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The Impact of Bilingualism on English Vocabulary Learning Among Middle School Students

Shahrbanoo Zarghami*
Department of Foreign Languages
M.A. in TEFL
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch
Shiraz, Iran

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri
Assistant Professor,
Department of Foreign Languages
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch
Shiraz, Iran

Abstract. Bilingualism as a complex psychological and socio-cultural linguistic behavior can be observed everywhere in the world. Being such a widespread issue, it has attracted increasing research interest in its effects on education, especially learning additional languages. In addition, bilingualism and its effects is a controversial issue and there are contradictory views in this regard. Some studies have evidenced on its positive effects while some others have provided counterevidence. The present study seeks to find out whether bilinguality of English learners influences their achievement of English vocabulary learning. Data were gathered from 45 Turkish-Persian female bilinguals, and 45 Persian female monolinguals through a multiple choice test of English vocabulary to measure vocabulary achievement and a Persian questionnaire to homogenize the participants. 35 bilinguals and 35 monolinguals were singled out from them in terms of similar age, level of instruction, socioeconomic states and educational context and data analysis was administrated to their

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*Corresponding author

scores. Result of the data analysis showed that there was not any difference between the performances of two groups. Regarding many advantages bilingualism has on individuals' abilities, bilinguals did not outperform monolinguals. This can be attributed to influential factors such as level of threshold in the second language, lexical selection, distributed characteristics across languages, balanced vs. dominant bilinguals, and sensitivity to language as a system that bilinguals encounter in the process of learning vocabulary of additional languages.

Keywords: Bilingualism, bilinguals, advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism, vocabulary learning

1. Introduction

Many advantages of bilingualism such as positive cognitive gains, intellectual growth, critical and creative thinking, greater metalinguistic competence, enhanced executive control, benefits in linguistic knowledge, cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher-order thinking skills have been approved in studies done by researchers in language domain. However, the effect of bilingualism on vocabulary learning especially in beginner language learners is a controversial issue and there are contradictory views regarding positive effects of bilingualism in this regard. Researchers have tried to find the reasons behind the poor performance of bilinguals in learning vocabulary. They believe that the insufficient performance of bilinguals is due to some factors that influence bilinguals, studies, tests and experiments. Some of these factors are discussed in the following to justify observations of the study.

Thomas (1988) compared the acquisition of college French by English monolinguals and English Spanish bilinguals and claimed that bilingual adults had developed sensitivity to language as a system and therefore, would perform better on third language activities than monolinguals. "Bilinguals learning a third language seem to have developed a sensitivity to language as a system which helps them perform better on those activities usually associated with formal language learning than monolinguals learning a foreign language for the first time" (Thomas, 1988, p.240). Bilingual at early stages of language learning may do not develop sensitivity to their languages as a system. This fact may hinder

them to perform better than monolinguals in the process of learning vocabulary. Moreover, Thomas (1988) claimed that those bilinguals who possess literacy skills in L1 and L2 perform better in the kind of tests that require manipulation of language. The results of studies show that bilingualism has a more positive effect on third language's vocabulary achievement when the first two languages are taught formally. Consequently, the bilinguals who learn their L1 only orally in a natural setting are not more successful. Balanced bilingualism (Peal & Lambert, 1962) is an influential factor in bilinguals' attainment in learning additional languages. Baker (1993) demonstrated the notion of balanced bilingualism and believed that it brings positive effects on the individual mental/cognitive development. Moreover, Döpke (2003) stated that balanced bilinguals are better than monolinguals in tasks which require conscious manipulation of language that is playing with sounds with a purpose to get a new word (as cited in Silva, 2008, p.6). Balanced bilinguals can benefit from bilingualism in learning additional languages. Cummins (1975) assumed that a high level of threshold in the second language is essential for positive influences while a failure to attain a minimum threshold level competency in that language will have a negative effect. Since beginner bilinguals have not attained the competency in their second language it cannot facilitate the process of learning third language. Recent studies have shown that in order to have positive effects of bilingualism a certain level of competence in the two languages must be acquired in order to have positive effects of bilingualism (Chipongian, 2000). But the attainment of threshold level itself is determined by various environmental factors (Cummins, 1976). Similarly, "if bilingual children attain only a very low level of proficiency in one or both of their languages, their interaction with the environment through these languages, both in terms of input and output, is likely to be impoverished" (Grosjean, 1982, p. 226).

Another difficulty that bilingual language learners encounter is lexical selection. Experts concluded that because the sizes of bilinguals' lexicons are approximately double those of monolinguals, they have more word options to express a given concept, which increases competition during lexical selection. By necessity, they use each language less fre-

quently than their monolingual counterparts (Gollan, Montoya, Cera, & Sandoval, 2008). This fact can provoke some difficulties in learning vocabulary in the process of learning additional languages. Scholars also debate another factor that may justify the deficiency of vocabulary learning in bilinguals. They believe that the reason for this seems that bilingual children have to learn two different labels for everything, which reduces the frequency of a particular word in either language (Ben-Zeev, 1977). This makes the task of acquiring, sorting, and differentiating vocabulary and meaning in two languages much more difficult when compared to the monolingual child's task in one language (Doyle et al., 1978). Vocabulary overlap is also discussed in bilingualism studies. There is considerable evidence of a vocabulary overlap in the lexicon of bilingual children's two languages, differing from child to child (Umbel, Pearson, Fernandez, & Oller, 1992). This vocabulary overlap is attributed to the child acquiring each language in different contexts resulting in some areas of complementary knowledge across the two languages (Saunders, 1982). These factors may influence bilinguals and prevent them to outperform monolinguals in the test. Bilinguals can be influenced by the notion of distributed characteristic discussed in Oller and Pearson' studies (2002). Some of bilingual's vocabulary tends to be available in one language without translation equivalent vocabulary being available in the other language. Then, it can be said that lexicalized concepts of the bilingual are "distributed" across the two languages. The distributed characteristic makes some of the bilinguals' lexicalized words inaccessible to any single-language assessment (Abudarham, 1997). Adolescent bilinguals engage with L1 and L2 while they are struggling to digest new vocabulary of third language. It is a possibility of difficulty for bilinguals in these situations. Researchers have stated various reasons to illustrate the ambiguous facets in effects of bilingualism. McLaughlin (1978), for example, explains that the main cause of the early difficulty for many children may not be bilingualism but it may be the fact that they are forced to learn a second language in the school. He also argued that there is no evidence that children are behind when they have equal exposure to the two languages. McLaughlin (1978) in Grosjean (1982) pointed out that the command of second language is considered to be a critical fac-

tor. He argued that poor performance is predicted if bilingual child has not mastered the language well. He believed that when the child's command improves, academic performance will improve in subjects taught in that language. He added that many factors also should be taken into account such as poor home environment, the parent's low socioeconomic status, negative attitudes of the majority group, conflicts in culture, and so on (as cited in Al-Amiri, 2013, p.4).

2. Literature Review

Many studies concerning the effect of bilingualism on L3 vocabulary learning in international and national scope have been conducted by researchers. Studies investigating the effect of bilingualism on L3 vocabulary learning have achieved paradoxical findings.

Some studies in this field indicated no advantages of bilingualism on vocabulary learning. For instance, Thomas (1988) compared monolingual English college students with two English-Spanish bilingual groups in learning French. The results indicated that the bilinguals with the formal training outperformed the other two groups in learning grammar but there was no significant difference between the bilingual groups in learning vocabulary. Sanders and Meijers (1995) compared 15 Dutch monolingual speakers with 46 Turkish-Dutch and 31 Moroccan-Arabic bilingual speakers in learning English as either a second or third language. Socioeconomic and intelligence factors were controlled but the researchers found no significant difference between bilinguals and monolinguals on several English proficiency tests. Van Gelderen et al. (2003) compared the English (foreign language) reading comprehension of 397 Dutch monolinguals and Turkish or Moroccan-Dutch bilinguals in the Netherlands. They realized that bilinguals were weaker in L3 reading than monolinguals. Similarly, Magiste (1984) reported an investigation by Balke-Aurell and Lindbad (1982) on the differences between monolingual and bilingual immigrants of varied L1s with Swedish as L2 in learning English as a foreign language. The results showed no difference between the bilinguals and monolinguals in standardized tests of English comprehension and grammar performance. Ben-Zeev's research (1977b) revealed a 10-point deficit on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test for

bilinguals compared to same age monolinguals. Rosenblum and Pinker (1983) and Doyle, Champagne and Segalowitz (1977) found evidence suggesting that bilingualism constrains children's vocabulary development (as cited in Pearson et al., 1993). Bilinguals tend to attain lower scores on receptive vocabulary tests. Maghsoudi (2010) noted that monolingual and bilingual learners do not differ in acquiring, syntactic structure. He even maintained that monolingual participants surpassed bilingual participants in general English proficiency.

Contrary to these claims, some research studies demonstrated that bilingualism positively influences vocabulary learning. Sanz (2000) compared 124 Catalan-Spanish bilinguals with 77 Spanish monolinguals. The general English proficiency of the participants was measured using grammar and vocabulary tests, in which variables such as socioeconomic background, motivation, attitudes, general intelligence and exposure to English were controlled. The bilingual participants scored higher on the tests than their monolingual peers. Keshavarz and Astaneh (2004) found that L3 learners of English outperformed their L2 peers in learning vocabulary. The group of Armenian- Persian speakers was considered more balanced since they acquired their first and second languages both orally and academically, while the Azeri-Persian speakers acquired their L1 only orally in a natural setting. Kaushanskaya and Marian (2009) conducted a study to examine whether bilingualism facilitates acquisition of novel words in adults with different language histories. In their study word-learning performance was tested in monolingual English speakers, early English-Spanish bilinguals, and early English-Mandarin bilinguals. Novel words were phonologically unfamiliar to all participants, and they were acquired in association with their English translations. At testing, both bilingual groups outperformed the monolingual group. Their findings indicated that bilingualism facilitates word-learning performance in adults, and they suggested a general bilingual advantage for novel word learning. Kassaian and Esmae'li (2011) compared the performance of bilingual EFL students with monolingual EFL students on vocabulary knowledge test and word reading skill test. 30 Armenian-Persian bilinguals and 30 Persian monolinguals participated in their study. The results of the data analyses showed that bilinguality is highly corre-

lated with breadth of vocabulary knowledge and reading skill. Dibaj (2011) compared the vocabulary learning of monolingual learners of English as a second language with bilingual learners of English as a third language. His study was based on data from 52 monolingual Persian-speaking learners of English and 45 bilingual Azeri-Persian-speaking learners of English. The third language learners outperformed their second language counterparts at all word difficulty levels. Saadat, Mehrpour and Weisi (2013) conducted a study to see if there was any difference between Kalhuri Kurdish learners reared monolingually (using Persian) and the ones reared bilingually (using both Kalhuri and Persian) in terms of their achievement in English. Analyses of the data indicated that although gender had no significant relationship with bilinguality vs. monolinguality, as most students from low socioeconomic class were reared bilingually. Students reared bilingually outperformed their monolingual counterparts in terms of achievement in English.

3. Objective of the Study

Bilingualism influences learning additional languages and many researchers have considered to study its positive and negative effects on various aspects of individuals' third language. Vocabulary as an important part of language learning has always been investigated by researchers. There are some influential factors in the process of bilingualism and learning vocabulary learning that must be investigated to help students, teachers, language learners and educational institutions to attain more success in educational attainments. The present study intended to see if bilingualism has any negative effect on English vocabulary learning. The main objective of the present study is to investigate the relationship between bilinguality of second language learners and their vocabulary achievement in their English textbooks.

Research Questions

1. Is there any significant difference between monolingual and bilingual students in terms of their vocabulary achievement?

2. Does bilinguality of English learners have unfavorable effects on vocabulary achievement in English school textbooks?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Two groups of female middle school students, aged 12-13, participated in this study, group A (Farsi speaking monolinguals) and group B (Turkish-Farsi speaking bilinguals). There were 90 students in the second grade, 45 Turkish bilinguals learning English as their third language and 45 Persian monolinguals learning English as their second language. Turkish students learned their L1 only orally in a natural setting. Both groups were studying in Effat Middle School, in different shifts, periodically in the morning and in the afternoon. This school is located in the south of Shiraz, where a lot of Ghashghaei-Turkish people live. A questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was given to both groups in order to have a better balance in the selection of participants, and in order to homogenize the participants. 75 participants from two groups were chosen in terms of similar educational context and socioeconomic status. It also needs to be added that the educational system in Iran is centralized; therefore, the textbooks and methodology for teaching English as a foreign language are the same.

4.2. Instruments

In this study, two instruments were used to ascertain educational context and socioeconomic status of participants and then to measure the vocabulary achievement of the participants.

1- A demographic questionnaire

2- A teacher-made English vocabulary test

The content validity of both demographic questionnaire and teacher-made English vocabulary test was confirmed by the thesis committee members. The reliability of teacher-made test was estimated through KR-21 Method. Because there were two groups of bilinguals and monolinguals in this study, reliability of the test for both groups was calculated separately. The result for the test administrated to the bilinguals was 0.91 and for monolinguals' test was 0.85. This is an indication that this instrument is maximally reliable.

4.2.1. Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was used to ascertain the similar conditions regarding age, sex, level of education, place of living, place of study, background knowledge of English and their socio-economic status. It aimed to make known how many languages the participants know and speak at home and in the society. The survey questionnaire also aimed to ensure that the language background of the participants in the first group was the same (only Persian). It was also used to ensure that the language background of the participants in the second group was the same (Turkish-Persian). The questionnaire asked the participants' age and gender and families' educational level and occupational background. It also asked the level and the name of English books that they have studied in English institutes. The questionnaire was designed in Persian to make sure the participants were able to understand it.

4.2.2. English vocabulary

Test A multiple-choice test including fifty English vocabulary items was prepared on the base of the popular testing-books to measure vocabulary knowledge of the students. It was considered to omit the items which were testing other skills. The test items included the words covered in English textbooks and taught during one educational year in second grade of middle schools.

4.3. Procedures for data collection

Initially, 45 female monolingual and 45 female bilingual students were chosen from among the students of a middle school. A questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was given to the both groups in order to select those who had similar socio-educational context and socio-economic status. A teacher-made test, whose items were selected from testing-books and its reliability and validity were approved, was given to these 90 participants. The content of the test covered what was expected of the students to have learned in their second year of formal English instruction in school. This test was used in order to measure their achievement in English vocabulary of the English text book. The first part of this study was carried out with Farsi-monolingual participants in their middle school. The researcher explained the study to the students. The

multiple-choice test was distributed and the participants were asked to complete it. All the papers were collected after 40-minutes. After a short time rest, they were asked to complete the Persian questionnaire and raise their hands if they did not understand anything or faced any difficulties. The second part of this study was carried out with Turkish-Persian bilinguals in the afternoon using the same procedure followed by the Farsi monolinguals.

4.4. Procedures for data analysis

To yield empirical answers to the research questions posed, the consequent analyses and statistical procedures were applied to the data. A questionnaire was conducted to secure homogeneity at the entry point. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, 70 participants with similar conditions were selected from among the 90. In order to analyze the data, SPSS software was used to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics. An independent t-test was performed to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the means of the two groups. As mentioned earlier, there were two groups involved in this study: bilinguals and monolinguals. Each group consisted of 35 participants. Since there were only two groups, a t-test was the appropriate statistical measure to compare the means of two groups.

5. Results

In order to find appropriate answers to the research questions, at the end of educational year a test of 50 items based on the students' middle school English text book was administrated to two groups of female bilingual and monolingual participants. The results of this test show whether there is any significant difference between these two groups. Some information concerning descriptive statistics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Group statistics

	Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Bilingual	35	31.8857	10.66267	1.80232
	Monolingual	35	35.0571	8.11296	1.37134

Table 1 displays the number of subjects, means value of two groups, standard deviation, and standard error for the test variable(s) within categories defined by the grouping variable (bilinguals and monolinguals).

Table 2. Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
scores	Equal variances assumed	2.793	.099	-1.400	68	.166	-3.17143	2.26471	-7.69060	1.34774
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.400	63.485	.166	-3.17143	2.26471	-7.69642	1.35357

According to the results shown in Table 2 the significance value for the Levene's test is high (greater than 0.05), in our case, the equal variances are assumed ($p = .099 > .05$). A significance value of .166 (greater than .05) indicates that there is no significant difference between the two group means.

6. Discussion

Regarding many advantages of bilingualism on individuals results shown in Table 1 and Table 2 indicate that bilinguals in this study do not outperform monolinguals. Based on the results to answer the first research question we can state that a significance value of. 166 (greater than .05)

indicates no significant difference between the two group means. That it, there is not any significant difference between monolingual and bilingual students in terms of their vocabulary achievement. With regard to the second research question we can state that since bilinguals' performance is not far behind monolinguals' performance, it indicates that bilingualism does not have negative effects on bilingual middle school students in their achievement of English vocabulary learning and they do not suffer from unfavorable effects of bilingualism.

A review of previous studies showed many advantages of bilingualism such as benefits in linguistic knowledge, cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher-order thinking skills. However, the effect of bilingualism on vocabulary learning especially in children beginner language learners is a controversial issue and there are contradictory views regarding positive effects of bilingualism. Regarding these advantages researchers have tried to find out about the reasons behind the poor performance of bilinguals in learning vocabulary of third language. They believe that the insufficient performance of bilinguals is due to some factors that influence bilinguals, studies, tests and experiments. Some of these factors are discussed in the following to justify the observations of the current study.

Thomas (1988) claimed that bilingual adults had developed sensitivity to language as a system and therefore they would perform on third language activities better than monolinguals. The bilingual subjects in this study, Turkish-Persian students, did not develop sensitivity to their language as a system because there are not adult. This fact may hinder them from performing better than monolinguals. Moreover, Thomas (1988) claimed that those bilinguals who possess literacy skills in L1 and L2 perform better in the kind of tests that require manipulation of language. The results of many previous studies show that bilingualism has more positive effect on third language's vocabulary achievement when the first two languages are taught formally. Turkish subjects who had learned their L1 only orally in a natural setting were not more successful than monolinguals.

Balanced vs. dominant (Peal & Lambert, 1962) bilingualism influence bilinguals' attainment in learning additional languages. Baker (1993)

demonstrated the notion of balanced bilingualism and believed that it brings positive effects on the individual mental/cognitive development. Moreover, Döpke (2003) stated that balanced bilinguals are better than monolinguals in tasks which require conscious manipulation of language that is playing with sounds with a purpose to get a new word. Bilingual subjects in this study, Turkish-Persian students, are not balanced bilinguals to benefit from bilingualism. They are still dominant in Turkish.

Cummins (1975) assumed that a high level of threshold in the second language is essential for positive influences while a failure to attain a minimum threshold level competency in that language will have a negative effect. Since bilingual middle school students speak Turkish at home and in their environment (many Turkish people live there), they have not attained the competency in their second language to facilitate the process of learning third language. Recent studies have shown that in order to have positive effects of bilingualism a certain level of competence in the two languages must be acquired in order to have positive effects of bilingualism (Chipongian, 2000). But the attainment of threshold level itself is determined by various environmental factors (Cummins, 1976). Similarly, "if bilingual children attain only a very low level of proficiency in one or both of their languages, their interaction with the environment through these languages, both in terms of input and output, is likely to be impoverished" (Grosjean, 1982, p. 226).

Another difficulty bilingual language learner encounters is lexical selection. Experts concluded that because the sizes of bilinguals' lexicons are approximately double those of monolinguals, they have more word options to express a given concept, which increases competition during lexical selection. By necessity, they use each language less frequently than their monolingual counterparts (Gollan, Montoya, Cera, & Sandoval, 2008). This fact can provoke some difficulties in learning vocabulary in the process of learning additional languages.

Bilingual participants can be influenced by the notion of distributed characteristic discussed in Oller and Pearson' studies (2002). Some of bilingual's vocabulary tends to be available in one language without translation equivalent vocabulary being available in the other language.

Then, it can be said that lexicalized concepts of the bilingual are "distributed" across the two languages. The distributed characteristic makes some of the bilinguals' lexicalized words inaccessible to any single-language assessment (Abudarham, 1997). Adolescent bilinguals engage with L1 and L2 while they struggle to digest new vocabulary of third language. It is a possibility of difficulty for bilinguals in these situations.

Researchers have stated various reasons to illustrate the ambiguous facets in effects of bilingualism. McLaughlin (1978), for example, explains that the main cause of the early difficulty for many children may not be bilingualism but it may be the fact that they are forced to learn a second language in the school. He also argued that there is no evidence that children are behind when they have equal exposure to the two languages.

McLaughlin (1978) in Grosjean (1982) pointed out that the command of second language is considered to be a critical factor. He argued that poor performance is predicted if bilingual child has not mastered the language well. He believed that when the child's command improves, academic performance will improve in subjects taught in that language. He added that many factors also should be taken into account such as poor home environment, the parent's low socioeconomic status, negative attitudes of the majority group, conflicts in culture, and so on (cited in Al-Amiri, 2013).

Results of the current study indicate that the difference between the two groups means is not significant and there is no a significant difference between the performance of two groups. Results in the current study are consistent with those of Van Gelderen et al. (2003), Sanders and Meijers (cited in Bhatia & Ritchie, 2012) and Okita and Jun Hai (2001) which showed no effect of bilinguality on the acquisition of (some components of) an additional languages.

7. Conclusion

Regarding numerous advantages of bilingualism for both children and adults approved in many studies, the results of the current study indicate that bilinguals in this study did not outperform monolinguals. If bilingual children in some studies seem slow in lexical development and

have smaller lexicons, researchers believe that the poor performance of bilinguals is due to some factors that influence bilinguals, studies, tests and experiments. So, speech professionals, researchers and parents should try to understand what causes the delay, rather than attribute it to bilingualism. Some influential factors such as level of threshold in the second language that is essential for positive influences of bilingualism, lexical selection, distributed characteristic across languages, sensitivity to language as a system, bilinguals' type (balanced vs. dominant) can influence bilinguals' attainment in learning additional languages. Moreover, many other factors also should be taken into account; command of second language, poor home environment, the parent's low socioeconomic status, negative attitudes of the majority group, conflicts in culture, and so on.

Regarding difficulties the bilinguals face in the process of language learning bilingualism in turn lead to more effective abilities and superior cognitive and metalinguistic abilities in learning a new language, especially in classroom situations. Moreover these advantages continue to their adulthood and they benefit the positive effects in future. Thus, just like Latin once used to be taught as an academic exercise, mental gymnastics with the aim of cognitive training, it has been demonstrated that people who know more than one language usually think more flexibly than monolinguals.

Finally, it can be concluded that childhood bilinguality has a positive effect on adult aptitude for learning a foreign language (Eisenstein, 1980). That is, those who learned a second language during childhood would have a greater success in learning foreign languages than adults. It can be added that some scholars in this field agree that the answer this question is actually not easy, especially when it is related to complicated mental and psychological aspects and some researchers believe that there is no clear-cut answer for the question of the impact of bilingualism on language learning.

8. Implications

This study has some implications for the field of language teaching. Discussion of the current study and a review of previous studies in national and international scope proved that bilingualism has positive effect on vocabulary achievement of third language when the first two languages are taught formally, as Thomas (1988) claimed that those bilinguals who possess literacy skills in L1 and L2 perform better in the kind of tests that require manipulation of language, additionally childhood bilinguality has positive effects on adults' aptitude for learning a foreign language (Eisenstein, 1980) and those who learn a second language during childhood would have a greater success in learning foreign languages in the future. Therefore, it is suggested that second and third languages should also be introduced in formal education in Iran from the first years of schooling. It also provides a basis for improving the quality of practices in the teaching of first, second, and third languages' vocabulary. It also has implication for test constructors and raters. Large bilingual test corpora are urgently needed in order to evaluate and compare methods in an objective manner. Large-scale test databases that are truly multilingual are needed.

The authors

Shahrbanoo Zarghami has obtained her M.A in TEFL from the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch. She has taught English as a foreign language for more than six years in different institutes and schools at different levels. She is at present an instructor at Payam-e-Noor University. Her main areas of interest include language teaching and learning.

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri is an Assistant professor and a faculty member at the Department of Foreign Languages at Shiraz Islamic Azad University. He has written and published many books and articles (locally and internationally). He has participated in many national and international conferences.

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