

Effects Of Bilingualism On L3 Vocabulary Learning Among Iranian EFL Learners

Mostafa Zare

Mostafa.zare314@gmail.com

*Faculty of Foreign Languages,
Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran*

Sajad Davoudi Mobarakeh

Sajad.davoudi@gmail.com

*Faculty of Foreign Languages,
Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran*

ABSTRACT

It is well documented that everybody's first language or mother tongue influences the way one learns his/her second language (Wade-Wolley, 1999; Lyszka, 2004). However, the difference and comparison of this effect on third language learning motivated the researchers to investigate whether Arabic-Persian bilinguals (APBs) take advantage of their bilingualism in learning the third language (English) versus Persian monolinguals (PMs) or not. The study sample comprised of 100 male senior high school students who were randomly selected. 50 PM students were in one group and 50 APB students were in the other group. Firstly, a questionnaire through which mono/bilingualism and proficiency level in the language skills were asked was given to students. Then a list of English words was presented to the students and they were requested to write the meaning of words they knew. 50 words meaning of which none of the students in both groups knew were selected to be taught. For homogeneity purpose, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was also used. After taking the pretest (based on 50 unknown words), students received the treatment (50 unknown words were taught). Finally, posttest was run and the performance of both groups on L3 general, recognition and production vocabulary was analyzed. Results of three T-tests revealed that APBs in general and in L3 production vocabulary learning outperformed their PMs. The results also showed that no significant difference was seen between APBs and PMs in L3 recognition vocabulary learning.

Keywords: Bilingualism; Arabic-Persian bilinguals (APBs); Persian monolinguals (PMs), L3 vocabulary learning; mother tongue

INTRODUCTION

As opposed to a couple of decades ago, finding people, nowadays, who speak or understand more than one language is as easy as a pie. In line with the advances in technology, the opportunities and, perhaps the most significantly, the need to communicate with speakers of other languages emerged as a must. The human's lust for communication has been among the most important factors paving the way for bilingualism and multilingualism expansion throughout the world. Therefore bilingualism and multilingualism socio cultural facts deserve to be extensively explored. Gottardo

(2008) emphasizes that the definition of bilingualism is complex and is influenced by multiple factors such as the age of acquisition of the second language, continued exposure to the first language, relative skill in each language and the circumstances under which each language is learned.

Bilingualism of home and school is a worldwide phenomenon and as such has been dealt with rather positively in countries like Singapore, Canada, Switzerland and many more, through introduction of systems of bilingual or multilingual education (Lambert, Genessee, Holobow & Charttand, 1993, as cited in Khadivi & Kalantari, 2011). Iran, a multilingual and multicultural country with a population of more than 75 million people, is one of the most populous countries in the Middle East.

Although Persian (Farsi) is the official language of the country, other languages like Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Baluchi and Armenian are spoken by minority groups in different parts of the country. As was formerly mentioned, Arabic is also one of the languages spoken in Iran. Arabic speakers mainly reside in Khuzestan province (where one of the authors lives) in the southwest of Iran. Khuzestan with a population of more than four million people is the fifth most popular province of Iran. There have always been differences in English language learning between bilingual Arabic-Persian speakers and Persian monolingual speakers. Such differences can be ascribed to a host of determining factors, among of which bilingualism of Arab student seems to be more influential. Bearing this point in mind, the researchers, in the present paper, aim at probing the effect of bilingualism on L3 vocabulary learning between APBs and PMs.

ROLE OF VOCABULARY

Vocabulary as an important part of any language teaching program should be taken into account by both teachers and learners. As Vermeer (2001) argues, vocabularies are the primary carriers of meaning. This view denotes that even without having adequate knowledge of structure, we can still convey the basic message across. Because of such views toward vocabulary, nowadays, we witness an unbelievable increase in the number of instructional materials which accelerate vocabulary learning process. Despite this prosperity and attention in vocabulary learning arena, there are still steps to take to satisfactorily enrich English language teachers and students with a sufficient domain of vocabulary. Accordingly, the present paper aims at comparatively investigating the effect of bilingualism on third language vocabulary learning, generally, and receptive/productive vocabulary, particularly.

Everybody who has experienced teaching in a classroom confirms that each student has its unique identity with peculiar assets. These numerous and sometimes contrasting characteristics put the burden of selecting a moderate and fair level as the norm of the class on teachers' shoulders.

The more homogeneity among students' characteristics, the better the teachers and students cooperate in learning process. However, optimal homogeneity is not usually achieved in our classrooms. We may face diversified groups of learners in the classrooms. This assortment of features directly influence the way learners perform in academic atmosphere. The L1 with which students have grasped the concept of world is one such determining factor that possibly affects the Iranian learners of English. The case of Arabic spoken by the Arab learners who live in Iran and have to learn the official language of the country, Persian, is one of the parameters that may shed some light on the

different performance of APBs versus PMs in vocabulary learning of English as L3. Thus, in the present study we are going to see if bilingualism of Arab students has any effect on their L3 vocabulary learning.

RELATED STUDIES

Studies concerning the effect of bilingualism on L3 vocabulary learning in international and national scope have so far, respectively, focused on dominant European languages and dominant domestic languages like Turkish. The reason behind current excessive focus on Turkish in Iran's EFL context lies in the number of Turkish-speaking people who are the second greatest group of Iran's population.

Nevertheless, other minority languages spoken in Iran have been recently studied by scholars. Forerunner of the researchers investigating the issue in Iran, Keshavarz & Astaneh (2004) conducted a research in which they studied the impact of bilingualism on third language vocabulary learning of three groups of bi/monolingual female students (Turkish-Persian bilinguals, Armenian-Persian bilinguals and Persian monolinguals) in two regions of the country. They concluded that the subjects' bilingualism has a positive effect on third language vocabulary learning.

In a similar study, Dibaj (2011) compared the performance of 52 monolingual Persian-speaking learners of English with 45 bilingual Azari-Persian speaking learners of English in English vocabulary learning. All the female participants were studying English as a foreign language at two universities in Iran. The subjects received two incidental and four intentional vocabulary learning exercises. They were measured at four difficulty levels. He found out that bilingual language learners outperformed their monolingual counterparts at all word difficulty levels.

Concerning the Armenian bilinguals which mostly live in Isfahan province, Kassaian and Esmae'li (2011) conducted a research to investigate the effect of bilingualism on third language breadth of vocabulary knowledge and word reading skill. 30 female Armenian-Persian bilinguals and 30 female Persian monolinguals participated in this study. The Nation's vocabulary levels test and Burt word reading test, respectively, were used to measure subjects' knowledge of vocabulary and their word reading skill. After computations, the results indicated that bilingualism is highly correlated with breadth of vocabulary knowledge and reading skill.

Although studies conducted in national context centering on the effect of bilingualism on L3 vocabulary learning have mostly reported the positive and facilitating role of bilingualism, not in all areas of L3 learning such a consensus exists. There are studies investigating the effect of bilingualism on other sub skills of language which have achieved paradoxical findings. For instance, while Merrikhi (2012) states that bilinguals definitely outperform monolinguals on the English grammar, Maghsoudi (2010) notes that monolingual and bilingual learners do not differ in acquiring syntactic structure. He even maintains that monolingual participants surpass bilingual participants in general English proficiency.

In international scope, though not specifically considering L3 vocabulary learning, a host of studies express, in line with Iranian ones, the facilitating role of bilingualism in the course of L3 learning. Sanz (2000) quotes Cenoz and Valencia (1994) and Swain, Lapkin, Rowen and Hart (1990) who believe that literacy in two languages facilitates the acquisition of a third language. Furthermore, Errasti (2003) exploring the

positive effects of bilingualism on L3 writing skill asserts that bilingual students (Spanish and Basque) who use Basque in more language domains get the best scores in English (L3). Clyne, Hunt and Isaakidis (2004) also point out that bilinguals tend to be more effective and persistent learners of the target language than monolinguals. They add that bilinguals are able to benefit from their metalinguistic awareness.

As it is clearly indicated the literature mainly supports the positive effects of bilingualism on L3 learning generally. Within this framework, the present paper tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do Arabic-Persian bilinguals (APBs) generally outperform Persian monolinguals (PMs) in English (third language) vocabulary acquisition?
2. Do Arab-Persian bilinguals outperform Persian monolinguals in both recognition and production vocabulary?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred male students who are in their third grade, in senior high school were randomly selected from Shoushtar, a city in Khuzestan province, participated in this study. Half of which were APBs (group A) and the other half were PMs (group B). Students in group A were studying Persian and English Academically and the only place they used Persian was at school and the rest of their daily communication was mostly done via Arabic. Their age range from 17 to 18. Moreover, participants, up to the time of the research, had experience of at least 5 years of studying English at school. The participants' homogeneity on L3 proficiency was achieved through OPT.

INSTRUMENTS

The instruments used in this study were as follows:

1. Questionnaire and list of words

A survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) was used in this study to make sure what the participants' mother tongue is. Furthermore, through this questionnaire we could know of the languages one could speak or understand. The level of proficiency in sub-skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) of the spoken languages was also questioned. Participants were expected to name the languages they know and specify their proficiency in each of the skills on a Likert scale which ranged from a little to fluently (questions 9, 10, 11, 12, & 14, 15, 16, 17). The questionnaire was originally prepared by Pilar and Jorda (2003) and was later adopted and used by Dibaj (2011) in EFL context of Iran. To have a better picture of the context in which participants were learning third language, the questionnaire also asked the educational level and occupational background of informants' parents (questions 18, 19, 20) as well as the city from which they come.

Due to the sensitivity of the items related to families' educational and occupational background, participants were free to answer these questions. To make sure of understandability of the questionnaire, it was written in Persian. As Dibaj (2011) argues "the purpose of this questionnaire was to ensure that the language background of

the participants in both groups was the same. Additionally, a list of 70 words which were selected from the book “intermediate vocabulary” by B.J. Thomas (1995) was given to students and they were required to write the meaning of the words they knew in Persian. The book was composed of 70 different units.

With the purpose of having a full coverage of the book content, one word from each unit was randomly selected. Of these 70 words, 50 words which none of the students knew their meanings were taught to students in five weekly sessions (10 words a session). The same teacher taught both groups. The words were taught as part of the conventional vocabulary section of the textbook students had to pass during the academic year.

2. OPT

To assure of the homogeneity of the learners’ English proficiency before conducting the research and as grammar is heavily focused in Iranian EFL curriculum, we used the grammar section of OPT for the purpose of homogenizing students. The grammar section consisted of 100 items with an estimated time of fifty minutes for completion. Testees have to read the stem with a blank and choose the right choice for the blank. A sample test item is given below:

Today they are/ there are/ it is many millions of people learning English.

3. Vocabulary Test

As was previously mentioned, the vocabularies of this study were 50 words selected from the book “intermediate vocabulary”. The test (Appendix 2) was originally composed of 15 multiple-choice recognition items and 15 production items in which participants were asked to define words as they were taught and presented in the book and classroom. The test was piloted with 40 students (20 APBs and 20 PMs) who had similar characteristics (in the same school and in the same grade) as target participants.

After piloting the test, five problematic items from each section (recognition and production) were eliminated. Therefore the pre/posttest consisted of 10 multiple-choice recognition items and 10 open-ended production items. Also the reliability of the test was found to be 0.88. The scoring procedure employed was giving one mark for each correct answer. It is worth nothing that in open-ended production items, we saved ourselves from subjectivity trap as the exact definition of the words presented in the classroom was regarded as the only correct answer. The maximum possible score in each section would be 10.

PROCEDURE

Data collection started with the questionnaire and the list of words. Through questionnaire, bi/monolingualism of the students was discovered. Along with the questionnaire, list of words was presented to students and consequently (OPT) was administered to make sure that subjects are of the same level of background knowledge. Then, the participants in both groups took the pretest.

The purpose of the pretest was to assess the students’ knowledge of these words before the treatment. Then the vocabularies were taught to the students by the same teacher and through the same method. 10 words were taught each session. Two weeks after instruction was finished, students took the posttest. Finally the performance of both

groups on pre/posttest was statistically studied to see whether there was any significant difference between APBs and PMs in general, receptive and productive vocabulary learning.

ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

Having administrated the tests, the researchers marked the tests and results were submitted to SPSS18 for statistical analysis. To answer the first research question which was whether APBs generally outperform PMs in English (L3) vocabulary acquisition, an independent sample T-test was used to compare the general performance of the participants.

To have answer to the second research question which was whether APBs outperform PMs in recognition and production vocabulary, two separate T- tests were run, in one of which the performance of both groups on recognition items was studied and in the other T-test we compared the participants' scores on productive vocabulary section.

RESULTS

The first independent sample T-test was run to compare the two groups' performance on L3 general vocabulary learning. After computations were done, the following results were obtained.

TABLE 1. Results of L3 general vocabulary learning

	N	Mean	SD	Max. score	Min. score	T observed	T critical	df	Sig.(two-tailed)
APBs	50	15.38	6.43	20	6				
PMs	50	11.64	4.65	18	5	2.96	1.98	98	0.05

As table 1 indicates APBs have outperformed their PM counterparts in L3 general vocabulary learning. A difference of approximately four points is observed in the mean score. Through two other T-tests, participants' performance on L3 recognition and production sections was studied.

In recognition section which was composed of 10 multiple-choice items, students in both groups demonstrated roughly the same knowledge of vocabulary. As Table 2 shows, students had a good command of recognizing the correct word; nevertheless APBs were slightly better with an average of 6.82 (of 10) versus 5.82 of PMs.

TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics for recognition section of the test

	N	Mean	SD	Max. score	Min. Score	T observed	T critical	df	Sig.(two-tailed)
APB	50	6.82	3.01	10	1				
PM	50	5.82	3.01	10	1	1.66	1.98	98	0.05

TABLE 3. Descriptive statistics for production section of the vocabulary test

	N	Mean	SD	Max. score	Min. score	T observed	T critical	df	Sig.(two- tailed)
APBs	50	4.54	3.14	10	0				
PMs	50	1.94	2.39	8	0	4.06	1.98	98	0.05

In table 3, the results of another T-test investigating the students' knowledge of production vocabulary have been presented.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study illuminates on the nature of vocabulary learning between APBs who are learning English as their third language and PMs who are learning English as their second language. Table one reveals the fact that Bilinguals have generally had a better performance and it implies that APBs presumably take advantage of knowing two languages in learning third language through associating third language words with related concepts and words in first and second language, whereas PMs can only resort to their first language.

Analyzing the Table two, one notice that no significant difference exists. The most important point perceived from Table two is that both groups have an average command of recognizing the correct choice which fits the sentence. Subsequently, it is implied that what distinguishes bilinguals and monolinguals in third language learning lies in production section. According to the table three, APBs, on average, obtained approximately 2.5 scores higher than PMs.

The present study partly pictures the reality of language learning in some regions of Khouzestan province where APBs are living and studying along with PMs. It is firstly concluded that Iranian learners of English believe in themselves as good receivers of passive knowledge of language not as good users of their English knowledge in real situations. In other words, Iranian EFL learners have a good command of English vocabulary but unfortunately they lack the power of activating this passive knowledge to produce communicatively well-formed strings of words. That is why they have illustrated a weaker performance on production vocabulary section.

What is actually obvious is the gap between passive and active knowledge of vocabulary that for bridging entails carefully designed remedial programs to be incorporated in Iran's EFL syllabus. Secondly, a significant number of bilingual students in different parts of the country necessitate designing more localized, flexible and comprehensive educational courses to accommodate all these students' needs and expectations with different linguistic, cultural and social background.

It is worth noting that currently Iran follows a nationwide syllabus for teaching English. Such syllabi by no means can take into account the diversified social and cultural milieu in which Iranian learners live and hence can be regarded as a threat to educational equality.

Results of the present study are consistent with previous ones in which all have reported superiority of bilinguals over monolinguals in third language learning in Iran and other parts of the world (Cenoz & Valencia, 1994; Errasti, 2003; Sanz, 2000). In Kassaian and Esmaeili (2011), for example, it has been clearly stated that there is a

significant difference in scores of bilinguals (mean=48.77) and monolinguals (mean=34.73) on vocabulary test. In the same vein, Dibaj (2011) concludes that at the 60% difficulty level, the mean for the monolinguals was 102.62 and 115.07 for bilinguals. Moreover, Keshavarz and Astaneh (2004) note that the comparison of means indicated significant performance of bilinguals (mean=16.61 & 17.61) versus monolinguals (mean=14.25). To sum it up, the present paper urges all those who are somehow involved in the process of language learning and teaching to ponder such differences and to base the educational programs on more localized methods.

This study has theoretical and practical implications for the field of language teaching. It provides a basis for improving the quality of practices in the teaching of second and third language vocabulary through devising more intensive programs for teaching English vocabulary to second language learner and through reinforcing facilitating strategies like metalinguistic awareness (Clyne et al., 2004) in third language learners.

Moreover, the findings of the present study have some implications for syllabus designers to develop instructional materials based on the idea of specialization of textbooks according to minority groups' languages. This implication emanates from the nationwide English language teaching syllabus mentioned earlier. Teachers and testers in different parts of the world can also utilize the finding of this research to choose the most convenient methods for teaching and assessing bi/multilingual students.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire (translation)

Directions: complete the following questionnaire. Please note that in some of the questions the answers are provided for you and you just have to mark one of the choices, however, for some of the questions you may have to write a few words in the space provided. Thank you very much for your cooperation regarding completing this questionnaire.

1. What city are you from?

2. What is your mothers' tongue? Please specify.

3. What is your fathers' tongue? Please specify.

4. What languages are you fluent in?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) both d) other ()

5. What language or languages do you use outside home, at work or at school?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) both d) other ()

6. For writing materials outside school, e.g. letters, notes and other what language or languages do you use?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) both d) other ()

7. For reading materials outside school, e.g. newspapers, poems and others what language or languages do you use?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) both d) other ()

8. Which language is your first language?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) other ()

9. How well do you speak this language? (Please circle one)

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

10. How well do you understand this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

11. How well can you read this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

12. How well can you write this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

13. What is your second language?

a) Arabic b) Persian c) other ()

14. How well do you speak this language? (Please circle one)

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

15. How well do you understand this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

16. How well can you read this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

17. How well can you write this language?

a) very little b) little c) moderately d) very well
e) fluently

18. Please specify your parents' occupation. (Optional)

Mother Father

19. What level of education has your mother achieved? (Optional)

a) no formal education b) under high school diploma
c) high school diploma d) bachelor degree
e) Master degree f) PhD g) other ()

20. What level of education has your father achieved? (Optional)

a) no formal education b) under high school diploma
c) high school diploma d) bachelor degree
e) Master degree f) PhD g) other ()

APPENDIX B

Part 1: multiple choices

Read the following statements carefully. Then select the one item a, b, c, or d which best fits the statement and mark your answer sheet. **DO NOT MARK IN THE TEST BOOKLET.**

1. I prefer to open a account since it earns interest.

a) checking b) current c) deposit d) charge

2. They keep a of all their documents.

a) notice b) record c) cash d) cross

3. The police couldn't read the of that muddy car.

a) windscreen b) number plate c) headrest d) pedal

4. Flight BA3421 is experiencing severe now.

a) convenience b) turbulence c) combination d) expansion

5. He the cars ahead of him because he was in a hurry.

a) overtook b) undertook c) took over d) took down

6. Military service is for boys in Iran.

- a) compulsory b) competitive c) voluntary d) compulsive
7. Schools for the summer holiday in July.
a) put up b) break up c) give up d) bring up
8. The farmer provided water to the land.
a) irrigate b) plough c) sow d) wreck
9. Rice is a basic for many Iranian foods.
a) dessert b) ingredient c) snack d) course
10. He made a/an for his son to see the doctor.
a) development b) treatment c) prescription d) appointment

Part 2: open-ended questions

Please write the meaning of the following words.

1. Obligatory:
2. crisis:
3. punctual:
4. interrupt:
5. shrink:
6. harmful:
7. buckle:
8. crew:
9. stammer:
10. conceited:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mostafa Zare received his master's degree in TEFL from Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. He has taught English in different junior and senior high schools of Shushtar, Iran for more than ten years. His main areas of interest are Teaching Methodology, CALL and Bilingualism.

Sajad Davoudi-Mobarakeh holds a master's degree in TEFL from Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. He has over seven years of teaching experience at different language institutes of Isfahan. His research interests lie in ESP, reading strategies, discourse analysis, textbook and teacher evaluation and language teaching.