

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARD BILINGUAL EDUCATION: A STUDY OF EFL LEARNERS IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT

The technological innovations during the past century have revolutionized information transfer leading to cross-cultural and multi-lingual human communication. Considering the importance of multilingual education in the recent century, the current study documented a survey on Iranian students' perception of bilingual education. A total number of 161 English language learners participated in this study. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire and considering age and gender as the variables of this study, the results revealed that there was no significant difference between males and females with regard to their attitudes toward bilingualism. However, a significant relationship was found between participants' age ranges and their attitudes towards bilingualism. In other words, as the learners' age increased the participants' attitudes towards bilingualism became more positive. The findings of this study would be useful for material developers and curriculum designers.

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Introduction

Nowadays, efficient language teaching is an increasingly important area in applied linguistics. The efficiency of the teaching depends on some factors such as setting, motivation factors, having good command of the target language, use of L1 and etc. Among the above-mentioned factors the use of the L1 is the major concern of this article. It is argued that the use of standard

language instead of first language as a medium of instruction in educational system especially in bilingual countries does not act fruitfully. To what extent the claim is provable is still under question. There are different perceptions towards bilingual education. In some countries early bilingual education is favored, but there are problems regarding this issue. Political programs in the bilingual countries play an inhibiting role.

Students find language learning meaningful when the language is used as the medium of receiving information or in real communicative situations and discussions (Curtain & Martínez, 1990, as cited in Merisuo-Storm, 2007). "Many are concerned that teaching through a foreign language may have negative effects on the development of children's literacy skills in the mother tongue" (Merisuo-Storm, 2007, p. 1). "According to a study carried out by Nikula and Marsh (1997, pp. 110–111) pupils learn subject matter equally well when the teaching is carried out in a foreign language as when they study in their mother tongue".

In addition, in EFL setting L1 use has become a controversial issue. Monolingual approach in many countries is favored in the political programs in the EFL context.

In very general terms, bilingual education implies some use of two or more languages of instruction in connection with teaching other than language per se. 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).

According to Mackey (1978), bilingual education, is thousands of years old, predating even the invention of the alphabet. Lewis (as cited in Lotherington, 2004) "points out that prior to the Christian era, the three linguistic ascendances of Akkadian, Aramaic, and Greek brought with them consequent widespread bilingualism requiring bilingual education for minority functionaries"(p. 696).

Bilingual education is rooted in a political ideology that rejects a singularity of cultural vision and works toward understanding across cultural and linguistic difference. Although bilingual education is generally lauded as an enriching educational experience, this is not a universal opinion. Given the range of political perceptions of multilingualism, from economic bonus to political threat, and the influence of social policies on public views and expectations of citizens' language competencies, opportunities for and attitudes toward bilingual education vary widely. (Lotherington, 2004, p. 698)

In other words, 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).

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

A recent research conducted by McMillan and Rivers (2011) documented the attitudes of 29 'native-English speaker' teachers at a Japanese university. It was revealed that where exclusive use of the target language was promoted as a key feature of the optimal foreign language learning environment, contrary to the official policy, many teachers believed that selective use of the students' L1, by the teacher or by students, could enhance L2 learning in various ways within a communicative framework.

Cook (2005) suggests that because code switching is a natural feature of communication among bilinguals it should also be permitted in the L2 classroom. Similarly, Levine (2009) suggests strategies for increasing learner awareness of useful code switching, while Dailey-O'Cain and Liebscher (2009; see also Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain, 2004) have shown that learners can also develop naturalistic norms of code switching on their own. From the more sociolinguistic standpoint, and of particular relevance in contexts such as Japan, Fuller (2009) argues that code switching allows learners to associate themselves with their L1-based identity and peer group while at the same time developing a new social identity in the TL (as cited in McMillan, Rivers,).

Regarding bilingual Education a study has been done by Tuula Merisuo-Storm (2007) which investigated the effects of bilingual teaching on the development of children's literacy skills and attitudes towards language learning. In this study, in the bilingual classes, 20% of the instruction were given in English. Pupils' literacy skills in the bilingual classes were significantly better than in the monolingual classes. It was revealed that when observing pupils who started first grade with either a poor or an excellent level of school readiness, there was no significant difference between bilingual and monolingual groups. In addition, the pupils in bilingual classes showed significantly more positive attitudes towards foreign-language learning than the pupils in monolingual classes. However, students' attitudes rarely are asked concerning their preferences of the language through which they are taught.



Considering the importance of using L1 in educational settings, this study tried to find EFL learners' attitudes and perceptions toward bilingual education in the Iranian context.

Method

In this study, the survey research method which incorporates the use of questionnaire was used 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). The questionnaire which was piloted in another study previously was administered to 161 participants. 79 male and 82 female EFL learners of different age range (17- 44) filled in the questionnaires. In the questionnaire their attitudes and perceptions toward bilingual education, i.e., use of their mother tongue in class were studied. In addition, their views about maintaining native languages and cultures and the language policy in an Iranian context were investigated. Cronbach's alpha was estimated for checking the reliability of the attitude questionnaire and it was reported to be 0.92.

Results

H₀1: There is not a significant difference between males and females 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 results.

		total attitude
N		161
Normal Parameters^a	Mean	50.30
	Std. Deviation	4.50
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.10
	Positive	.06
	Negative	-.10
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.25
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.09
a. Test distribution is Normal.		

Since the p-value for the distribution is more than 0.05 (p-value = 0.09), the null hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there is a normal distribution of the data. After checking the normality, the t-test (Table 2) was run in order to answer the first research question.

		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	.038	.87	1.166	158	.88	.11
	Equal variances not assumed			1.156	158.98	.88	.11



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 which means that the null hypothesis was accepted. In other words, there was not a significant difference between the two gender groups with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism:

$$t (159) = 0.88; p > 0.05.$$

The following table (table 3) shows the mean scores of the attitudes for both groups which are very high (out of 60) and very close to each other.

Table 3. Group Statistics					
	participa nts' gender	N	M	Std. Error Deviation	Std. Mean
total attitude	male	7	5	4.4	.5
		9	0.3	0	0
		5	5	4.6	.5
total attitude	female	8	5	4.6	.5
		2	0.2	2	5
		2	2	4	1

H₀2: There is not a significant relationship between participants’ age ranges and their attitude towards bilingualism.

In order to check the second null hypothesis, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was estimated (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations			
		participants' age	total attitude
participants' age	Pearson Correlation	1	.22'
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.01
	N	160	160
total attitude	Pearson Correlation	.22'	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.01	
	N	160	161

The result of the correlation analysis shows that there was a significant relationship between age and attitude towards bilingualism (p-value = 0.01). Of course, the amount of correlation was not very high (r = 0.22). Therefore, the second null hypothesis is rejected at p-value less than 0.05: r = 0.22, n = 160, p < 0.05.

This result means that, as the age increases the participants’ attitudes towards bilingualism becomes positive.

Discussion

As hypothesized, there was no significant difference between males and females with regard to their attitude towards bilingualism. A common view in favor of the L1 was supported in both of the genders. The attitudes tended dissatisfaction towards the use of monolingual educational policy, i.e., they preferred bilingual education to monolingual one. Moreover, concerning second hypothesis, the null hypothesis was rejected. In other words, there was a significant relationship between participants` age range and their attitudes towards bilingualism. As the age range increased, the attitudes were more in favor of use of L1 in the educational context. The finding of the present study was compatible with the study conducted by McMillan and Rivers (2011). In both of the studies, it was believed that the use of the students’ L1 in the educational setting, besides L2, could enhance L2 learning. It is not proven that what should be the span of L1 use in the educational context, but as Cook (2005) has suggested since code-switching is a natural feature of communication among bilinguals, it should also be permitted in the L2 classroom. The

educational system should take steps to fill the gap between successful learning and students' real needs. Since one official language (Persian) is permitted in an educational context in Iran, teachers feel pressured to exclude the L1 use in the classroom. Further research is needed to be conducted in a more detailed way to seize teachers' beliefs regarding bilingual education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of bilingual students about bilingual educational program. The results and discussion of the research from analyzing the data indicated that, students favor their mother tongue beside official language in the educational program. In conclusion, it appears that pupils care more than what was believed or shown in the society about their home languages. Since the age range carries variable in this study, it gives us a broad view of ideas regarding bilingual education. As age increases, awareness of the pupils is increased regarding the importance of their mother tongue. But concerning gender, both genders are in favor of bilingual education.

Although we conducted a research on bilingual education, this study has exclusively focused on two variables in bilingual educational setting which are age and gender and just one approach in collecting data which was questionnaire was used. In fact, the reason of the obtained result is another area of research which is still unresolved. Another area of future study is to investigate how bilingual education differs in early and late ages. We acknowledge that, since our research is limited to one bilingual city, our findings may not be fully generalizable. It is logical to assume that other bilingual cities or countries might have different views concerning bilingual education. Therefore a further research is needed to explore bilingual learners' beliefs. Our findings can be used to set a future educational agenda in bilingual countries. In addition, learners' first language should be taken into account by material developers and curriculum designers to lead to a successful learning.

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