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Classroom teachers' viewpoints about the effects of immersion programs on native language development in a Turkish context

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Abstract

Educational experts are in a continuous effort for a more effective and efficient EFL model to meet personal communication needs of learners in English starting from an early age. Present outcomes of the EFL programs implemented in Turkey does not seem very promising and a search for more effective foreign language teaching practices has gained importance. As one of the solutions that private educational institutions have implemented is immersion programs, which is based on bilingual classroom practices. In this study it is aimed to investigate the effects of immersion programs on elementary students' native language development through viewpoints of classroom teachers at a bilingual school in Ankara. A focus group was selected randomly among elementary school students, and a semi structured interview was conducted and recoded with 7 classroom teachers. The answers were analyzed via MAXQDA 11 qualitative analysis program. The results show that there is no significant effect of bilingual teaching on students' native language development.

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Keywords: Bilingual education; classroom teachers; elementary school students; immersion programs; language development; native language.

1. Introduction

Developing a plurilingual identity widens vision of individuals and brings them a new perspective to the life. It may be a way to develop self-confidence, to be involved in the social life, and to become productive on international

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platforms. Today interaction among the citizens of different countries, global progress in trade, improvement in communication technologies and development in industrialization necessitate individuals' being able to speak at least two other languages besides their native language.

Foreign language learners who are exposed to intensive programs may not become good at communicating with native speakers of that language if they gain competence only in grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing skills rather than communication skills (Barimani, 2013). On the other hand bilingual children are more advantageous over monolinguals as they are more aware of form and meaning in language since they develop syntactic orientation to language earlier. Cognitive benefits that bilingual children show is an advantage as they are good at dissociating concepts from the words which they are verbalized as it is closely related to cognitive flexibility (Harley et al, 1986; Sampath,2005).

Effective EFL programs for young learners can be categorized under five headings namely; **FLEX programs** (foreign language exploratory or experience), **FLES programs** (foreign language in elementary school), **Immersion programs**, **Dual-language or two way immersion programs**, and **Transnational and maintenance programs** (Shin and Crandall 2014). In the immersion programs, education is provided in the medium of English totally or partially at least in some parts of the school period and in some courses. Meanwhile, the learners' native language is not neglected and in the partial immersion programs half of the school subjects are taught in the learners' own language. In immersion programs learners are expected to develop functional proficiency in English to become effective users of the language for their personal communication needs in real life situations inside and outside of the school settings.

Private schools in Turkey offer intensive EFL programs starting from pre-schools and elementary schools to develop children's language skills. Those children who have the opportunity of going to private schools start learning English at an early age. Many schools offer additional partially immersion programs (Turkish- English medium bilingual classes) besides their EFL courses to make the language learning process more effective and fruitful, and to support academic achievement in their native language, Turkish.

The students English language competence development, their language competences in Turkish and their academic achievements in the bilingual classes are discussed in the proceeding sections of the study.

2. Problem statement

The problem statement of the study is "What do classroom teachers in Turkey think about the effects of immersion programs on mother tongue development of their students?" Based on this problem statement the sub problems of the study can be stated as follows:

- What is the influence of immersion programs on their skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) development?
- What are the educational attainments of students exposed to an additional language?
- What is the level of their linguistic (phonological, morphological and syntactic) awareness in immersion programs?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A focus group interview was organized and the interview was recorded and decoded. Teachers' gender, teaching experience in their present school and prior teaching experience in bilingual schools were identified. Seven female classroom teachers participated in the study. Their teaching experiences varied from 28- 37 years. None of them had a prior training or teaching experience in another bilingual system in Turkey or abroad.

3.2. Materials

A questionnaire of 9 open ended questions was prepared by the researchers based on the resources in the related review of literature on immersion programs and bilingual classes. The questionnaire was first administered to 10 other teachers in the same school, and as a result of the teachers' comprehension of the questions and their responses, and the experts' opinions, 5 of the 9 questions were decided to be used in the research.

3.3. Findings and discussion

The answers were categorized under 3 headings as skills development, educational attainment, and structural awareness. The findings based on each topic are as follows:

3.3.1. Skills and vocabulary development

Teachers stressed on skills and vocabulary development on both languages. They told that they hadn't noticed any remarkable effect of listening and writing skills whereas they emphasized on the development of vocabulary and speaking and reading skills as below;

T3: 'When they make up a sentence in Turkish they usually insert one or two English words into that sentence. That's a negative effect in speaking skills but they don't do it in writing much'.

T1: 'They may do it as they want to show that they know English because most class teachers are not as competent as their students in English. It is a kind of show off I think'

T4: 'They are capable of reading popular books in English, such as Gulliver's Travels. They also read it in Turkish and comment on the interpretations in each book. They criticize the translator author. They want to read more especially world classics for children both in Turkish and English and try to make comment on them. This process supports their cognitive development as they think critically'.

T2: 'In fact they gain a good knowledge of vocabulary in English because the courses are constructed on Turkish curriculum and English teachers give relevant vocabulary to the students. The course may be science or maths but at the end they have learned the words, phrases and also sentences related to that course subject'

When students were learning reading and math or science in their nonnative language only, this may be affected negatively in their ability to understand and subsequently learn the material. Receiving instruction in the native language may result in increased performance along with probable advantages in executive functioning and metalinguistic awareness (Marian, Shook and Schroeder, 2013).

Immersion programs provide potential improvements in academic performance and also make them gain proficiency in both languages of instruction (Marian, Shook and Schroeder, 2013; Collier and Thomas, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, 2005). In the globalized world, the ability of communicating in two languages and interacting with a large population is probably an advantage for the students who are exposed to immersion programs.

Awareness towards linguistic and communicative language skills will be resulted in predicting later reading skills (Dreher and Zenge, 1990). Besides reading skills bilingual children have shown increased executive functioning skills (Bialystok and Martin, 2004; Carlson and Meltzoff, 2008) such as math performance.

3.3.2. Educational attainment

The teachers talked particularly about positive effects of the immersion programme on students' educational attainments, such as;

T5: 'The students are very good at English at a very young age. They can speak, write and read quite well. I can notice it clearly'.

T3: 'Their vocabulary in English is quite developed as they have the chance of getting for example a science course both in Turkish and English. As they get the courses twice in different languages, this makes learning better'.

T6: 'I see that bilingual education makes them confident individuals'

According to researches done on immersion programs, it was indicated that bilingual children have better awareness of language differences and better at learning new languages. Moreover, they have important advantages in intelligence and cognitive growth (Sampath, 2005; Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

Cummins (2009) obtained qualified verbal and non verbal intelligence of bilinguals. A bilingual child had mental flexibility and he is superior in concept formation and diverse mental abilities. A number of studies (Collier and Thomas, 2004; Slavin and Cheung, 2005) Hamers and Blanc, 1989) indicated that bilinguals show better abilities in verbal tasks such as verbal input, verbal creativity, consciousness of arbitrariness of language, relationship between words, referent and meaning and perception of linguistic ambiguity. Bilinguals achieve better in complex syntactic structure, in native language composition and syntax.

3.3.3. Linguistic awareness

Classroom teachers pointed out the students' linguistic awareness towards both languages. The teachers realized that the students gained the capability of distinguishing the forms of languages. They mentioned as follows;

T2: 'If you mean that whether they are aware of the differences between English language and Turkish language, the answer is yes. Naturally they compare the sentences in form. One day one of students asked me that if she makes up a sentence in English in translation it is an inverted sentence in Turkish. I corrected it'

T7: 'I haven't experienced any linguistic problems among my students. They are aware of Turkish and English sentence structure. There is no unusual word order or restriction of vocabulary'.

Barimani (2013) asserted that the learners can get linguistic competence because the knowledge of language enables the learners use the form of language correctly. The learners can also get communicative competence which makes them use language correctly and appropriately. In other words, immersion programs enables learners acquire both the knowledge of language form and appropriateness of language use.

Immersion students are more aware of these two different languages and they are encouraged to use both regularly. This intermixing results in increased metalinguistic knowledge. (Bialystok, 2007; Marian, Shook and Schroeder, 2013; Collier and Thomas, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

Appel and Muysken (1987 cited in Kırkıç, 2004) assumed that as bilingual children confronted with two system of linguistic rules they are able to develop a more analytical view of language so they gain a greater awareness of language than monolinguals.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of immersion programs on elementary students' native language development through viewpoints of classroom teachers at a bilingual school in Ankara. The results show that there is no significant effect of bilingual teaching on students' native language development. The obtained results were categorized under 3 headings as skills and vocabulary development, educational attainment and linguistic awareness.

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