



## Improving the quality of Farsi speech and the academic performance of Azeri-Farsi bilingual students through attending drama therapy sessions



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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effects of drama therapy on enhancing the linguistic performance and academic achievement of Azeri-Farsi bilinguals who speak Farsi as a second language. To that end, thirty-seven male bilingual students of Azeri and Farsi (age:  $9.32 \pm 1.12$  years) were randomly assigned to an experimental group ( $N = 18$ ) and a placebo group ( $N = 19$ ). The experimental group participated in 90-min drama therapy sessions twice or thrice a week for three weeks. During this period, the members of the placebo group were engaged in effortless activities. The MANCOVA results revealed the positive effect of drama therapy on the Mean Length of Utterances and the Speed of Speech in bilingual students, but it showed no effect on the Number of Utterances, Type-Token Ratio, and the Academic Average. In conclusion, we will discuss the possible factors that mediate such effects and indicate a number of directions for future research.

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In this era primarily characterized as the communication age, people from different ethnicities, cultures and languages come into contact, mingle and live together, turning homes to a hub of multilingual and multicultural interactions. It has been estimated that approximately 60% of the world's population is either bilingual or multilingual, using routinely two or more languages in their daily communication (Baker, 2001; Padilla, 1990). Accordingly, multilingualism and multiculturalism have found their ways to most classrooms and playgrounds as the social facts of this new century (Luke, Comber, & O'Brien, 1996). Though intermingling of languages and cultures has proved beneficial for dialog between nations, it has turned out to be difficult for multilinguals who need to master a formal language-different from that spoken at home-for their academic achievement and successful interaction with the wider society (Riaux, 2008). Such a situation calls for thoughtful endeavors to lessen the problems faced by multilinguals and to help them enhance their language learning abilities and gain social success. The present research falls in this category by aiming at an investigation of the linguistic and academic performance of Azeri-Farsi bilingual students, and proposing a solution to improve their performance through the remedial function of art, namely drama therapy sessions.

The environment in which Azeri-Farsi bilingual students are studied is Iran, a country with a considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. The formal language of the country is Farsi. It is used in all the academic and official situations, leaving no space for the use of the local languages in these situations, and thus giving rise to bilingualism in some areas. One such area is the province of Azerbaijan where people are mostly Azeri-Farsi bilinguals who speak Azeri (Riaux, 2008) as their first language and Persian (Farsi) as their second language. They make up approximately sixteen percent of the total population of the country.

### Bilingualism and academic performance

Different studies indicate that students from diverse nationalities and languages have not been successful in their education at schools using formal language other than theirs. This is because either they lack compatibility with the school environment or they have problems with other students because of speaking a different language (Darcy, 1953; Delpit, 1995). In line with the concerns of the present study, Riaux (2008) has shown that Iranian students from different ethnicities, with different vernaculars from that of the official language and a low level of proficiency in their official language are not fully prepared to understand class trainings, hence they have a lower academic performance and compatibility. Since there is an overwhelming grammatical difference between Farsi and Azeri languages, Azeri students experience serious problems in learning and using Farsi as their academic language

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and consequently suffer from poor academic performance in their school education.

Being bilingual does not necessarily put these students at a cognitive disadvantage. Up until 1962, a negative opinion about bilingualism prevailed among researchers. Mixing of the languages and low performance in one of the languages have led some early researchers to conclude that bilingualism hinders the complete development of the grammar, hence the decrease in their performance. [Petitto et al. \(2001\)](#) has shown that the kind of the language delay observed in bilinguals is only a “protracted language development” in which bilinguals take longer to process their L2. Otherwise, monolinguals and bilinguals show similar evolutionary patterns. Other recent researches have also shown that not only do bilinguals fare a lot better in having a metalinguistic awareness that monolinguals lack, but also they perform better in some cognitive tasks ([Fromkin, Rodman, & Hymas, 2011](#)).

The pathbreaking study that showed the positive effects of bilingualism was [Peal and Lambert \(1962\)](#). They found that Canadian French-English bilinguals were superior to their monolingual peers in verbal and non-verbal measures of intelligence. Other follow-up studies showed that the superiority of bilinguals lie in their divergent thinking, analytical approach toward language, communicative sensitivity and field independence ([Baker, 1988](#); [Grosjean, 1997](#)). [Cummins \(1979, 1991, 2000\)](#) took up [Lambert's \(1977\)](#) findings on the positive effect of high language proficiency on the educational performance of bilinguals and proposed the threshold and interdependence hypotheses to show the relation between the two languages. Based on threshold hypothesis, high proficiency in the language of instruction (as L2) has a facilitatory effect in bringing about a higher chance of academic achievement. Those students whose proficiency in L2 is relatively weak will tend to fall further and further behind unless the instruction they receive enables them to comprehend the input (both written and oral) and participate academically in class ([Cummins, 2000](#): 175). As a supplement to this hypothesis, the interdependence hypothesis suggests that proficiency in L1 has a positive effect on L2 development. Studies conducted globally on educational bilingualism show that balanced bilinguals, those who are equally proficient in both their languages, perform better than non-balanced ones both in their own vernacular and official languages ([August & Hakuta, 1997](#); [Hakuta & McLaughlin, 1996](#); [Reese et al., 2000](#)). Also in relation to the contributory role of L1 in bilingual education, [Parvanehnezhad and Clarkson \(2008\)](#) have shown that bilingual students switch between their two languages when they are solving mathematical problems and their L1 is an indispensable help in problem solving.

Undoubtedly, bilingualism is one of the main issues of educational system in multilingual countries. In order to confront this issue, two basic approaches are adopted ([Brice, 2002](#)). The first approach is using the mother tongue, especially at early years of education, which is not only the child's absolute right, but also necessary for education. UNESCO, especially in recent decades, promotes mother tongue-based approaches to bilingual education. The second approach is more remedial. Incorporation of remedial activities in special educational programs for bilingual students and providing extensive pre-school education are among the most widely practiced remedial programs.

#### *Bilingualism and the remedial effect of drama therapy*

To enhance the quality of Farsi speech and accelerate the educational progress of Azeri-Farsi bilingual students, we propose a remedial approach called drama therapy. Not only is this method favored by children due to the playful nature of it, but also it has favorable educational and therapeutic outcomes without any side effects. Mental health professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists have recently accepted this method as

one of the most effective methods, which has plenty of applications in schools, kindergartens, orphanages, correction and rehabilitation centers, etc., both therapeutically and educationally ([Weber & Haen, 2005](#)). Dramatizing reality has been recognized as a central therapeutic tool by most drama therapists ([Blatner & Blatner, 1988](#); [Duggan & Grainger, 1997](#); [Jenkyns, 1996](#); [Jennings, 1998, 2004](#); [Johnson, 1981, 1991, 2000](#); [Jones, 1996](#); [Lahad, 2000](#); [Moreno, 1987](#); [Pendzik, 2006, 2008](#), among others). Drama therapy emphasizes creativity in order to provide an opportunity for the client to change. For example, a spectator observing a drama therapy intervention may only see what appears to be a child at play, while at same time the child is improvising and using theatrical techniques and is on the road to improving some abilities or gaining some knowledge from the role play ([Kedem-Tahar & Kellerman, 1996](#)). While this metaphor considers observations of the client to appear childlike, it does not mean that it is conducted exclusively with children. It does, however, assume that children or adults will appear childlike when expressing themselves through drama therapy. The childlike behavior is really a metaphor for how free clients appear when participating in drama therapy.

Drama therapy may be executed with either individuals or groups, but it is more frequently performed in groups. A variety of techniques, such as the use of props and masks, music, physical relaxation, imagery, and movement may be utilized in drama therapy ([Kedem-Tahar & Kellerman, 1996](#)). The British Association of Drama Therapists (1992) has adopted the following definition for drama therapy: it has as its main focus the intentional use of the healing aspects of drama and theater as a therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight, and growth ([Blatner, 2003](#)).

Drama therapy is an improvisational method which takes advantage of dramatic conventions for a remedial reason. From a theoretical and practical point of view, it can well be acknowledged as a method with fundamentally remedial applications in view, while having a link with ancient and conventional themes ([Pendzik, 2008](#); [Weber & Haen, 2005](#)). In 1921, it became prevalent by Moreno and then by Libovisi and Dyaktin in Paris ([Leeder & Wimmer, 2007](#)). This method which emphasizes play, storytelling, legend and myth, motion, sound, and pantomime as suitable educational materials can be applied to children and teenagers as well adults ([Pitruzzella, 2004](#)).

[Fairclough \(1972\)](#) stated that drama can lead to mental, physical, and sentimental freedom in individuals. It can be used to expand human experiences in all the stages of life. It leads to enhanced self-confidence as well as the skillful expression of experiences, and as such it can be applied to class situations to improve the students' speech and educational performance. [Ajuriaguerra \(1980\)](#) demonstrated that using drama therapy proves effective in acquired and selective mutism therapy in the youth. In an investigation on the use of drama for people with learning disabilities, [Melanie \(2000\)](#) found that drama could improve communication and speaking skills of the students participating in drama sessions. [Couroucli-Robertson \(2001\)](#) investigated the effect of a short-run drama therapy on a 13-year-old male adolescent who suffered from speech impediment. Results from this study showed that drama therapy improves the speech skills of an individual through alleviating his psychological distress. Results from studies in the next 2 and 4 months indicated that this individual was recovering from speech disorders. [Hemati \(2008\)](#) in a study on the educational effects of drama on students demonstrated that drama therapy improves the expression capability of the individuals so that they tend to observe brevity in their statements. [Narimani, Biabangard, and Rajabi \(2009\)](#) investigated the effects of drama therapy on social skills and self-esteem of the children suffering from dyslexia (developmental reading disorder) and pointed out that drama

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