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Disadvantage to Pre-school Children Learning a Foreign Language

Mehri Farzaneh

English Language Department, Payame Noor University, I.R. of Iran

Mostafa Movahed

English Language Department, Payame Noor University, I.R. of Iran

Abstract—in Iran learning English as a second language (ESL) in early childhood has become almost widespread. Parents of children choose to expose their children to English language learning at a very young age before they begin elementary education (Dabestan), at the level of phonology as well as the realm of vocabulary. Based on observations of Persian preschool learners of English as well as parental reports, we will focus on identified types of problems they might experience after they begin formal schooling. Children's experience and familiarity with the English sounds and vocabulary may lead to some negative consequences for the learning and development of Persian in schools. Based on observations of Persian preschool learners of English as well as parental reports, we will focus on identified types of problems these children might experience after they begin formal schooling. The researchers explained some cases in which children made a Persian error due to the direct influence of the information from English. We now turn to a discussion of four main negative effects of second language on first language acquisition. There are also some reasons why it might be disadvantageous, including language interference (mixing language), foreign accent, and additional effort for children, cultural discrepancies, when is the best time to start. Moreover some preschool children do not possess the aptitude or desire to learn a second language, and therefore, forcing them to learn it, may be unwise.

Index Terms—preschool, phonology, vocabulary, interference, discrepancy, disadvantage, parents

I. INTRODUCTION

In Iran learning English as a second language (ESL) in early childhood has become almost widespread. Parents of children choose to expose their children to English language learning at a very young age before they begin elementary education (Dabestan). The number of preschool children learning English as a second language shows that English language learning (ELL) is a great fascination for both parents and their preschool aged children. There is certainly some reasoning supporting this increasing attention to ELL throughout the preschool years, including the point that the child's brain is like a sponge, it will absorb everything that they hear. The plasticity and virginity of the children's brain enables them to learn, take in and remember a lot of information so that is why they can pick up languages more easily (Harley, 1986; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). There are many differences among second language learners that may have a direct effect on second language learning. Most authors state that age, motivation and attitude, learning style/strategy and intelligence are among determinative factors in this area (Ellis, 1985; Reilly, 1988; Bond, 2002; Walqui, 2000; Liao, 1996; Skehan, 2002), with age showing to be the strongest predictor of success. There is a general consensus among researchers and theorists about the ease with which children acquire second languages, including:

- Language learning is natural for children because they are biologically well prepared for it (Chomsky, 1959).
- Language acquisition must occur before puberty in order for the speaker to reach native-like fluency (Lenneberg, 1967). This is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)
- Learning an L2 develops respect for cultural identity, rights, and values (McLaughlin, 1984),
- Learning a second language is part of children's social, and cognitive development (Clark, 2009; Bialystok, 2006; Pruden, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2006).

It is true that age plays a key role in second language learning and younger language learners are more successful children should be exposed to a second language, such as English, and be able to interact with others, but when to expose children to a second language, such as English, is extremely important. Now we don't mean necessarily as young as preschool children (that are not able to read and write in Persian), but maybe start as old as Elementary or Middle school (*Rahnemâyi*), or when children have a high degree of proficiency in their first language. Schooling and teaching reading and writing in the first language are important factors that can affect the acquisition of a second language. It seems that learners who somehow master their first language are more successful in second language acquisition.

Lightbown and Spada (1999), for example, give the example of a study carried out by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle on a group of English speakers learning Dutch as a second language. This research was especially valuable because it

included learners from all age categories, from six to sixty year olds. Surprisingly, according to this study, the adolescents, not the children nor the adults, were by far the most successful learners. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle found that young learners had some difficulty in learning tasks that were beyond their cognitive maturity whereas adolescents learned faster in the early stages of second language development. The study eventually signals that adults and adolescents were able to make a considerable progress in NLL when they used the language on a daily basis in social, professional and academic interaction (quoted in Fawzi Al Ghazali, 2006). The study also indicates that learners who have strong academic skills in their mother language will learn a second-language faster than those who lack these skills in their native language. In other words, effective acquisition of the first-language plays an important role in learning a second language. The weakness in acquiring the first language skills may result in difficulties in learning a second language for the child. In this article we discuss the importance of the completion of the scholastic Persian language acquisition, and the possible challenges that Iranian preschool English language learners face during the Persian language acquisition process in elementary school (Dabestan), at the level of phonology as well as the realm of vocabulary. Based on observations of Persian preschool learners of English as well as parental reports, we will focus on identified types of problems they might experience after they begin formal schooling.

A. *Statement of the Problem*

There are many ways in which teaching English to Iranian pre- school children could potentially interfere with their future performance in learning Persian language in elementary school. The interference of L2 in L1 may cover some aspects of the language, such as, phonology and lexicology. In some specific instances this interference leads to the formation of “penglish” such as “asb” instead of “اسب”.

The present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Is language interference a problem?
2. How common is language interference among Iranian children?

B. *Purpose of the Study*

The main objectives of this study were to better understand the English interference that might occur during the Persian language acquisition process, and especially how the level of prior English fluency might impact that interference.

C. *Significance of the Study*

As a part of our research into language interference among Iranian children, we conducted case studies of Iranian children who had English learning experience before going to elementary school (Dabestan). The subjects of the present study were chosen at random from among children in Isfahan and Semirom. We had no background of their language interference. All of these children are living in Isfahan, a county in Isfahan Province, and Semirom County, which is 150 km far from Isfahan. We interviewed the parents of these children. The children were not aware of the interview questions and their parents' answers. The interview questions were taken from a research into language mixing among bilingual children, conducted by Ford (2001).

What was the child's age when s/he attended a language school?

What is the child's age now?

What are the mother's and father's first languages?

What is the family language spoken most often?

Does the child mix the two languages?

If so, how often? in what contexts? and, do you perceive this to be a problem?

An important aspect of this study is that it considers those specific areas of second language (English) that affects children's writing skills in their first language (Persian). Moreover, the present research determines the importance of the learner's knowledge of the sound features of L2, which cause difficulty in L1. Hence this study attempts to provide knowledge that makes Iranian parents aware of the errors made by their children in the current L1 learning context.

a. **Persian Alphabets**

Farsi, also known as Persian, consists of 32 letters. Some of them have small and big forms like “ب/ب” while others have only one form like “د”. Capital letters are mainly at the end of words and may be used alone, or connect to their preceding letter (as in “کباب” /kabāb/). On the contrary, small letters come at the beginning or in the middle of words. (Meshkat-Aldini, 1998).

Persian speech sounds are grouped into two main categories: consonants and vowels (Samareh, 1999; Meshkat-Aldini, 1998)

1. Consonants can appear at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of words, as in the following words: b â, parde, tâze, qand, šab, davâ, sabr, zard, mard, leb â

2. Vowels can only appear in the middle and at the end of words, as in the following list: bini, dâ n â tarsu, serke, suzan, torš, meil, jou (Samareh, 1999)

We all know that the 26 letters of the English alphabet have both small and big forms like A/a. We also know that English speech sounds are classified into vowels (a,e,i,o,u, and sometimes y) and consonants (the rest of the alphabet letters). Vowels are clearly at the peaks of syllables and are syllabic (Ladegoged, 2006). If we say that vowels are at the

core of the syllables this is because the existence of the syllables depends on the vowels, and If you delete the vowel, it remains no syllable (Samareh, 1999).

However, in Persian language there are no letters considered as vowels. Instead, we put some sounds on or under the letters to make them readable(available at <http://www.easypersian.com/persian-alphabet/>).

. There are six main sounds in Persian recognized as vowels, three short vowels and three long vowels. The following are Persian short vowels.

1. A^o : If this symbol is puts on a letter, the letter will be pronounced /æ/ as in “dad”.
2. A_o : If this symbol is put under a letter, the letter will be pronounced /e/ as in “bed”.
3. A^u : If this symbol is put on a letter, the letter will be pronounced /o/ as in “door”.

There are three long vowels in Persian. As we noted all big letters come at the end of the words and may stand either attached or separated from other letters with only one exception.(available at <http://www.easypersian.com/persian-alphabet/>).

Here are Persian long vowels:

1. آ : This is big letter ‘A’ in Persian, which unlike all other big letters comes at the beginning of the words only and pronounced as /a:/ in “arm”.
2. ی :In Persian the big letter ‘Y’ can be pronounced as /i:/ sound. /i:/ in “see”.
3. و : This is the only letter that may be pronounced as /u:/ in “two”.

Now that we are familiar with the short and long vowels, let’s review all Persian letters (alphabets) from the very beginning.

TABLE 1.
PERSIAN LETTERS (ALPHABETS)

| pronunciation | Character | | pronunciation | Character | |
|---------------|-----------|-------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| | Capital | Small | | Capital | Small |
| alef | ا | | saad | ص | صد |
| a | آ | | zaad | ض | ضد |
| be | ب | ب | taa | ط | |
| pe | پ | | zaa | ظ | |
| te | ت | ت | eyn | ع | ع |
| the | ث | ث | gheyn | غ | غ |
| jim | ج | ج | fe | ف | ف |
| che | چ | چ | qaaf | ق | ق |
| he | ح | ح | kaaf | ك | ك |
| khe | خ | خ | gaaf | گ | گ |
| daal | د | | laam | ل | ل |
| zaal | ذ | | mim | م | |
| re | ر | | nun | ن | ن |
| ze | ز | | waaw | و | |
| je | ژ | | he | ه ه ه ه ه | |
| sin | س | س | ye | ی | ی |
| shin | ش | ش | hamze | ء | |

As you see in learning Persian alphabets, sometimes, it is possible to find the English equivalents for them. For example “ب” is the same as the small letter “b” in English as in “bed”. It’s worth noting that such similarities can cause those children, who started ELL before formal learning of Persian, to have trouble learning and using certain Persian alphabets. In other words, homophonic letters in the two languages may cause recognition difficulties and mistakes (i.e., misconceptions) in early reading and writing Persian alphabets.

b. The Role of Formal Schooling in the First Language

Children begin the process of learning their first or home language through contact with family members and others in early communication that includes talking, singing, cooing, making sounds and engaging in non-verbal communication (Clark, 2009). In the context of schools, children learn their first language formally in the classroom to develop reading and writing skills. It is essential for parents to understand the benefits of maintaining their children’s first language. They should know that the first six years are crucial for young children in developing their first language and cultural identity, and it is during these early years that children build up their knowledge of the world around them(Clark, 2009). The first language, learned in the home, is extremely important and forms the foundation for all later language development. Parents, family members and early childhood professionals are the most significant influences on the development and maintenance of the first language (Clarke and Milne 1996).

Children who have the opportunity to maintain their first language can extend their cognitive development, while learning English as a second language. Their level of competence in the second language will be related to the level of competence they have achieved in their first language (Cummins 1984). Landry (1974) suggests that when learning a second language children must develop an understanding of the basic structures and patterns of two languages in order to produce new utterances in each language, which requires flexibility and adaptability on the part of the learner (Cited in Trustees,2010). It seems that learning to read and write in the first language, often facilitates the instruction in reading and writing in a second language. Children who develop proficiency in using their native language to

communicate, to gain information, to solve problems, and to think can easily learn to use a second language in similar ways (Pérez, B., & Torres-Guzmán, M., 1996, cited in Clark, 2013).

Therefore, preserving and strengthening the first language will help children become academically proficient in the second language (will support second lang. development and proficiency). However, there is real concern about children who choose to learn a second language, such as English, before they fully dominate their first language. Taking classes in English, for example, throughout the preschool years does not necessarily mean or guarantee that kids will be fluent, or able to communicate with a native speaker even halfway decently, or understand a native speaker when they are talking. In two years of learning English preschoolers may learn to say the English alphabets as well as some words for everyday things, read street signs, count to twenty, name the colors, and how to say 'I am thirsty'. Even though young children are not formally taught English, they bring all of the knowledge about language learning they have acquired to scholastically learn and develop their first language (i.e., Persian). In the process of scholastic learning of Persian in elementary school, it is a natural instinct for young children to make sense out of their past language learning experience, to look for similarities between Persian and English, and to try to draw some comparison with what they know already. If this is the case, then we would expect that the information from the second language would stand on the learner's path and affect the mastery of the first language. In other words, children's experience and familiarity with the English sounds and vocabulary may lead to some negative consequences for the learning and development of Persian in schools. Needless to say, this conclusion is controversial. There is some thought that children who may appear to be learning a second language very quickly at a very young age (before the age of 5), accompanied by the loss of their first language, have really replaced the first language with the second language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994, as cited in Clark, 2013). Many researchers believe that there is little benefit and potential harm in introducing a second language at a very young age unless caregivers are careful to maintain both languages as equally important and valuable (McLaughlin, 1984, as cited in Clark, 2013).

This paper discusses the possible problems that Iranian preschool learners of English might meet during the Persian language acquisition process in elementary school (Dabestan), at the level of phonology as well as the realm of vocabulary. Based on observations of Persian preschool learners of English as well as parental reports, we will focus on identified types of problems these children might experience after they begin formal schooling.

II. METHODOLOGY

The subjects were chosen at random from among children in Isfahan and Semirum. We did not know anything about their language interference. The problem was reported by their parents, especially their mothers. These reports were collected during interviews with them. In some cases, we also observed the children's performance.

Now let's consider some cases in which children made a Persian error due to the direct influence of the information from English.

1. My 5-year-old son, Vahid, was attending English school in Isfahan two times per week. He started to learn English letters between the ages of 5-6. He is now 7-years old and is learning Persian alphabets in the elementary school. But his progress is really slow. He can recognize the sound, but can not make sense of its certain letter. He usually interferes "ا" with "آ". For example, whenever I ask him to write /æsb/, instead of "اسب" he writes "asb". Even if I tell him again, he interferes the letters after a while. I don't know why he mixed the letters.

2. For months, our 6-year-old daughter, Zohre, attended English classes twice a week. She had to practice English alphabets everyday along with other things they were learning in school. During her elementary school, she had problems with reading and writing such letters as "ب" and "س". She pronounced the letter "ب" in the same way as the letter "b" is pronounced in English, i.e., "bee", or when she wanted to write, for example, "س" she used to write "s".

3. My daughter, Reyhane, attended English lessons before age 7 in Semirum- a city in Isfahan- and had weekly classes for one year. She really enjoyed the classes and was eager to attend each week. When she started to learn formal Persian in elementary school, she used to confuse "ز" with "z". We were worried about this problem, but after a lot of practice with a private teacher at home, we could overcome the problem.

4. My son, Pooya, attended an English School over the summer. He started with 45-minute twice-a-week classes and now in elementary school he has trouble learning and using certain Persian alphabets. He often confuses the letters "ب", "د", and "پ" with b, d, and p. Sometimes, I will get frustrated with him and fuss at him, which I know is not the answer, but it's hard to get him to focus. (Pooya's mother wants to know if there is an approach that she can take that won't get both of them frustrated.)

5. My child was entitled to attend an English school in Semirum, a city near Isfahan, the year she turned five. Mahsa could pronounce and use English alphabets very well. However, she had trouble learning Persian alphabets in elementary school. She very often confused the letters "ب", "پ", and "ک" with b, p, and k. For instance, she often replaced "ب" and b, or "ک" and k.

6. My son, Ali, is almost 7 years old, and he has been in an English school for the last 10 months before attending elementary school (Dabestan) in Isfahan. He started to learn English letters at the age of 6. But now he is incapable of learning some Persian letters, such as "ب" and "د" well. Of course, I think he is not the only kid in class that shows such a difficulty to learn these letters.

7. We live in Semirom, which is near Isfahan. My husband and I got our 5 year old daughter to learn English till the age of 7 when she entered an elementary school. Our daughter, Narine, seemed to have difficulty learning Persian alphabets at school. She used to have this problem in writing Persian words. For instance, once I asked her to write /a:b/. She wrote the word using the English spelling rather than Persian one, i.e., "ab" instead of "آب".

III. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The researches revealed that there are main negative effects of second language on first language acquisition such as:

1. Language Interference

It is a popular belief that learning of a second language is strongly influenced by the learners' first language. Strong evidence for this claim comes from the domain of the interference theory started with Hugo Munsterberg in the 19th century. The assumption that our ability to learn is disrupted by what we have learnt before and what we will learn in the future. Interference effects have attracted the attention of many researchers (Dulay et al ,1982; Lott ,1983; Ho ,1986; McLaughlin,1984; Ellis ,1997). These studies have focused on the L1 interference in the process of second language learning in many different areas

In light of these studies, it is fair to expect that language interference could also be mutual. -- that is to say, the *second language* can *interfere* with the first language. Children may manifest *interference* or *transfer* from L2 to their first language (L1), especially at those points in L1 which are more similar to L2. According to Vasek (1991), the mutual influence of languages on each other is very old, in fact as old as human speech itself. Language contact and its consequences, starting with mutual linguistic influences, also occur during the study of any foreign language (Vasek 1991), and therefore can also be a subject of the study of contact linguistics. Systematic research on the subject dates back only to the works on language mixing by Schuchardt (1881—91, quoted in Vasek, 1991). Albert and Obler (1978, as cited in Bhela, 199) claim that people show more lexical interference on similar items. So it may follow that languages with more similar features (eg English and French) are more susceptible to mutual interference than languages with fewer similar features (eg English and Japanese).Therefore, "interference" from the second language provides an account of one of the most basic problems in the process of teaching children to read and write their first language in elementary schools, where the aim is full literacy in the first language. On the other hand, the mutual interference might result in language mixing, and thus more likelihood of performance problems related to language mixing.

If this is the case, then we might expect more learning difficulties and thus more likelihood of performance interference at these points due to the contribution of L2 information in the production of L1 materials. This interference may hinder first language learning by children who start learning a second language at a very young age before mastering their first language.

To put it another way, in the process of first language acquisition in elementary school (Dabestan), where the child begins the task of learning Persian from point zero, information from English (mostly the sounds of English) can be seen as a major barrier on the child's path towards learning to read and write Persian materials. In fact, there is second language dominance over first language performance. As a result, a child with lexical and/or phonological knowledge of English will inevitably utilize the English information to understand and write Persian. Obviously, the child may make a Persian error due to the direct influence of English knowledge. We all know that in alphabet system English and Persian have some letters that share the same pronunciation. The negative transfer in reading and writing the letter always results from their similarity in pronunciation, letter pattern, and ways of expression. For example, an Iranian student is asked to write "ب", but because of L2 interference he/she may write "b" instead. This is an example of proactive interference, i.e., difficulty in learning new information because of already existing information. Therefore, Iranian students have great difficulty in mastering the alphabet system of their language. In the course of this research, the researchers observed the following problems with preschool aged children who started ELL before formal learning of Persian.

2. Foreign accent

Accent is a term that is unlike other related terms such as 'dialect' and 'standard language' has received a good deal of definitional agreement. However, by far the most representative definition of this linguistic and sociolinguistic term, in our opinion, is that given by Crystal (2003) in which he says that it is "the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation that identify where a person is from, regionally or socially." (Crystal, 2003, p.3)

It has long been accepted that children are superior in learning to speak a second language with a good accent than adults. Specifically, many people, such as Carroll (1963), believe that younger children can acquire a more native-like accent (or near-native pronunciation) in a second language than older students (quoted in Olson, Linda L.; Samuels, S. Jay, 1972).

Evidence of probability of achieving native-like pronunciation, with regards to near native-like accent, is largely supported by some studies conducted to examine the above assumption. Asher and Garcia (1969), for example, studied 71 Cuban immigrants in the United States who were from 7 to 19 years old. Most of the subjects, who had lived in the United States for five years, read four sentences into a tape recorder. When the recordings were completed, the tapes were given to 19 judges who were native speakers of English. The judges rated each speaker according to a four-point scale. The findings suggested that, of children who lived in the United States for more than five years, those who were

six years old or younger had a high probability of achieving native-like pronunciation. Those immigrants who came to the United States between the ages of 7 and 13 however, had a 50% chance of attaining a native-like accent while those subjects who were 13 and older had little chance of attaining a native-like accent.

This finding is similar to Oyama's (1976) study which investigated the pronunciation ability of 60 Italian immigrants who were between the ages of 6 and 20 and lived in the United States for 5 to 10 years. Oyama discovered that whether or not one acquires an accent largely depends on the age that one was when they immigrated to the United States. Those children, for example, who arrived before 12 years of age had pronunciation close to those of native speakers of English, while those children of 12 years of age or older did not demonstrate native-speaker pronunciation.

For many parents, it's enough if the child can *speak* in a particular language. These parents should know that children who start learning a new language early in life will have a "foreign" accent, which can cause mispronunciation and misunderstandings, and impede future opportunities in using their mother languages professionally. For example, a Persian speaking person may have greater difficulty pronouncing Persian words because of his or her tendency to want to apply English pronunciation to the first language.

3. Additional effort for the children

Mastering a foreign language would also require extra studying and effort outside of class on the part of students. Foreign languages are easily forgotten if not put into practice. There are parents that send their children to the same level of language classes. They claim that their children have forgotten what they have already learned and that they want their children to learn better than that. If it is so, will it be rational to say these children are not good at learning foreign languages? Certainly "NO". What is the problem? Let's say that one problem is that these children do not have the opportunity to improve these skills. Given the limited time in an English class, for example, and the break-neck pace at which classes are taught, we can presume it would be very easy for a student to forget the language they were learning.

4. Cultural Discrepancies

For many older adults, the choice to learn a foreign language is one of interest, for reasons of business or as per school requirements. But when children learn a foreign language, the reasoning tends to stem from a parent's desire. These parents wish to prepare their children for future opportunities, as is the case for many parents in non-English speaking countries who send their children to English schools. Either way, due to the intimate link between language and culture, children will get a taste of a foreign culture. This can result in cultural confusion in some cases, especially when a child is of a multi-ethnic background. For example, a Japanese child living in Hawaii might be surrounded by other Japanese Americans, attend Japanese school and even have Japanese extracurricular activities. The result of living in a Japanese community but still being American can cause a child to question his identity, especially in the teen years when self-identity becomes crucial and deeply linked with social circles.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In a non-English-speaking country like Iran, learning a foreign language like English may seem vital and necessary to many school kids. However, there are also some reasons why it might be disadvantageous, including language interference, mixing language, foreign accent, and additional effort for children, additional effort for parents, and cultural discrepancy. Moreover some preschool children do not possess the aptitude or desire to learn a second language, and therefore, forcing them to learn it, may be unwise.

Because of these problems we think it is better for Iranian children to begin learning a foreign language like English after they have mastered, or are actively using their first language. It is best to allow children to decide for themselves if they would like to take a foreign language class, and parents ought to understand this in order to maintain the interest of their children towards English language learning. Of course, parents should not delay their children's English language learning. Because this leads to another problem: starting a child's foreign language too late can result in an inability to completely master the new language. It might be a wise decision to send their children to English language classes as soon as they are performing well in their native language courses (i.e., Persian).

When is The Best Time to Start? It is not so easy to answer such question as the best age to learn a second language.

Because children are so much more skilled at picking up a second language than adults (Scovel 1999), elementary schools are a popular choice for parents. Children between the ages of 7 and 12 spend most of their time in schools, taking part in almost all educational and learning activities. They are more interested in doing activities that their peers are doing – one of which is unlikely to learn a foreign language, such as English. During these ages children have the opportunity to pick up *a second language so quickly and successfully* (Scovel 1999).

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Mehri Farzaneh is the faculty member of English language teaching. She is teaching English language courses for graduate courses in the English language Department at Payame Noor University in Islamic Republic of Iran. Her research interest includes language acquisition, teaching reading comprehension, and Discourse Analysis, attitude toward learning second language.

Mostafa Movahed is a teacher of English. He has been teaching English to students of all ages including children, teenagers and adults. He is currently teaching English at Payame Noor University in Islamic Republic of Iran. His research interest includes psycholinguistic, phonology and reading comprehension.