positive attitudes toward bilingualism

Table 7. Group Statistics					
	Participants' level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
total attitude	freshman	43	48.61	4.39	.67
	MA	55	50.26	4.17	.56

Therefore, there was not a significant difference between BA and MA students with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism.

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Discussion:

The current study set out to examine more in depth the affecting factors in students' attitudes regarding the use of their mother-tongue in the educational environment. The results of the study indicated that context can be an influencing factor in learners' attitude toward bilingual education. It was found that Iranian EFL learners in private institutes have more positive attitudes toward bilingual education than their counterparts at university. That is, they prefer to use their native language in educational settings more than university students. The reason may be that, university students are more required to use the official language in formal settings, whereas institute learners feel free in using different languages in class settings, or in other words, students in language schools feel more comfortable to speak their native language to preserve diverse national heritages. This is in line with findings of Baker (1992), where he believed the type of school affects student attitude toward bilingual education. However, Hayashi (2005) did not find a clear correlation between the type of school and learners' attitudes. Therefore, the atmosphere of the learning context has effect on learners' attitude on bilingual education.

On the other hand, it was found that proficiency level of students cannot be a determining factor in their attitudes toward bilingual education. As the results indicated there was not a significant difference between beginner and advanced institute students in terms of their attitudes, nor was a difference between MA vs. BA students' attitudes, regarding the use of their native language besides the official language (or the language which is the medium of instruction in class) in educational settings. This is in contrast with the previous studies conducted by Prodromou (2002), where he declared that students of higher levels of education had negative attitudes toward using their L1 in class. The findings of the study are also in contrast with Nazary (2008), who indicated that proficiency level of learners can be a determining factor in their perceptions toward using their mother-tongue in a classroom setting. This finding is also in contrast with Baker (1992) findings. Baker stated that the learner language ability correlated with learners' attitude toward bilingual education. However, Baker (1992) used a self-rating as a measure of ability, in other words, we could say that Baker considered language confidence rather than language proficiency as an influencing factor. Therefore, it is concluded that to have successful bilingual education programs which takes into account learners' attitudes, the program designers need to consider the context (setting) rather than proficiency level as an important variable. However, there are some limitations regarding this study which should be taken into account. Participants' age, gender, mother tongue, and language background can be other influencing factors which were not controlled in this study. In addition, it is better to study the factors influencing attitudes in different contexts in order to determine in detail the important factors affecting students' attitude before implementing a bilingual education program as it is obvious that students' attitude can be one of the chief factors in the success of the program.

It is also worth mentioning that this study was limited to one bilingual city and it is suggested that the research be repeated with a larger number of participants and in other bilingual cities or countries as well. Language use could be another variable that must also be considered in future studies. Besides, this study utilized only one data collection tool (i.e., questionnaire) which could be improved in future studies.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring leaners' attitudes toward bilingual education, that is, using their mother tongue in an educational setting besides the official language or the language which is used as a medium of instruction in class. The findings of the questionnaire indicated that unlike the findings of Nazary (2008) and Prodromou (2002), the learner's proficiency level cannot be an influencing factor in learner's attitude. Context (setting) of education is another factor affecting learner's attitude toward bilingual education. That is, where learners feel free to choose from among the languages they can use in an educational setting, they have more positive attitudes toward the bilingual education.

There can be so many factors influencing the positive attitudes of learners which shall be taken into account before planning any bilingual education program. Developing and maintaining the students' native language in no way interferes with language acquisition. Despite what might be expected, investigate throughout the most recent decade in bilingual classrooms with built-up models of instructional brilliance shows that utilization of the essential dialect upgrades the securing of a moment dialect as its wearer to put it in other words, use of learners' native language stimulates their natural linguistic curiosity and helps them to realize that there are equally valid ways beside the second language for expressing ideas. In addition, as using the native language for classroom instruction allows the education of the student to continue uninterruptedly from school to home, bilingual education programs can enhance learning to a great extent.

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