An investigation about language learning problems at elementary levels in bilingual areas of Iran

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Abstract

This investigation was conducted to specify child language learning phonological, morphological, and syntactic problems in listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing skills of Persian at elementary level in bilingual areas of the I.R. Iran, where Turkish and Arabic speaking children are supposed to learn Persian at school. The findings of this study show that these children have more listening comprehension problems in the first two months of the educational year, but the problems decline in the next months. The most frequent morphological problems of Arabic speaking Persian learners are in verbal inflections (mode, tense, number …) and subject-verb agreement. Bilingual learners of Persian in these areas use limited code in speech and their speech contains grammatical nonconformities. They have technical problems in reading and writing as well. The comparative study of Turkish and Arabic with Persian and measuring it against the findings of the survey research in this study show that the differences of these Persian. Vice versa, the phonological, morphological and syntactic commonalities between children's native tongue languages with Persian is a significant hinder causing problems for bilingual learners of and Persian ease up the learning process. Having considered the problems of bilingual Persian learners among the speakers of different languages and dialects spoken in Iran, a consideration regarded for choosing Arabic and Turkish speaking bilingual speakers was the fact that these two languages are not from the same language branch as Persian.

Keywords: Bilingual child, Second language learning, linguistic problems, non-linguistic problems

1. Introduction

Bilingual children of Iran could be classified in three major groups. The first group comprises the children whose native tongues have only phonological, accentual, and sometimes lexical, but not syntactic differences with standard Persian, exp. Bandarabbasi and Bushehri dialects. Second, are the children who speak a dialect different from Persian, but their dialect are sub-branches of Iranian Languages and are supposed to be from the same language family as Persian, exp. Gilaki, Baluchi, Kurdish. There are a lot of structural and lexical commonalities among these languages and Persian. The third group includes children whose mother tongues are neither sub-branches of Iranian Languages, nor even from Indo-European language family. For example, Turkish and Turkmen are from the Altaic and Arabic is from Semitic language families. Languages from These two language families are structurally different from Persian. Naturally, learning Persian at school is more problematic for the second and especially for the third group.

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2. Methodology

The questions of the present study are as follows:

1 & 2: What are the listening comprehension and speech problems of the first grade bilingual children?

3 & 4: What are the reading and writing problems of the first grade bilingual children?

The participant samples of this study comprise 120 teachers and students of 12 classes of the schools in Turkish and Arabic speaking areas. The samples were chosen by an accidental multistage cluster sampling. The data were gathered through teacher questioners comprising 29 questions about linguistic and nonlinguistic issues about the students in the first two months of the educational year. The answers came in the form of Likert-type 5 choice scales and also open answers. Also, students’ behaviors during instructions were observed and they were interviewed with the same questions assessing their listening and speaking skills during the first two months. The interviews were recorded and after a form was completed for each student, the average was calculated for each class. In order to have a basis for the Likert-type scales in the questioners, 5 monolingual Tehrani students were chosen by the same sampling method and they were interviewed by the same questioners.

Descriptive statistical method, including [calculating] percentage, frequency, and average, was used to analyze the quantitative data; then the quantitative and the qualitative data obtained through the questioners, interviews and observations, were analyzed and compared with the results of the comparative study of Arabic and Turkish with Persian.

3. Findings:

Question 1: What are the listening problems of the first grade bilingual children?

A) Teachers Questioner

Table 1: the average of the students’ listening ability from their teacher’s perspective

| Comprehending nouns | Comprehending adverbs | Comprehending verbs | Comprehending adjectives | Comprehending nouns | Comprehending prose texts | Comprehending poetry | Understanding teacher’s instructions | Understanding the words related to class activities |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| b1                  | Turks                 | 04.3               | 38.3                     | 25.3                | 81.2                      | 33.3                 | 83.1                             | 67.1                                                   |
| s                  | Turks                 | 93.2               | 28.3                     | 92.2                | 85.2                      | 48.2                 | 04.3                             | 55.2                                                   |
| t                  | Turks                 | 11.3               | 16.3                     | 25.3                | 71.3                      | 61.2                 | 98.2                             | 22.2                                                   |
| s                  | Arabs                 | 02.3               | 02.3                     | 63.3                | 67.1                      | 33.3                 | 83.3                             | 44.3                                                   |
| t                  | Arabs                 | 33.3               | 22.2                     | 81.2                | 22.2                      | 73.1                 | 05.2                             | 77.1                                                   |
| s                  | Turks                 | 75.3               | 15.3                     | 82.1                | 67.1                      | 33.3                 | 05.2                             | 77.1                                                   |
| t                  | Turks                 | 79.1               | 67.4                     | 67.1                | 33.3                      | 52.3                 | 52.3                             | 67.1                                                   |

B) Students’ Questioner

Table 2: the Average results of Listening Comprehension of the Students in the Interviews

| Speech relevance with the topic | Recognizing the meaning of the sentences | Recognizing the meaning of the words | Month |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Arabs                          | Turks                                    | Arabs                               | Turks |
| 83.1                            | 67.1                                     | 17.2                                | 83.1  |
| 33.2                            | 50.2                                     | 67.2                                | 67.2  |
The data in this chart show that, the listening comprehension problems of students in most of the morphological structures come down to a balance in the 2nd month of the educational year; the students could distinguish nouns from verbs, adverbs, and pronouns more effectively. Teachers say that students are still weak in comprehending poetry in this month; Arabic speaking students still have difficulty in understanding teachers’ instructions. The findings of interviews also show that the students can comprehend the meanings of words but still have difficulty in comprehending the meanings of sentences; however, the situation improves in the 3rd month.

**Question 2:** what are speaking problems of the first grade bilingual students?

| Morphological Structures | Speaking Problems |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Nouns                   | Lack of agreement between nouns and verbs |
| Adjectives              | Incorrect use of time adverbs |
| Adverbs                 | Noun-adjective inversion |
| Verbs                   | Incorrect pronunciation of adverbs |
| Pronouns                | Incorrect use of the colour terms |
| Turkish                 | 55                |
| Arabic                  | 35                |

| Morphological Structures | Speaking Problems |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Nouns                   | Repeating nouns instead of using pronouns |
| Adjectives              | Using the antonyms of the adjectives |
| Adverbs                 | Incorrect use of the colour terms |
| Verbs                   | 24                |
| Pronouns                | 22                |

| Morphological Structures | Speaking Problems |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Nouns                   | Displacement of the pronouns |
| Adjectives              | The main problem of the children is in using verbs |
| Adverbs                 | Consistency of adverb problems until the end of the educational year |
| Pronouns                | Having problem in distinguishing comparative adjectives |
| Turkish                 | 12                |
| Arabic                  | 7                 |

| Morphological Structures | Speaking Problems |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Nouns                   | using the adverbs which are mentioned in the instructional books only |
| Adjectives              | Incorrect pronunciation of adverbs |
| Adverbs                 | No problems found in using common adjectives |
| Pronouns                | 12                |

| Morphological Structures | Speaking Problems |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Nouns                   | No problems found in using common pronouns |
| Adjectives              | 2                 |

Both in teachers’ reports and in the interviews, the students have fewer problems in using nouns. Qualitative results also report speaking problems like adjective-noun inversion, using the antonyms of the adjectives, incorrect use of the colour terms, and inability in distinguishing comparative adjectives. The qualitative findings related to the morphological structures show that the students do not have any problems in using the nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns which are shared by their mother tongue and Persian.

**Questions 3 & 4:** What are reading and writing problems of the first grade bilingual students?

| Reading Problems | Writing Problems |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1-                | 2- Writing problems |
| Page | Line | Description |
|------|------|-------------|
| 15   | 12   | Problem in holding the pencil |
| 15   | 15   | Unfamiliarity with the lines of the ruled papers |
| 5    | 14   | Failing to recognize the directions of the writing papers |
| 16   | 15   | Failing to comprehend teachers’ instructions |
| 11   | 14   | Failure in regarding the proper curvature of the writing symbols |
| 16   | 16   | The mismatch of their hand movement and the writing symbols |
| 14   | 26   | Dropping the phoneme of the word |
| 13   | 11   | Problem in writing polyphonic letters |
| 11   | 16   | Misplacing the letters |
| 13   | 16   | Dropping letters |
| 6    | 10   | Misplacing the dots |
| 10   | 6    | Problem with serrated letters (curvature and number of serrations) |
| 6    | 11   | Writing in the opposite direction |
| 6    | 8    | Upside-down writing |
| 5    | 5    | Writing by heart |
| 31   | 17   | Lack of agreement between subject and verb |
| 10   | 18   | Misplacing the words |
| 45   | 18   | Inability in making/writing sentences |
| 1    | 12   | Misreading the sequence of the letters |
| 30   | 4    | Misreading caused by mistaking the proper place of the dots over or under the letters |
| 37   | 4    | Mispronunciation |
| 8    | 1    | Problems with multifunctional letters |
| 57   | 5    | Interference of the local accent |
| 14   | 26   | Reading by rote |
| 30   | 2    | Problems in reading word with more than two syllables |
| 14   | 1    | Interference of the intonation of their mother tongue |
| 4    | 4    | Failing to halt properly between sentences |
| 20   | 1    | Problems in syllabification |
| 13   | 1    | Reading by rote |
| 14   | 1    | More problems in comprehending sentences than words |
| 10   | 1    | Problem with comprehending the verbs |
| 14   | 1    | Problem with comprehending unfamiliar words |
| 10   | 1    | Comprehension problems in the first three months of the educational year |
| 22   | 8    | Comprehension failure because of unfamiliarity with Persian |

4. Discussion and conclusion:

4.1. Listening comprehension

First grade bilingual students in Arabic and Turkish speaking areas have difficulties in understanding spoken Persian in the first two months of the educational year, so that they cannot attain a decent understanding of the educational activities and materials. These students cannot respond appropriately to the instructions, they cannot comprehend properly the poems and prose texts which are read to them, and cannot give normal answers to the questions.
4.2. Speaking

1- Bilingual children use nouns more properly and more effectively than the other parts of speech; their most frequent problem is with using the verbs.
2- Bilingual students tend to use simpler, more general and more concrete morphological structures and less adjectives and adverbs. They have difficulty in using time adverbs, comparative adjectives, and proper sequence of nouns and adjectives.
3- (a) even in the third month of the educational year, bilingual students still have problems with the syntagmatic relations among the parts of the sentences. (b) They tend to use the template of the written form sentences in their speech. (c) They do not usually use successive sentences in response to questions; their use of successive sentences is accompanied with syntactic and semantic errors; there are syntactic disagreements among the parts of the sentences. There exists the same problem in their single-sentence responses as well.

The structural differences between Persian and these children's mother tongue may be an effective factor in causing such syntactic problems.

4.3. Reading and Writing

Some of the reading problems of the bilingual students considered in this study are related to the preliminary skills of reading, decoding and recognizing the letters. Other problems comprise maintaining the rhythm and comprehension while reading.

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