

Reading and writing skills among non-Farsi speaking students in Iran: An evaluation of the instructional language policy and methods

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Abstract: The development of reading and writing skills are among the fundamental objectives of all educational systems, as these skills are the logical continuation of the linguistic skills the child acquires, naturally and socially, prior to entering this system. From a **dialectic constructivist** perspective, the development of new writing and reading skills in school is contingent upon the oral speech and its internalization (verbal thought) that develop in earlier years. Hence, the instructional language policies of countries where a duality of language between home and school exists need to be reconsidered and adjusted accordingly. One such country is Iran that has a diverse linguistic population and yet a single official language. Naturally **the first language** of many Iranians is **not Farsi**, yet it is **the official language of instruction** throughout the educational system. In the past, **PIRLS** data have been used to show **the disadvantage** experienced by some of the **non-Farsi speaking students**. Although the absence of **linguistic continuity** between home and school **among Azari-Turkish** speaking Iranians **necessitates** a different overall **curriculum**, but as a minimal intervention, **the methods** used in the Farsi-dominated curriculum need to be **adjusted** for non-Farsi speaking students. To assess any such adjustments, an **evaluation of teaching methods** in reading and writing from a constructivist point of view was undertaken in both Farsi and Turkish speaking schools. The reading and writing skills of the two groups were also assessed in order to see if the previously recorded disadvantage persists over the years of schooling. The findings show that the one language- one method policy does not lead to one level of achievement among Farsi- and non-Farsi speaking students. However, those teachers who use constructivist methods help their students to have better reading and writing skills.

Theoretical/practical Framework

Reading and writing skills are the most basic among those developed in school, yet have their roots in other linguistic skills developed at home and prior to children entering the school system. Continuity of the oral and aural language experiences of pre-school years to the writing and reading experiences of the school years is not a luxury that all students entering school have. There are those whose language experiences at home are in a different language than the one used in school and hence, suffer both developmentally and academically, from what has been called the bilinguality of home and school (Hameedy, 2005).

From the dialectic constructivist perspective, bilinguality of home and school is a condition to be remedied. From this perspective language is a significant social tool for global (multidimensional) development (Vygotsky, 1978; Woolfolk, 2001). Children's construction of knowledge is guided by, initially, their native language, and then by the school language if indeed it is other than the native language. Therefore the linguistic continuity is necessary. However, if the child learns two languages simultaneously, i.e. if the child becomes bilingual, the two languages would together serve as a better tool for global development. Being bilingual, of course, is more than just using two languages, as it involves cultural familiarity which has different degrees (Hakuta & Garcia, 1989). With higher degrees of bilingualism come higher cognitive functions such as concept formation, creativity, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility (Santrock, 2002; Woolfolk, 2001). However, such achievements are only possible if the language policy of the country faced with bilinguality of home and school is such that pursuing these goals is possible.

Bilinguality of home and school is a worldwide phenomenon (Paulston, 1988; Hameedy, 1992) and as such has been dealt with through different language policies. In countries like Singapore, Canada, Israel, Switzerland, and many more, the issue has been addressed through introduction of some system of bilingual or multilingual education (Lambert, Genesee, Holobow, & Chartrand, 1993). Viewed as the main educational instrument, competency in the language of instruction is a necessity as is the instructional use of the language in which the child is competent. Hence the competencies in native language ought to be expanded while new competencies in another language are developed to the point of balanced bilingualism. Research shows that the best time for doing so is between the ages of 3 to 7 (Johnson and Newport, 1989). Research not only allays fears of one language overcoming the other (Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999; Oller, 1999), but reassures that balanced bilingualism has a positive effect on cognitive development and reading ability as well (Bialystok, 1999; 1997). In the absence of a language policy that aims at balanced bilingualism of the student population, bilinguality of home and school, coupled with the uniformity of curriculum and methods there within, could lead to what has been called smilinguality, meaning that the child learns both languages of home and school incompletely and inadequately. Bilinguality of home and school could have less crippling effects if the school curriculum and the methods used by teachers were such that not only would prevent smilinguality, but would pave the way for balanced bilingualism. Are the curricula and methods used in countries like Iran that as a result of their language policy are faced with duality of language at schools and homes equipped to do so?

Iran, a multicultural society, is home to a number of language communities speaking Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Urdu languages among others, and constituting 42% of the country's population. Yet the language policy of the country calls for the official instructional language of all Iranians to be Farsi, creating a problem of bilinguality of home and school for

the non-Farsi speaking populations. It is a problem because, as it was mentioned earlier, it does not necessarily lead to balanced bilingualism (Santrock, 2002) and may even cause dilemmas that could be harmful (Ovando, 1997; Rothstein, 1998). This could be a contributing factor to the poor school performance of a vast number of Iranian students in non-Farsi speaking provinces, and their poorer performance in PIRLS (Hameedy, 2005). However, the issue of bilinguality is seldom addressed and its conditions and consequences are rarely studied in Iran partly because of the fear that it might give rise to separatist movements and hence threaten the national cohesion, vis-à-vis security (Mehrmohammadi, 1992). Given the sensitivity of the issue, it is therefore necessary to look at the problem from a different angle and see if the curriculum and methods therein for the basic language skills (Writing and reading) are modified to meet the needs of students faced with bilinguality of home and school. The curriculum planners at the Ministry of Education have recognized the problem and have devised a one month preparatory course for students entering first grade whose home language is other than the school language. This program has been implemented for the past fifteen or so years, yet no comprehensive evaluation of its impact has been undertaken. Assumption is probably that it is adequate to help the first graders to cope with the linguistic shock they may experience in school. As for the methods of teaching, the MoE has offered courses and workshops on new and “active” teaching methods through the in-service training programs in order to alter the traditional methods. However, this gradual and perhaps optional change in methods has been promoted in general with no regards toward the bilinguality problem or the problems facing the nation in the area of writing and reading. Are the methods used in Writing and Reading classes the same for both the Farsi and non-Farsi speaking students? Are these two groups of students equal in reading and writing achievement? These questions are addressed here in order to find answers and pave the way for educational improvements in regards to the bilinguality problem. However, the answer may have already been given by other studies.

Literature Review

Research conducted on non-Farsi speaking students, teaching methods, and on writing and reading skills, in Iran is indicative of inadequacies in all three areas. Khoshroo (1996) as well as Daadsetaan & Majdaabaadee (1996) have shown that non-Farsi speaking students at the entry level to the educational system have lower levels of both Farsi comprehension and production, compared to Farsi speaking students. The problem seems to persist through out the following years, as the Department Of Education’s statistics show 50% of the school failure among Azari students is due to failure in Farsi writing and reading courses (Aamoozesh va Parvaresh, 2002). Hazaariyaan (1991) reports on another group of Iranian students facing bilinguality of home and school who suffer from inadequate communication skills. Another study (Fallaaahchaayee, 1995) has found that Kurdish students have school problems that stem from the bilinguality of home and school. Movahadeepoor (2003) reports that Spanish speaking students whose school language is English also have shown linguistic deficiencies both in grammar and vocabulary. Khoshroo (1996) has also cited research that

indicate Irish students whose home language is other than their school language are significantly behind in achievement, not only in writing and reading, but in mathematics as well!

The literature on teaching methods is extensive. This body of information indicates that in Iran, like most of the developing countries, the prevailing teaching method is still the traditional positivist i.e. teacher-centered, unidimensional, unidirectional, and learner-pacifying method (Nasraabaadee & Noroozee, 2003), despite the fact that the bulk of research conducted through out the world is indicative of the effectiveness of the more modern methods that are constructivist in nature i.e. student-centered, multidimensional, multidirectional, and learner-active (Fathecaazar, 2003). Among the works conducted in Iran, Kiyaanee (2004), for example, has shown that the use of the so called active methods of teaching improves students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral achievements. Learners in these studies were found to be self-initiating and explorative while their teachers were facilitators. Deenaarvande (1994) citing the academic deficiencies of non-Farsi speaking students in Khuzestaan province, points out that the method used in their schools being the same as that for the Farsi speaking students, i.e. positivist in nature. The use of constructivist instead of positivist methods in teaching writing and reading has not been addressed specifically though it can be deduced that the constructivist methods would be more effective given its emphasis on socio-cultural as well as individual dimensions.

Some of the research on the writing/reading skills and the most appropriate teaching methods were alluded to above (e.g. Hazaariyaan, 1991). The major evidence indicating deficiency in reading skills come from PIRLS 2001 and its predecessor 1970 International Study in Reading Comprehension. The Iranian students ranked 14th among 15 countries participating in the latter, and 32nd among the 35 countries taking part in the former (Kareemee, 2003). It was mentioned earlier that the non-Farsi speaking students participating in PIRLS 2001 performed even lower than the mainstream students (Hameedy, 2005). Garcia (1991) has also compared the reading comprehension of regular students with those who were experiencing bilinguality of home and school and found that only those of the latter group who did not have an adequate knowledge of their home language had lower comprehension skills than the regular students. Aarefee (1996) has compared the reading comprehension and vocabulary of Armenian and Turkish speaking students in Iran and reports the advantage of the Armenians who, along side learning Farsi, the national school language, learn their own language as well, something that the other group is not allowed to do. So given the national language policy in Iran, it seems that it would be up to the schools to focus on the problem of home-school bilinguality and its consequences and devise ways of overcoming them. One area that schools seem to have a free hand in is the teaching methodology. However, given the studies done on teaching methods in general, it appears that no methodological difference should be expected in teaching reading and writing skills in

Farsi and non-Farsi speaking schools. Furthermore, the level of these skills, regardless of the methods used, is lower among students suffering from home-school bilinguality.

Methods

To test these hypotheses two separate studies were conducted. Both involved two groups of Farsi and non-Farsi speaking students of Tehran and Tabreez, along with their teachers who were tested once. The data collection was done in school settings and during the morning hours. The students were tested in groups, but teachers provided data individually and that caused the data collection last a whole week.

The reading study was done on the middle school students because it was assumed that by having completed the elementary school, their basic competency in Farsi has stabilized enough. From among all 5 school districts in Tabreez one, and from among all the middle schools in this district one school, and from among all grades in this school one grade was randomly selected which happened to be a first grade class (sixth Grade). The same sampling method was used in Tehran and consequently a group of 205 students of whom 109 were Farsi speaking, participated in the study. The teachers participating in the study were all middle school teachers at the one district randomly selected from among all districts in each city. As such the sample consisted of 37 Tehrani and 52 Tabreezee teachers.

The writing study was done on the elementary school students, because writing was considered to be an area least attended to and detection of any short comings in early years would be more useful in finding remedies. The selection of data sources in this study was similar to that of the reading study; however, due to the larger size of the student population, two districts were chosen from among all districts. As a result 120 Tabreezee 5th graders along with 54 of their teachers and 220 students from the same grade, along with 125 of their teachers from Tehran took part in the study. However, of the 179 teachers only 171 provided the requested information.

The instruments used in both reading and writing studies consisted of a methodology questionnaire and a skill test. The reading methodology questionnaire (RMQ) consisted of 20 statements on the characteristics of both positivist and constructivist teaching methods in reading. The validity of this questionnaire was assessed by 2 teachers and an educational psychologist. Its reliability was determined, using a sample of 30 Tehraanee teachers and Cronbach's alpha, to be 0.78. Its test-retest reliability was 0.75. The skill test in reading was a comprehension test (RCT) with questions on recognizing simple information, understanding the main intent, interpretation ability, and composition of old and new data. The validity of this test was assessed by a reading specialist and its reliability was determined to be 0.83 using the test-retest method. Its inter-rater reliability was 0.90. The writing methodology questionnaire (WMQ) was similar to the RMQ in nature with emphasis on writing of course.

Its validity was confirmed by a panel of experts while its reliability was 0.87 for its positivist subsection and 0.75 for its subset of constructivist statements. The skill test in writing (WAT) was based on the content of the fifth grade's Farsi text and consisted of three subtests of spelling, grammar, and composition. WAT's validity was confirmed by fifth grade teachers, its split half reliability, with the help of a sample of 30 students, was determined to be 0.85, and its inter-rater reliability was 0.89.

The data so collected were of two types: interval and nominal, and considering the hypotheses regarding the skill differences between the two groups of students, and method differences between the two groups of teachers, were analyzed using the independent t-test for the former, and the Chi-squared test for the latter comparisons. The findings are as follow.

Findings

The analysis of data in the second study on writing skills of the two groups of fifth graders showed a significant difference between the two in all three sub-areas of spelling, grammar, and composition, with the Tehrani students having the upper hand ($t = 9.22, 8.23, \& 10.09$, $df = 340$, $\alpha = 0.001$). The comparison of the two groups in the reading study yielded a similar result with the Farsi speaking students again having the upper hand ($t = 8.30$, $df = 203$, $\alpha = 0.001$). As for the hypotheses on the methods used by writing and reading teachers, the findings are mixed since in the two studies two different findings were recorded. In the writing study no significant difference between Tehrani and Tabreezee teachers in terms of the methods they use was found. However, more Tehrani teachers used constructivist methods than the positivist method, where as the Tabreezees were almost divided in half between the two methods. In reading, on the other hand, there was a significant difference in method between the two groups since more Tehrani teachers used constructivist methods while most Tabreezees used positivist methods.

The findings in both studies confirm the hypotheses on the non-Farsi speaking students lagging behind their Farsi speaking counter parts in reading and writing skills. These findings are consistent with those of the other researchers. Aarefee (1996), Khoshroo (1996), Daadsetaan & Majdaabaadee (1996), and Hameedy (2005) have all shown this lag which could be rooted in the bilinguality of home and school and the one-curriculum-one-language policy. Obviously five years of the elementary school experience has not been able to compensate the initial lag in Farsi competency in non-Farsi speaking students when the fifth graders are low in writing skills and the 6th graders in reading! Surely enough among the causing agents one could point finger at the teachers teaching methods. Perhaps one reason for the Farsi speaking students performing better in both reading and writing is that more of their teachers use constructivist methods in which exploration, evaluation, organization, imagination, and ... are fostered. However, the teachers who have students suffering from home-school bilinguality, rather ironically, either use both the positivist and constructivist

methods equally, as the case was in the writing study, or use the positivist method more, as was the case in the reading study. These findings too correspond with those of others (like Nasraabaadee & Noroozee, 2003) who have observed that the positivist methods are still dominant in most educational systems, especially those of the developing countries. Although the correspondence in findings and the support that these two studies provide for the hypotheses help to make the case for a change in policy, curriculum, or method, such implications or suggestions are contingent upon a critical review of the present studies.

In retrospect, having taken a constructivist perspective, these two studies should have been merged together and the data on both set of skills gathered from the same set of students and teachers. Better yet, if the two sets of data were taken from two groups farther apart from one another than the 5th and 6th graders, any developmental or time related changes could have also been registered. That way, in addition to the developmental data, the interconnectedness of the two sets of skills would have become apparent as well. For the same theoretical reason, the studies could have taken a multi-faceted approach and have included a set of observational data as well, so that the teachers' claims to constructivist methods could have been checked. Nevertheless, the findings merit some suggestions to be made.

Obviously a reexamination of the language policy is in order and the curriculum change in such a way that it would be more socio-culturally suitable to the student population is also a must. Furthermore, a change in methods could also help remedying the problem. However, for the new constructivist methods to be fully effective their theoretical and philosophical underpinnings need to also be understood and followed. Otherwise the impact would be minimal. Having cited the shortcomings of the present studies, it is also worth suggesting that they be conducted again with those shortcomings alleviated.

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