



## Importance of Education in Mother Language for Iranian Bilingual Students

Pouran Seifi

*Department of Frisian Language and Culture  
University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

### ABSTRACT

Language is the very essence of communication in class but submersion instruction makes students frustrated and increases underachievement in non-Persian Iranian students. Teachers report diversity of problems in students learning process and parents are struggling with their children's educational problems in elementary grades mostly. It seems that application of strong type of bilingual education like immersion is recommended in most provinces of Iran in order to provide students with a warm and pleasant learning situation by respecting their rights as learning in their mother language and helping them develop to the highest level of their potentials in the society by leaning national language. This lead students, their families and communities to feel they belong to this country. Consequently, the unity of the country will be strengthened.

**Key words:** mother language, underachievement, bilingual education

### INTRODUCTION

Native or first language is the language in which a person finds identity. This language plays an important role in his/her personal relationships and it is used for thinking and imagination. So first concepts of the language are formed in his/her mind with this language.

Education is a process of communication. Levels of communication constitutes a language that is the only effective approach in the education process. People cannot communicate without language properly. Without communication education is impossible. Moreover, transition of cultural heritage and civilization is impossible without education. Family education is the first stage of human education which is done with family communications. Children in their social environment, family, learn their own language whose richness of vocabulary and grammar depends on the sociological and cultural environment of the child. Going to school is an important event for children because its form and content is different from family and environment of the children. However, if the school language is different from the child's language, the consequences of this event will be broader and it will have negative impact on pupils' education lives.

In terms of psychology, learning with native language leads to a better understanding of the content and provides cognitive development for pupils. They are attracted to the social environment easily. Language as a key element of culture, puts the pupils in touch with their cultural past. Emotionally application of mother language in education causes persistent use of their linguistic symbols; therefore, it stops the emotional disconnection due to not using the native language. Starting school, Iranian non-Farsi students do not find their mother language in School curriculum because instruction and course content language is based on only Farsi language which has no bond with their mother language with which they achieved previous experiences. While informal communication within the school may be done with their native language, such a dissociation between school language and the students' native language causes difficulties for their motivation.

Conflict between family-based communications and school official communication circuit is both qualitative and quantitative. It is qualitative because non-Fars students face with a language which is not the result of their cultural and life traits. It is quantitative since its syntax, phonetic and morphology is different from their native language. As a result, a gap emerges between students' native and school language. (Sarban, 2010)

The purpose of this study is to explain problems of monolingual education, ignoring minority language students' mother tongue, learning problems of Iranian elementary minority students in order to address the ministry of education and science of Iran to improve the current educational policy and allow the minority language students of Iran to be literate first in their mother language then acquire the national language.

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Mother language**

Morosu (n. d) elaborates 'mother tongue' as the notion that linguistic skills of a child are developed by the mother and, therefore, the language spoken by the mother would be the primary language that the child would learn. The mother tongue, native or first language, is what a person has learned from birth or within a critical period, where the ability to acquire a language is biologically linked to age, and thus becomes the basis for social identity.

The mother tongue is part of a child's personal, social and cultural identity. We get this identification from speaking our mother tongue that creates successful social patterns of acting and speaking. Our different social backgrounds make us unique and interesting in society.

The mother tongue is an essential instrument for the development of intellectual, physical and moral aspects of education. Mother tongue forms habits, conducts, values, virtues, customs and beliefs. Needless to say, weakness in the mother tongue indicates a paralysis of all thought and power of expression. (Morosu, n. d)

### **Literacy**

Literacy means the ability to read, write, competence and knowledge in a specified area.

Baker (2011) states that literacy has many uses in bilingual and multicultural situations. It can be used for learning, citizenship, pleasure and employment. Cultures, subcultures and localities diverse in the application of literacy in religious groups, transmission of heritage values and beliefs. Approaches to literacy include: the skills approach (functional literacy), construction of meaning, sociocultural literacy and critical literacy. A transmission literacy style to classroom literacy is contrasted to a critical approach where matters of power, status, equality and justice are addressed through a language minority perspective.

### **Advantages of education in mother language**

Ludi (2006) puts that many conditions enable or facilitate success at school. They include the quality of the relationships between adults and children and the fit between the requirements of school and the child's potential. It is necessary to stress the importance of the language of instruction which plays an essential role since knowledge of that language is the key to communication processes in class and, therefore, to children's acquisition of knowledge. A great deal of research has proved that mother tongue-based education in the sense established above significantly increases the chances of success at school, if not gives the best results. The most important of these are as follows:

- Learning the written language is enormously more effective when pupils already know the language. They are able to apply psycholinguistic strategies to form hypotheses about the relationships between an image and a word they know; they can also start to

communicate in writing as soon as they understand the fundamental spelling rules of their language. However, in submersion situations students may be able to decipher words written in a language they know only imperfectly or not at all.

- If a student's knowledge acquisition occur in first language, it starts not only much earlier but also at the (much) later stage when he/she is proficient enough in second language. The construction of new concepts in the negotiation between teacher and learners makes participatory acquisition contexts that accelerate cognitive and linguistic developments simultaneously. On the contrary, submersion practically excludes such interaction because of the limited linguistic knowledge.
- The teaching/learning of second language is not subordinated to the acquisition of the written form and a new conceptual network; it can be more systematic, according to orality and children's abilities and needs.
- When children have developed written proficiency in first language and communicative proficiency in second language, they will easily transfer the writing techniques and cognitive faculties obtained in the familiar language to second language. This occurs through what Cummins (as cited in Ludi, 2006) has called the "theory of interdependence", or "common underlying proficiency" which makes such cognitive and linguistic transfers possible and explains why it is unnecessary to acquire these faculties a second time.
- Students' development is easier to evaluate if they are tested in first language whereas, in submersion, linguistic competencies and knowledge of subjects are so confusing that teachers are not able to tell whether children do not understand a concept or have difficulties expressing themselves.
- The affective aspect, especially children's self-confidence, self-assurance, self-respect and identity, is reinforced if first language is used as the language of instruction. It boosts children's motivation, initiative and creativity and enables them to develop their personality and intelligence. However, submersion makes them silent and passive; mechanical repetition leads to frustration and, in the end, failure at school. (Ludi, 2006)

Baker (2011) believes that when home language is used at school, children may feel themselves, their home, family and community to be accepted, hence maintaining or raising their self-esteem. Bilingual education can help foundation of a more secure identity at a local, regional and national level.

### **Disadvantages of switching to another language in education**

If children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be weakened or even lost. Even more importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure and early school drop-out. (Morosu, n. d)

Additionally, Baker (2001) mentions that when a child's home language is replaced by the majority language, the child, the parents, relatives and not least the child's community may feel inadequate and disparaged by the school system.

Cummins (2001) puts that any convinced educator will agree that schools should founded on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and instruction should also develop children's abilities and skill. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we demolish children's language and destroy their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are conflicting the most basic of education. Moreover, children's cultural and linguistic

experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it.

### **National language and Bilingualism**

In countries with different minority language having a national language is a must to help all nation communicate to each other; moreover, learning the national language as a second language is necessary for children in that society. Moreover, there are many reasons for second language learning that will be explained as following:

First, social and individual reasons include external (out of the classroom) goals and internal (classroom) goals (Cook, as cited in Baker, 2001). Here national politics insist on the teaching of a national language for unity and social cohesion, while people may prefer instruction through the regional language. Basque separatists in Spain and Eastern Europeans rejecting Russian as the language of communism, are two examples of difference between social and individual wishes.

Second reason is social one. For language minority children, the purpose of second language instruction may be assimilationist and subtractive. Assimilationist ideology tends to work for the dominance of the second language. Learning the national language as a second language may be a step towards economic, social and political freedom. In Ireland, English-speaking children are taught Irish for this reason. A different societal reason for second language learning other than assimilationist or preservationist is to decrease conflict and obtain increased harmony between language groups through bilingualism.

The last one is individual reason. According to Baker (2001), "you need to understand other people, not just expect them to understand us".

### **Advantages of being bilingual**

Children or adult can benefit from being thought a second or third language as the following reasons:

1. Cultural awareness: To break down national ethnic and language stereotypes. It widens human understanding and tries to encourage sensitivity towards other cultures and beliefs. While cultural awareness may be conveyed in the first language, the inseparability of culture and language indicates that such awareness may best be achieved through simultaneous language learning.
2. Cognitive development: Given the memorization need to negotiate in communication, language learning has been regarded as a valuable academic activity in itself. (Baker.2011)

Another reason is to get a language for social, emotional and moral development, self-awareness, self-confidence and social and ethical values. Such affective purposes include the possibility of incipient bilingual being able to make more effective relationship with target language speakers. Mechell at al. (as cited in Baker, 2011) suggested that learning a second language increases the density of grey matter. Grey matter density was greater in bilinguals than monolinguals with early bilinguals having increased density comparing with late bilinguals.

Bilingualism has positive effects on children's linguistic and educational development. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they obtain a deeper understanding of language and how to apply it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize

reality. More than 150 research studies conducted during the past 35 years strongly support what Goethe, the German philosopher, once said: The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language. The research puts that bilingual children may also develop more flexibility in their thinking because of processing information through two different languages. (Cummins, 2001)

Tse (as cited in Baker, 2011) states that literacy practices in two or more languages increases functions to a language, widens the choice of literature for enjoyment, gives more opportunities for understanding different perspectives and viewpoints, and leads to a deeper understanding of history, heritage, traditions and territory.

In some cases of bilingualism underachievement is seen with different reasons. According to Baker (2011), some people blame the child to be bilingual. But only when both languages are not sufficiently developed to cope in the curriculum can blame be attributed to bilingualism itself. Even in that case home, neighborhood or societal circumstances that made underdeveloped languages must be blamed.

The second reason may be lack of exposure to the majority language. In the US and UK, a typical explanation for the underachievement of some language minorities is insufficient exposure to English. Therefore, mainstreaming and transitional forms of education attempt to ensure a fast conversion to the majority language. It is necessary to mention that a fast conversion to the majority language could do more harm than good, because it denies the child skills in the home language, denies the cognitive and academic competence already available through that home language and often denies the identity and self-respect of the child.

Instead of building upon existing language proficiency and knowledge, the sink or swim approach tries to replace such language abilities. (Baker, 2011)

When bilingual children exhibit underachievement, then related reason is sometimes a mismatch between home and school. For instance, advice by some educational psychologists and speech therapists has been for language minority parents to grow their children in the majority and school language such a mismatch is seen as not just about language differences but also about dissimilarities in culture, values and beliefs. As an extreme, this tends to reflect a majority viewpoint that is assimilationist, imperialist and even oppressive. (Baker, 2011)

According to Baker (2011), the alternative view about bilingual children's underachievement is that the school system should be flexible enough to incorporate the home language and culture. A mismatch between home and school can be positively addressed by strong forms of bilingual education for language minorities. By dual language and heritage language programs, by the inclusion of parents in the operation of the school, by involving parents as partners and participants in their child's education, the mismatch can be a merger. An additive and not subtractive outcome is then probable.

Cummins (as cited in baker, 2011) states that another reason of bilingual child's underachievement is the type of school a child attends. The child will have desire to attain more if placed in programs that use the heritage language as a medium of instruction rather than in programs that searches to replace the home language as quickly as possible. A system that concealing the home language is likely to be responsible for individual and ethnic group underachievement where such problems exist.

## DISCUSSION

The education system in Iran is basically divided into five cycles namely, pre-school, primary, middle (or guidance), secondary and post-secondary. Three outstanding characteristics of the Iranian education system must be mentioned at this point. First, elementary education is mandatory under the Iranian constitution. Secondly, due to increasing number of applicants, admission to post-secondary institutions is through a nation-wide entrance examination and thus only the most talented students can enter universities. Finally, in general, education (in primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels) is free of charge though private schools and universities authorized by law are allowed to charge tuition fees. The language of education is only Persian or Farsi.

Moreover, according to the 2008 census, population of Iran includes more than 70,472,000 people. More than half of the population of Iran is active population and about 39.5% of population is under 14 years old. The main ethnics of Iran are named Turks, Persians, Kurds, Lurs, Baluch, Bakhtiari, Talysh, Turkmen, Qashqai, Arabs, Gilaki and Laks. However, considering the vastness and variety of the Iranians, smaller ethnic groups live in Iran, as well. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country's official and script language is Persian. But given the fact that Iran is a very large country more than 75 languages and dialects spoken in the country. The major spoken languages of Iran are, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Turkmen, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Khalaji, Lori, Bakhtiari, Arabic, Balochi, Leckie, Tati, Armenian, Assyrian, Mandaeen, Georgian, Hebrew and Chaldean. According to the fifteenth principle of the Iranian constitution, textbooks in Iran must be taught in Persian language and script. However, the use of regional and ethnic languages in the press, media and teaching their literature in schools beside Persian is allowed.

Based on aforementioned data a large number Iranians are at school age. Generally it is told that Turks are the largest population of Iran after Persians but there is no exact number available because authority tries to conceal that. However, a great number of students are non-Persians but not only they are not allowed to be educated in their mother tongue but also they are robbed of learning their own language literature which national constitution allowed. Consequently, these minority language students have diverse problems especially in elementary school.

Hoseini (as cited in Sarban, 2010) investigated the causes of underachievement in Tabriz (East Azerbaijan) and concluded that one of the reasons of underachievement in children whose native language is not Persian is that they have communicated with others to meet their needs at home and outside for 6 years. After this long time, they face with unfamiliar Persian rather than their familiar mother language at school. In such situation the first phases of education content may not be transmitted well and comprehended. Consequently, the likelihood of achieving the objectives of training and education will be reduced and dropouts in education will be caused.

Osareh (2008) conducted an experiment in Turk and Arab regions of Iran. She compared language functions and structures of 2 languages of Turk and Arab with Persian in first 3 months of educational year. Findings of her research indicate that students in elementary grades in bilingual regions have problems with oral comprehension of Persian, hence they cannot be placed in education circle easily and cannot cope with the school instructions. These problems are severe in first two months, but they are decreased later. Teachers have to use students' local language to teach them to let them understand subjects. Due to incomplete comprehension of Persian, students cannot react suitably to questions or they are not able to

understand simple words and school curriculum well. According to Osareh (2008), students have pronunciation problems, they pronounce Persian words with local accents. Some of these pronunciation problems are because of phonetic differences between Persian and those languages. Students cannot use nouns correctly and no compound nouns are seen in their sentences. Arab students have problems in conjugating verbs and verbs are not used with proper subject and pronoun. However, Turk students do not bring adverbs correctly and have difficulties in adjectives.

Oral sentences of students are short and combined with limited vocabulary. Their sentences have not adverb and adjective. Moreover, adjective clauses are rarely found in their sentences. Facing with questions, they do not react properly so that they are shocked, crying, silent and present unrelated answers and repeat peers answers. Generally, they answer the questions and explain subjects with the least words and sentences. Their conversation is full of pauses without correct structure because their being bilingual is a type of combined, unbalanced, unstable and artificial and often occurs in school. Since their knowledge of Persian is weak, they cannot reach to a stable level deeply. Conversation in Persian is restricted to home and out of school. As a result, the format of that limited conversation in Persian is flawed. Students reading problem has different reasons. Some of them are due to not being prepared in pre-reading stage. Another set of problems in reading disability can be attributed to failure in recognizing letters and words. Some other symptoms are because of not comprehending the meaning during reading process.

Pronunciation errors and reading slowly with pauses can be found in abundance. Some of their problems as disability in writing subjects are very visible. Their writing has drawbacks in terms of structure and message. The number of words in their sentences are limited.

She adds that there are a lot of differences and some similarities between Persian and other two languages in construction of phonetic, morphology and syntax. It seems that the differences between them are the basic for creating language-learning difficulties.

However, Magga at al. (2004) declare the children's education right as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states in Art. 29 that the education of the child shall be directed to "The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and "The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin". Based on ILO Convention No. 169, Art. 29, "The imparting of general knowledge and skills that will help children belonging to the peoples concerned to participate fully and on an equal footing in their own community and in the national community shall be the aim of education for these peoples". The most essential educational Linguistic Human Right (LHR) in education for ITM children is an unconditional right to mother tongue medium education in a non-fee state school, at least during the whole primary education (minimally 6 but preferably 8 years). (p. 2)

## CONCLUSION

As Baker (2011) elaborates, there two kinds of bilingual education. Some of them are weak forms which their basic purpose is assimilation of language minorities rather than maintenance of their home languages and cultural pluralism. In non-Persian regions of Iran although teaching in another language is not allowed, some teachers converse to students' mother language to help them understand the basics. It seems that at least they try this type of

bilingual education at first grade to help students be assimilated in Persian language and they are not taught their own culture.

As Baker states the basic purpose is still assimilation and not bilingualism or biliteracy. They are named as mainstreaming/ submersion, segregationist, transitional bilingual and separatist forms of bilingual education.

Regarding the fact that majority of Iranian students are non-Persian, most of their parents, teachers are struggling with children's learning problems and the children themselves tolerate big pressure of underachievement and disappointment. It is time even so late to give back their real right of education in their mother language. It is worthwhile to use other countries experiences on having bilingual instruction in their schools, train bilingual teachers and stop wasting the smart human resources of Iran. There are some varieties of strong bilingual education where the application of both languages, national language as majority language and mother language as minority language, in the curriculum is fostered. Strong forms of bilingual education determined for students to become bilingual, biliterate and bicultural sometimes multicultural, multilingual and multiliteracies. Some of the well-known strong bilingual education types are immersion, heritage language and dual language education. (Baker, 2011)

The vital solution for dropouts in schools is bilingual education which can help students obtain knowledge in their mother language to build strong educational foundation. If they learn their own culture at school, their self-esteem will be given back to them. As a result, they will have tendency to learn national language in order to have success in higher stages of education and to have a proper job deserving their talent and hard-working. This kind of additive education will support the unity of the country and erase the threat of separationist beliefs.

## References

- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundation of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. USA: McNaughton & Gunn Ltd.
- Cummins, J. (2001). *Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?* Sprogforum, 7(19), 15-20. Retrieved from [http://www15.gencat.net/pres\\_casa\\_llengues/uploads/articles/Bilingual%20Childrens%20Mother%20Tongue.pdf](http://www15.gencat.net/pres_casa_llengues/uploads/articles/Bilingual%20Childrens%20Mother%20Tongue.pdf).
- Ludi, G. (2006). *Considerations on the place of mother tongue in schools*. Retrieved from <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=11142&Language=en>.
- Magga, D., H., Nicolaison, I., Trask, M., Skutnabb-Kangas, T. & Dunbar, R. (2004). *Indigenous children's education and indigenous languages*. Retrieved from [http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/pdf/PFII\\_Expert\\_paper\\_1\\_Education\\_final.pdf](http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/pdf/PFII_Expert_paper_1_Education_final.pdf).
- Morosu, G., L., B., N. (n. d). *How important is mother language?* Retrieved from <http://www.newvision.co.ug/mobile/Detail.aspx?NewsID=632321&CatID=396>.
- Osareh, F. (2008). *Investigation of language learning problems of first grade students in bilingual regions*. *Educational Sciences*, 9, 42-60. Retrieved from <http://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/388060>.
- Sarban, H. (2010). *Description and different kinds of bilingualism*. [Web log post] Retrieved from <http://kobra88.blogfa.com/post-8.aspx>.