

Research Article

An Analysis on Iranian EFL Learners' Prospects toward Bilingualism

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Abstract

The 21st century has seen significant scholarly interest in the benefits of bilingualism and foreign language learning at both individual and societal levels. Bilingualism, defined as the capability to use two languages proficiently, is increasingly prevalent due to global mobility and cross-cultural interactions. This study explores the perceptions of bilingualism among 20 young adult Iranian EFL learners at a state-run university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews incorporating both closed and open-ended questions to ensure triangulation and reliability of findings. Participants were asked specifically about how bilingualism impacts their identity, emotions, personality, mental abilities, cognitive processes, and intelligence. Results indicated strongly positive attitudes towards bilingualism, with learners highlighting benefits such as improved cognitive skills, increased mental flexibility, enhanced personal identity, and emotional stability. The findings underscore bilingualism as a valuable asset in personal development and academic contexts, supporting the promotion of bilingual education programs.

Keywords

Bilingualism, Cognition, Identity, Monolingual, Prospect

Introduction

Bilinguals, those who know and use more than one language, have various linguistic experiences relative to monolinguals, who know only one language. These experiences stem from different interactions with their environments and the individuals therein.

Whether someone is trying to decipher multilingual signs at high speeds on the highway, order coffee in a bilingual city, or communicate academic research to multilingual peers, the

people involved in these interactions bring to the table their individual levels of language knowledge, language fluency, language preferences, overt goals, and covert intentions. Bilingual environments thus have fluctuating language demands (Anderson et al., 2018). In its most general form, bilingualism refers to the ability to use two languages in everyday life (Grosjean, 2010) and can be considered as a complex mental activity (Adesope et al., 2010). Contemporary research indicates that the equal usage of L1 and L2 might be very beneficial (Thomas-Sunesson, Hakuta & Bialystok, 2016). In addition, Baumgart and Billick (2017) stated that “Bilingualism is

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generally categorized by equal or near-equal proficiency in two languages that have been used regularly by the subject for the majority of their life" (p 273–283). Current views on bilingualism are positive, with dual-language acquisition being encouraged rather than suppressed. Realizing the significance and frequent request for being bilingualism in the modern era, this report is an attempt to analyze prospects of 20 young adult EFL learners toward bilingualism at an Iranian state-run university. The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews using both closed-question and open-question methods. In other words, this was conducted to triangulate the results of the comparative analysis of the given prospects. Study sample were asked how and to what extent their identity, affection, personality, mental capability, cognition, and intelligence have been affected by bilingualism.

The age at which one acquires a second language plays a vital role. Accordingly, we recognize between early and late bilingualism. Early bilingualism covers *infant bilingualism* (roughly up to the age of three) and *child bilingualism* reaching approximately to the age of puberty, which is regarded as the onset of *adult or late bilingualism*. Provided that both languages are acquired by the child at the same time (as in the case when a child is born in a family where the parents speak different languages), we speak of *simultaneous bilingualism*, and if the second language is learned after the child (or adult) has already acquired his/her first language (e.g. a child of immigrant parents who meets the second language only on entering compulsory education), the process is referred to as *successive or sequential bilingualism*. Simultaneous acquisition of two languages always happens in a natural setting (usually the family), whereas successive bilingualism develops in a tutored environments, such as a kindergarten, a school or any institution systematically providing or supporting education in the second language. Balanced bilingualism represents an ideal which is very difficult to achieve and uphold. Totally, most bilinguals tend to be more fluent and generally proficient in one language, or even in some uses of it, i.e. they have a dominant language and a weaker one (e.g. a bilingual engineer with a Bosnian father and a Slovene mother, born and educated in Slovenia and working in a Slovene company, will use Bosnian at home with his father and during the holidays with his paternal family, and Slovene with his mother, his maternal family and at work, and will consider Slovene as his dominant language). The language they feel most at home in is their preferred language, which in most of the cases coincides with their dominant language. Anyhow, these language roles may change in a bilingual's life for different reasons, very often as a result of the status awarded to a language in a community (e.g. if the Bosnian engineer's company opens a branch-office in Sarajevo and he moves to Bosnia to work there, marries a Bosnian and decides to live there, Slovenian

might lose its importance and become his weaker language in time). The condition, in which languages are acquired in a balanced way, with no status differences attributed to them, is termed *additive bilingualism* (implying a language "gain"). When a second language is learned to the detriment of the first language (especially if it is a minority language), we speak of *subtractive bilingualism* (implying a loss), which usually results in the proficiency of the second language increasing as the mastery of the first language decreases (Lambert 1974). Subtractive bilingualism may also lead to semilingualism which mean a person is unable to function properly in either of his/her languages, which is also one of the most frequently voiced criticisms of bilingualism and plurilingualism. The extent to which subtractive bilingualism will take place largely depends on the status of each language, i.e. whether it is the majority or a minority language is a community. This is very often the case with children of immigrant families, who, when they enter the educational system, are not encouraged or given opportunities to uphold their first language, while the family environment is not able to systematically provide support and motivation in this sense. The definitions of bilingualism (or plurilingualism) which focus on the bilingual's proficiency in each of his/her languages fail to recognize the importance of the functionality of these languages, i.e. how they can be used to communicate effectively. Oksaar (1983:9) suggests combining the criteria of competence and function in her definition of bilingualism (which perfectly applies to plurilingualism) as "the ability of a person to use here and now two or more language as a means of communication in most situations and to switch from one language to the other if necessary". And in her culture-me-theory Oksaar (1988) also stresses that communication not only involves verbal means, but para-verbal, non-verbal and extra-verbal elements as well, which all can be used to compensate for the lack of verbal elements. For instance, when we lack the adequate, culture-specific verbal means to express politeness and respect, we can try to convey these aspects by using a limited number of words, but a meaningful intonation and extensive body language. As to the functions which languages fulfil, House (2001) distinguishes between *languages for communication* (such as English used as lingua franca) and *languages for identification*, which are used for interpersonal exchange across cultures and for expressing one's identity as a member of a particular cultural community. In international conferences, for example, English is generally regarded as the most appropriate language for communication, lectures are delivered, papers presented, negotiations conducted and the corresponding documents drawn-up in English, whereas the less formal contacts between the participants, in which their cultural identities are expressed, social contacts created, often occur by using other languages shared by the interactants in the communication, in

which they might be less proficient when discussing professional topics.

Review of Related Literature

Bilingual approach

A re-evaluation of the learners' L1 in L2 acquisition has posed a serious challenge to practices following a monolingual approach (Levine, 2013). Traceable to the Direct Method as a response to the prevailing Grammar Translation at the end of the 19th century, monolingualism has been explicitly or implicitly the valid paradigm in many of the divergent approaches and methods since then (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Mahboob & Lin, 2016). The monolingual approach assumes that L2 is best taught exclusively through L2 by native-speaker teachers, effective L2 learning resembles L1 acquisition and learners need to reach a native speaker-like competence (G. Cook, 2018). However, these assumptions and views that L1 use reduces the time available for L2, prevents learners from thinking in L2, and L1 interferes with L2 so that the languages should be kept separated are no longer supported unanimously (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Theoretical and Practical Background

In Al-Amri (2013) words, from the first half of the 20th century, whether bilingualism affect at the individual level has been discussed as a topic of essential investigation. Researchers have fallen into two main directions in answering this question. Some researchers claim that bilingualism is a negative phenomenon that has detrimental effects on bilingual. Recently, a number of researchers have produced evidence on the positive side that claim that bilingualism affects creativity and intelligence. According to May et al (2004) it was in the 1920s that bilingualism first attracted the attention of psychologists, when they became interested in understanding why bilinguals perform poorer at school than their monolingual peers. [Lee and Kim \(2011\)](#) revealed that participants with a higher degree of bilingualism tend to perform better on creative thinking tasks. Researchers have also suggested that learning contexts can directly shape the cognitive abilities of bilinguals ([Anderson et al., 2018](#)). Fayyazi, Sahragard, Roshan and Zandi (2013) tried to explore the different intelligences in monolingual and bilingual high school students. The findings indicated that the bilinguals had higher linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, and interpersonal intelligences than monolingual and monolinguals had higher intrapersonal intelligence than bilingual students. According to [Bialystok \(2011\)](#), bilinguals have an

advantage in executive functions because they would continuously train them to carry on a conversation that must be based on the context and require constant access to the information contained in the working memory. Furthermore, it is necessary to select the appropriate language for the specific communicative situation (inhibiting the other language) and to monitor what happens during the interaction (cognitive flexibility). Some of the cognitive functions that would seem to benefit from the knowledge of several languages are the metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, the ability to represent abstract and symbolic concepts ([Adesope et al., 2010](#)), and specifically, the bilingualism should improve the executive functioning. Wodniecka, Craik, Lou, Bialystok (2010) assert that most of the recent findings that reveal a bilingual advantage have been reported in intentional tasks that need the resolution of conflicting information in the visual field such as Simon task, Stroop task, and ANT task. They believe that this conflict resolution is done by the complex process of executive control. Executive control is needed for all forms of high processes done in the brain including the memory procedures used in everyday cognitive tasks, neglecting interference, performing on the ongoing streams of information, using effective retrieval procedures, and processing materials sufficiently. They claim that memory retrieval consist of two major components: familiarity and recollection. The difference between familiarity and recollection can be described in everyday lives and while recognizing someone you may know beforehand, for example. Neurobilingual research suggests a link between cognitive control and emotional processes in the ^[1]brain. The regions involved in cognitive control (e.g. attention, self-regulation), prefrontal cortex (PFC) and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and emotion become activated when situations demand emotion regulation or control of emotional thoughts, such as in response to an aversive event (e.g. pain). Interestingly, bilinguals simultaneously activate areas associated with cognitive control and emotion on language switching tasks, even when processing emotionally-neutral words. (Hernandez, 2009).

When doing a conversation whether speaking or listening, bilinguals activate both of their languages simultaneously. This parallel activation happens across different linguistic contexts for bilinguals (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013) including in language perception and production. When both areas are active, bilinguals have to manage the activation of an irrelevant language while trying to understand and produce speech in the target language. This causes the increase of Bilinguals' overall cognitive load. To do this management, bilinguals rely on inhibitory control. Inhibitory control is a device to choose what language that the speaker should produce, in this case, sometimes, switching languages often happens. By using inhibitory control more often makes this device more sensitive and make

the brain does too. When using one language, another area of language is also active.

It makes more neurons on two parts of brain work. That thing is so much in line with the research that states the more our brain works, the better its function is. Thus being natural a “mental-Juggler” of two languages (Kroll, 2009) increases cognitive control efficiency and transform the cognitive system, allowing it to accommodate and manage multiple languages. The further explore relationship between language activation and cognitive control, in a subsequent study, Blumenfeld and Marian (2013) measured between-language competition and cognitive control abilities in bilinguals. The cognitive benefits may arise from the need to manage switching between two languages that are activated in parallel. Importantly, the studies discussed in this section demonstrate that bilinguals can be considered experts at managing linguistic competition. In addition to the interplay between language, memory, and emotion, language and culture are closely intertwined (Freeman, 2016). When exploring how bilingual experience impacts emotion, it is necessary to consider cultural influences, as culture imposes norms on how we interpret emotional events.

Aims and research questions

The technological innovations during the past century have revolutionized information transfer leading to cross-cultural and multi-lingual human communication. Considering the importance of multilingual education in the recent century, the current study documented a survey on Iranian students' perception of bilingual education. The term bilingualism has been given different interpretations and connotations depending on the context within which it has been studied. From the sociolinguistic point of view, it is associated with contexts other than those strictly related to language and society as it is inextricably linked to the individual and the process of forming not only collective but individual identities, as well. Scholars are diverse in their attempts to address a variety of issues associated with the phenomenon of bilingualism. Among many others, the following are some of the general questions usually dealt with: Are bilinguals to be considered two personalities in one or two separate personalities? What processes are involved in switching from one language to another? What is the influence of the environment during language acquisition?

Article structure

The current report is divided into clearly defined and numbered sections. Section 1 of the present article with its subsections begin with introduction, that is, the overall topic

and theme, literature review, and the aim and research question. Following that are sections 2 and 3 which include the structure and research methodology respectively. In sections 4 and 5, results and conclusion and discussion related to this study are described.

Research Methodology

Sample size

In this study, the survey research method which incorporates the use of questionnaire was used as it is the most common form of research method engaged by educational researchers to gain qualitative, descriptive as well as quantitative data (Abdul Ghafur, as cited in Yunus & Hern, 2011). The questionnaire which was piloted in another study previously was administered to 20 participants. 11 male and 9 female EFL learners of different age range (17- 44) filled in the questionnaires. In the questionnaire their attitudes and perceptions toward bilingual education, i.e., use of their mother tongue in class were studied. In addition, their views about maintaining native languages and cultures and the language policy in an Iranian context were investigated. Cronbach's alpha was estimated for checking the reliability of the attitude questionnaire and it was reported to be 0.92.

Instruments

To conduct the project, a descriptive method was selected that is the most frequently employed research design throughout the globe. The standardized descriptive approach needs the application of questionnaires, private talks, etc. The tools employed to gather information included a test, a qualification questionnaire and an inquiry. A test including twenty questions was designed to evaluate knowledge level of the learners on the language ability which all learners took and answered the questions such as years of familiarity with digital learning, the tendency toward internet, hours spending on computers or internet a day or a week, reasons for using webs, etc. The background questionnaire also included learners' age, gender, grade, place of living, and so on. It involved 20 items. Besides, it wanted them if they are interested in bilingualism and how often and where they think about it. The survey (Alpha=0.77), adapted from inclination towards Internet created by Kilincoglu and Altun (in Isman, 2004), contained 20 statements in Likert type (strongly agree=5, agree=4, undecided=3, disagree=2, strongly disagree=1) and aimed to evaluate the degree of the prospects of the participants toward digital learning and distance education (See Appendix 1).

Data Analysis and Data Collection

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20) was employed to analyze the data. Assigning the significance level of 0.05, an independent samples t-test was used to examine the effect of linguistic background (monolingualism and bilingualism) on MI profiles of the participants. Additionally, the effect of gender as a moderator variable was tested. As noted earlier, this study was a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based research design. This investigation looked at participants' attitudes on being bilingual conducted among a group of university EFL students. A total of 20 college EFL learners majoring in TEFL participated in the survey, took introductory notes and completed it in exchange for course credits. In particular, 100% (n = 20) were college students. To respond the study question, 20 subjects were interviewed for expressing prospects toward bilingualism and its effect on their identity, affection, personality, mental capability, cognition, and intelligence. They were asked what they thought about the influences of being bilingual. Mean of the learners' life span, with the range of 20 and 29, was 26. In Table 1, dividing of the participants based on age, gender, and education levels were shown in number and percent. Of the participants, fifty percent, that is, 10 subjects were male and fifty percent, that is, 10 were female learners. An online program was designed to gather information from those learners. The researcher primarily sent students an invitation email to the online survey. Then, just university learners who consented to take part and gave informed consent were chosen as subjects. After that they were requested to click the Continue button to complete the investigation. Respondents perceived system quality, perceived benefits of bilingualism and its effects on identity, affection, personality, mental capability, cognition, and intelligence. At the end, the participants responded demographic questions about age, gender, and grade.

Table 1: Participants based on variables

Variables		N	%
Age	24	13	69%
	28	4	18%
	29	1	3%
	25	2	10%
Gender	Male	50%	
	Female	50%	

Level	upper intermediate	100%
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Results

The outcomes indicated that the learners became more positive in benefits of bilingualism at a significant level. To value the learners' attitudes towards bilingualism, multivariate regression analysis was employed (**Table 2**). The outcomes revealed that the learners became more positive in indicating benefits of bilingualism at a significant level. On the whole, findings indicated that the learners' prospects do not differ significantly in the statements in the survey. They all show inclination toward bilingualism effectiveness on identity, affection, personality, mental capability, cognition, and intelligence. Consequently, the inquiry hypothesis is confirmed. Participants were mostly believed that bilingualism was a worldwide demand, the quickest method to deliver knowledge, a space that causes pretty accordance among individuals, an influential training instrument and a method to deliver learning for learners to search in websites enthusiastically by knowing more languages. Almost all participants thought that it is enjoyable to seek information from the Internet and it is rudimentary to increase cultures connections through bilingualism. Bilingualism and gathering knowledge other than native language are considered as a source providing an easy life for them and includes necessary, useful information, and culminates in improved communities and knowledge. Put it in the other way, the obtained findings indicate that the learners believed that bilingualism culminates in a free life, makes mind calmness, and culminates in independency of mind. It develops people intelligence, affection, mental capacity, and cognition. The participants also believed that it influences individuals' personality positively so that they feel relaxed as having a high personality. The researcher conducted the report in the second current semester, 2022. The background questionnaire and survey were provided in the ten days then, they were distributed. After that, the obtained findings were statistically interpreted and analyzed with SPSS in two steps. Primarily, the frequencies were marked for posed questions. Further, the ANOVA values and independent samples tests were estimated to show the correlations among the all variables. In this paper, the dependent variables were 20 statements in the survey whereas the independent variables included identity, affection, personality, mental capability, cognition, and intelligence. In

the investigation, it was found out that a number of the variables and statements in the research are correlated.

Table 2: Learners' Attitudes toward bilingualism

Statements	Strongly agree and agree		Undecided, disagree and strongly disagree	
	N	%	N	%
Bilingualism affects identity.	19	95	1	5
Bilingualism provides an easy life.	18	90	2	10
Bilingualism is a fast method to reach knowledge.	18	90	2	10
Bilingualism culminates in good exchange.	16	80	4	20
Bilingualism helps mental capacity.	20	100	0	0
Bilingualism is vital for people.	19	95	1	5
Bilingualism is effective for cognition.	19	95	1	5
Bilingualism motivates learners to search.	20	95	1	5
Bilingualism helps to get information from Internet.	18	90	2	10
It is enjoyable for most.	19	95	1	5
The effects of bilingualism are permanent.	18	90	2	10
Bilingualism causes to be far away from anxiety .	20	100	0	0
It gives you real world skills.	17	85	3	15
It upgrades learners.	18	90	2	10
Bilingualism promotes tendency for prepared knowledge.	17	85	3	15

Conclusions and Discussion

We are surrounded by language during nearly every waking moment of our lives. We employ language to communicate our thoughts and feelings, to link with others and identify with our culture, and to understand the world around

us. And for many people, this rich linguistic environment involves not just one language but two or more. *Nowadays*, more of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual than monolingual. In addition to facilitating cross-cultural communication, this trend also positively impacts cognitive abilities. Researchers have indicated that the bilingual brain can have better attention and task-switching capacities than the monolingual brain, thanks to its developed ability to inhibit one language while using another. This study is significant as it gives the public information on an issue that has recently been growing more and more in many areas in the world. This specific issue has a high relevance in our community due to the growing globalization but also because it has the power to affect the education of adolescents and their knowledge and acceptance of the world. Assuredly, a bilingual body has more than one perspective and attitude, and is aware of more than just one world because such individual can think and express itself in more than one language, which can aid with critical thinking and problem solving. Bilingualism has been shown to be a lifestyle enrichment factor correlating with greater neural plasticity across the lifespan, at least under conditions of active and sustained engagement (see Pliatsikas [2020](#) for review). The science of bilingualism is a young field, and definitive answers to many questions are not yet available. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of bilingual students about bilingual educational program. The results and discussion of the research from analyzing the data indicated that, students favor their mother tongue beside official language in the educational program. In conclusion, it appears that pupils care more than what was believed or shown in the society about their home languages. Since the age range carries variable in this study, it gives us a broad view of ideas regarding bilingual education.

As age increases, awareness of the pupils is increased regarding the importance of their mother tongue. But concerning gender, both genders are in favor of bilingual education. Although we conducted a research on bilingual education, this study has exclusively focused on two variables in bilingual educational setting which are age and gender and just one approach in collecting data which was questionnaire was used. In fact, the reason of the obtained result is another area of research which is still unresolved.

Another area of future study is to investigate how bilingual education differs in early and late ages. We acknowledge that, since our research is limited to one bilingual city, our findings may not be fully generalizable. It is logical to assume that other bilingual cities or countries might have different views concerning bilingual education. Therefore a further research is needed to explore bilingual learners' beliefs. Our findings

can be used to set a future educational agenda in bilingual countries. In addition, learners' first language should be taken into account by material developers and curriculum designers to lead to a successful learning.

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Appendix 1

Bilingualism provides an easy life.

Bilingualism is a fast method to reach knowledge.

Bilingualism culminates in good exchange.

Bilingualism helps mental capacity.

Bilingualism is vital for people.

Bilingualism is effective for cognition.

Bilingualism motivates learners to search.

Bilingualism helps to get information from Internet.

It is enjoyable for most.

The effects of bilingualism are permanent.

Bilingualism causes to be far away from anxiety .

It gives you real world skills.

It upgrades learners.

Bilingualism promotes tendency for prepared knowledge.

Bilingualism includes necessary and useful knowledge.

Bilingualism causes destroyed societies.

Bilingualism does not save time and money.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism promotes active and independency.
