

A Study on Reading Proficiency of First Grade Students at Turkish-Persian Bilingual and Persian Monolingual Regions

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Abstract

This study was conducted to assess reading proficiency of first grade students at Turkish-Persian bilingual and Persian monolingual regions. The research design was survey-descriptive and the sample was selected through cluster sampling which encompassed 20 classes including 300 first grade students. Shafiei et al.'s (1387) Inventory Reading Test (IRT), was employed to assess participants' comprehension, accuracy and fluency; Soleimani and Dastjerdy's (1389) phonological awareness test was employed to measure phonological awareness differences; and a research made questionnaire based on Nematzade et al.'s (1390) study was used to achieve participants' vocabulary repertoire. The results through independent *t* test indicated significant differences in accuracy and fluency between bilingual and monolingual students. However, there were not significant differences among reading comprehension, phonological awareness, vocabulary repertoire of bilingual and monolingual students. To indicate the reading subcomponents relationships, Pearson correlation was done and the results showed significant relationships among reading five-subcomponents. Due to the effectiveness of bilingualism and the interconnection among reading sub-components, educational authorities should seriously support special intervening reading programs for bilingual students.

It has been estimated that approximately two-third of the world's population is either bilingual or multilingual; that is, more than half the people in the world routinely use two or more languages in their daily communication in different ways. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are social facts of this new century, which can be seen in most classrooms and playgrounds. Iran, a multicultural society, is home to a number of language communities speaking Azeri-Turkish, Kurdish, Baluch, and Arabic languages among others. In non-Persian regions children attending the first grade classes are not competent in Persian listening and speaking skills. These chil-

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dren should study all school curriculums in Persian along with Persian native-speaker students. It seems that bilingualism in Iran is a kind of subtractive bilingualism. Unlike additive bilingualism that both languages enrich each other, in subtractive bilingualism the second language is added at the expense of the first language. Consequently, bilingualism in Iran seems to have contributed to the high rate of retention and grade repetition. For instance, in both TIMSS and PIRLS international studies, Iranian students ranked almost last. As a case 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. Part of this result is due to bilingualism issue in Iran. The related literature indicates that Iranian bilingual students got lower scores than monolingual in reading comprehension test. Curriculum planners always search for ways to remedy this problem. For example, they have designed a one-month preparatory course for the non-Persian speaking students or have employed some other extra courses. But none of these solutions are effective for improving the non-Persian students' drop-out rate.

In recent years, dynamic systems theory has attracted a great deal of attention which has had a great impact on recent research on language studies. The central idea in dynamic systems theory is that language development is a dynamic, interrelated and complex cognitive demand. In the case of reading skill, it is a complex construct composed of a set of interrelated components such as accuracy, fluency, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and vocabulary repertoire. An overview on literature shows that the majority of reading comprehension studies have predominantly focused on one shot approach on reading development studying only one of reading sub-components. However, to analyze reading development, we should consider all five-subcomponents in developmental process and concentrate on the interaction components too. In sum, to our best knowledge, most of the studies in this realm of inquiry have employed a limited number of subcomponents to account for reading comprehension research. Therefore, the impetus that prompted us to undertake this study was to analyze first grade monolingual and bilingual students' reading comprehension because identifying the amount of reading comprehension of bilingual students and comparing it with monolingual students is the first step in eliminating the problem of the high rate of retention and grade repetition in bilingual areas. Therefore, the present inquiry set to investigate (a) to compare monolingual and bilingual students' reading skill (b) and to find whether there are any significant relationships between the sub-components (accuracy, fluency, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and vocabulary repertoire) of students' reading skill.

In this study, 20 classes including 300 first grade students selected from monolingual and bilingual regions chosen through cluster sampling and three reliable and valid questionnaires including Shafiei et al.'s (1387) Inventory Reading Test (IRT), Soleimani and Dastjerdy's (1389) phonological awareness test, and a research made questionnaire based on Nematzade et al.'s (1390) study were employed to evaluate participants' reading skill. Meanwhile, four examiners were selected to measure the students' reading comprehension skill. Independent *t* test and Pearson correlation were considered to signify the findings.

The results indicated significant differences in accuracy and fluency between bilingual and monolingual students. However, there were not significant differences among reading comprehension, phonological awareness, vocabulary repertoire of bilingual and monolingual students. Pearson correlation indicated that five-

subcomponents of reading construct are highly interrelated. These results were generally in harmony with previous studies. However, these findings were inconsistent with a number of related researches. The possible explanation for significance and non-significance differences in reading sub-components of bilingual and monolingual could be discussed considering contrastive analysis and the method of bilingual education in Iran. Another point of our interpretation concerns interrelatedness of sub-components of reading skill. Under appropriate condition, development in one dimension of a skill may facilitate the emergence of other aspects of language output. Based on this issue, the possible justification for reading sub-components correlation may be the co-adaptation of reading sub-components to each other in a parallel form. Thus, these sub-components could have cross-fertilized one another.

Keywords: monolingual and bilingual, accuracy, fluency, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, vocabulary repertoire