

BILINGUALITY OF HOME AND SCHOOL IN IRAN: CONDITIONS AND CONSEQUENCES AS SHOWCASED IN PIRLS*

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Abstract

Iran is home to many cultural/linguistic groups speaking Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, and Urdu among others. Yet the official language for school instruction is Farsi, the language of the majority group, creating a problem of bilinguality of home and school for millions of non-Farsi speaking children. The grade retention rates among these populations are higher, as are the drop-out rates, in comparison with the Farsi speaking population. In recognition of this problem, the MoE has designed and implemented a one-month preparatory course for children whose native language is other than Farsi to be taken prior to entering first grade. In addition, in some provinces one-year pre-school education is available to both populations, without any special provisions made for the non-Farsi speakers.

The purpose of the present paper is to make the case for the need to address the problem, and seek a rational solution to it, through bilingual education in one form or another. The sheer number of students involved and the severity of consequences suffered by the non-Farsi speaking populations demonstrate the educational significance of the issue. The dialectical constructivist perspective and the literature on bilingual education form the theoretical framework of the paper, wherein the data gathered by using the student questionnaire in PIRLS 2001 are used to show that the reading scores vary according to the extent of exposure to Farsi (EEF). Such variation, along with the low ranking of the country in PIRLS, is indicative the need for revamping the educational system in order to bridge the identified gaps.

INTRODUCTION

From a dialectical constructivist perspective, language is considered to be a significant social tool for overall development (Vygotsky, 1978; Woolfolk, 2001). Children's construction of knowledge is initially guided by their mother tongue and

then by the language of formal instruction if it is in fact other than their first language. However, if the child learns and uses two languages simultaneously, i.e. if he/she is bilingual, the two languages would collectively provide an even better tool for development. Being bilingual, as Hakuta and Garcia (1989) point out, is more than just the ability to use two languages. In other words, being bilingual is a matter of degree, and it is the higher degrees of bilingualism that have been observed to be positively correlated with cognitive functions like concept formation, creativity, metalinguistic knowledge, and flexibility in thinking (Santrock, 2002; Woolfolk, 2001). Furthermore, bilingualism and its positive effects are only observed when there exists a positive attitude towards bilingualism and the students' first languages are not threatened by stigmatization and abandonment (Garcia, 1992). In such conditions, and when exposure to both languages is not equal for any other reason, what would develop would be bilinguality of home and school rather than bilingualism.

Bilinguality of home and school is a worldwide phenomenon (Paulston, 1988; Hameedy, 1992) and as such has been dealt with rather positively in countries like Singapore, Canada, Israel, and Switzerland, and many more, through introduction of some system of bilingual or multilingual education (Lambert, Genesee, Holobow, and Chartrand, 1993). Students in Singapore, a country with four official languages, face no difficulty in regards to bilinguality of home and school. The same can be said about China wherein the curriculum planning has been successful in remedying the problems that existed in this area. In Canada, where there are more than fifty native languages belonging to eleven different language families, more than half of the native students use either English or French as their mother tongue. Most of the rest enjoy socio-educational benefits provided for them by the central government. In regards to the use of native languages in education different approaches have been tried throughout the history of Canadian education. Up to the time of W.W.II one of the two approaches to this issue was that the use of native languages, in and out of school, was looked down upon and every thing was either in French or English. The other approach was that the native languages were used as media of instruction in order to facilitate the comprehension of the content, as the official languages were gradually learned. During the post-war period different roles for the native languages in the educational system have been defined and experimented with. The oldest and most common model has been the learning of the native languages as a curriculum subject by both the native and non-native students. Another has been the use of native languages as media of instruction for the natives during the first few years of schooling. The first pre-World War approach mentioned above is similar to the approach used in the United Kingdom prior to the 1980's when the general policy of the educational system was that of single language instruction as well as the benign policy of linguistic assimilation (Paulston, 1988). The same type of policies, it can be said, are still used in Iran.

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. Some of the 27 provinces in the country are named based on the dominant cultural-linguistic group residing in them (e.g., Kordestaan, Lorestaan, Baloochestaan, etc.). The largest language grouping is that of the Turkish-speaking people in the five northwestern provinces of Aazarbaijaan (east & west), Ardabeel, Ghazveen, and Zanjaan. Of course there are smaller groups who have no specific geographical location like Armenians, Zoroastrians, Aasooryans, and Hebrew speaking people. Yet the official instructional language of all Iranians is Farsi, the language of the majority grouping. This is so according to article 15 of the Iranian constitution. Although the very same article emphasizes the basic right of all these language groupings to use their mother tongues in their schools and in the promotion of their native cultures, the national educational and curriculum planners do not seem to put much stock in the latter part of the said article. They seem to have assumed their curriculum as effective for the non-Farsi speaking students as it is for the Farsi speaking ones! This assumption has been disproved by the results of TIMSS and PIRLS as far as the general student population is concerned. Based on this evidence, it can be said that not only has the curriculum not been effective for the Farsi speaking students, but it also has created a problem of bilinguality of home and school for the non-Farsi speaking populations.

Bilinguality of home and school in Iran has even been recognized as a problem by the very curriculum planners at the national level, as they have designed a one-month preparatory course for the non-Farsi speaking students that has been implemented during the past fourteen years. Whether it can possibly remedy the problem is open to question, especially since rigorous research in this area, as in many other areas, is lacking. The anecdotal observations of this preparatory course for non-Farsi speaking students, which must be taken right before starting the first grade, have judged it useful yet insufficient (Educational Research Council [ERC], 1992). It can also be argued that bilinguality is a problem because it, or the national planners' concocted solution, does not necessarily lead to balanced bilingualism (Seifert, Hoffnung, and Hoffnung, 2000) and may even cause dilemmas that could be harmful (Ovando, 1989; Rothstein, 1998). What is meant by "balanced bilingualism" is equal proficiency in two languages that comes along with a measure of biculturalism. A month-long course can hardly be adequate for this purpose, as it cannot make up for the six-year long exposure to the mother tongue. Similarly, the absence of the native language from the curriculum during the school years that follow is certainly not a step toward such bilingualism! On the contrary, this would lead to what Santrock (2002) has called semilingualism, or lack of proficiency in either one of the two languages. Furthermore, with such a linguistic preparation "decontextualized language skills" such as reading would not develop (Snow, 1987) and students would have great many difficulties with complex schoolwork (Ovando, 1989). As such, bilinguality of home and school in Iran creates a serious challenge for the Iranian educational system.

The challenge that Iranian educators face is showcased by the two international studies that Iran has participated in: TIMSS and PIRLS. In both studies Iranian

students ranked almost last. In the international reading comprehension study of 1970 Iran ranked 14th among fifteen participating countries, and in PIRLS 2001, 32nd among the 35 participating countries (Karimi, 2003). Within such context it is reasonable to ask whether the non-Farsi speaking students performed lower in reading than the Farsi speaking ones. Considering the logical consequences of bilinguality, in the present study this was hypothesized to be the case, i.e., the non-Farsi speakers' performance is lower. The same factor (bilinguality) seems to have contributed to the high rate of retention and grade repetition. Manzoorniya (1992) reports that in the largest Turkish speaking province, where only close to 41% of the population can speak Farsi, the repetition rate is much higher in first grade compared to the fifth, countryside compared with the cities, and in areas less exposed to Farsi (due to lack of electricity/television) than other areas. Addeeb (1993) has also found that among all school subjects, the language courses have a greater contribution to grade failure/repetition than non-language courses per se. Given the bilinguality problem, both the educational system and the individual teachers have been challenged to come up with some sort of solution. Considering that 97% of the province's teachers are natives educated in Farsi, many, according to Manzoorniya (1992), feel compelled to use Turkish in instruction despite the legal requirement of using Farsi, more so in the first grade than the fifth (45% vs. 19%). Given the experience of other countries similar to Iran in population composition, the case for implementation of some form of bilingual education must be made.

The purpose of the present paper is to make such a case by establishing bilinguality of home and school in Iran as a possible contributing factor to the poor performance of a vast number of Iranian students both domestically and internationally. Much has been said about the merits of bilingualism and bilingual education worldwide (e.g., Bialystok, 1999), yet 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). Yet, 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, and Rodriguez, 1999; Oller, 1999), but reassures that balanced bilingualism has a positive effect on cognitive development and reading ability as well (Bialystok, 1999, 1997). Thus it could be argued that the strength of the nation lies in paying attention to the ethnic diversity of the country and allowing for the academic use of the native languages by members of each language community as a step toward a better society. To look at the reading scores of the non-Farsi speaking Iranian students in PIRLS and compare them to those of the Farsi speaking students can be a good point of departure.

METHODS

The *data sources* in this study are the Iranian fourth graders who participated in PIRLS 2001. The total of 7703 students in the sample, scattered across all 27 provinces in the country, included students from the non-Farsi speaking provinces as well. Following Karimi (2003), the selection was made using the systematic cluster sampling method wherein from among all schools in every province (total of 61110 schools), and based on the type (public or private) and location (city or country side) of schools, 184 schools were selected. Then, depending on the size of the selected schools, one or two fourth grade classes were randomly chosen from among the fourth grade classes in each school. The average age of the national sample of the fourth graders participating in PIRLS 2001 is reported to be 10.4 years.

The *instrument* in the present study is for the most part a truncated form of one of the instruments used in PIRLS 2001. From the questions on the *Student Questionnaire* five were selected to comprise what is being defined here as the EEF (Extent of Exposure to Farsi) factor. Items comprising this factor are the following: The extent of daily television watching, languages learned during childhood, the extent of speaking Farsi at home, the extent of speaking Farsi with adults, and the number of books at home. The item on pre-school education from the *Parents' questionnaire* was also added. The reliability indices for the original instruments are not reported by Karimi (2003), nor are the manner and conditions under which the data have been collected. The data collected by PIRLS office in Iran was recoded in order to re-categorize the responses into three categories of high, middle, and low. Of course there were those who did not answer some items (missing). To define the EEF, initially an average of the comprising items was calculated and then recoded into three levels of exposure to Farsi: high, middle, and low (HEEF, MEEF, & LEEF). With the validity and reliability of the collected data assumed, the reading scores were utilized as the dependent measure in comparing three groups of exposure to Farsi using the non-parametric test of Kruskal-Wallis. Such comparisons were also conducted for the high and low levels of each comprising item, using the Mann-Whitney U test or the independent samples t-test where possible.

RESULTS

The *analysis* of the collected data yielded the following results: Close to 11% of the sample never learned Farsi during childhood. Nearly 35% of the respondents indicated that they never, or only at times, spoke Farsi at home. 3.4% of the sampled fourth graders have no exposure to television; while close to 52% of them have only up to one hour of daily exposure (See Figure 1). There was a significant difference in reading scores of those who had learned Farsi during childhood and those who had not ($p < 0.0001$), as was the case for those who never spoke Farsi at home and those who always used this language. Overall the high exposure group was significantly better in reading than the low exposure group (see Table 1).

Figure 1: Relative Frequency Distributions of the Five Components of EEF

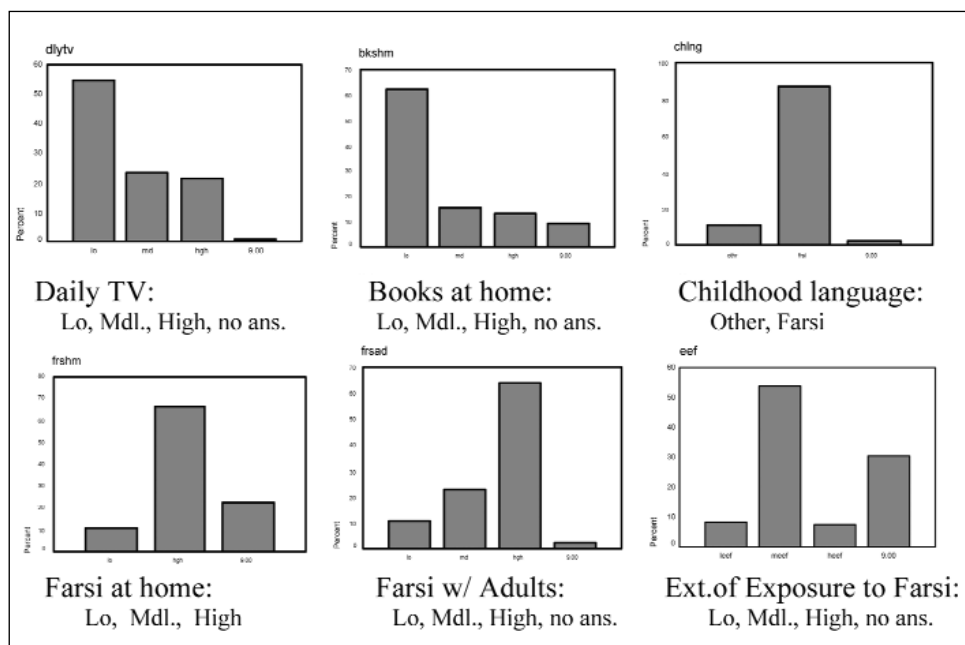


Table 1: Tests of Significant Difference Between High And Low Exposure Groups In Components of EEF

Item/factor	Frequency	Mean	Std. Deviation	Test stat./Sig
Hi daily TV	1595			Mann-Whitney
Lo daily TV	4045			0.9
Hi bks. at home	982	156.5	8.6	Student t test
Lo bks. at home	4616	150.9	8.6	.000
Farsi At home	4960	153.9	8.5	Student t test
Other language	796	146.4	8.2	.000
Farsi w/adult (h)	4757			Mann-Whitney
Farsi w/adult(l)	785			.000
Chlhd lng (Frsi)	6459			Mann-Whitney
Non-Farsi	798			.000
HEEF	564			Mann-Whitney
LEEF	631			.000

CONCLUSIONS

Although the overall ranking of the Iranian fourth graders in PIRLS 2001 indicates the need for revamping of, at least, the reading curriculum for all Iranian students, it is the status of the non-Farsi speaking sub-population that has been highlighted by

the present paper. This huge sub-population seems to be suffering from the prevailing bilinguality of home and school. Such suffering is anticipated from a dialectical constructivist perspective and borne out by the findings of the present study. The results are not only compatible with previous findings (Addeeb, 1993; Manzoorniya, 1992), but highlight the fact that the academic gap between the Farsi and non-Farsi speaking students has not been bridged even after four years of schooling, confirming the contention that the decontextualized language skills take 5-7 years to be mastered (Snow, 1987). This suggests the need for the restructuring of the reading literacy programs to not only include some form of educational bilingualism, but also some basic reassessment of the philosophical and hence methodological approaches to reading and writing in general. The MoE's one-month preparatory course aimed at helping the non-Farsi speakers to meet the demands of schooling in non-native language is clearly inadequate and more radical schemes need to be implemented if educational equality is to be approached. It is only through such actions that bilingualism and its advantages (Bialystok, 1999; 1997) would be within the reach of those currently suffering from the bilinguality of home and school in Iran.

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NOTE

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