The Effects of Context Variable on Writing Skills: A Study of Dutch and Iranian Learners

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Abstract

Many factors affect the quality of second language acquisition. Input, interaction, and output are three of these factors. The focus in this paper is more on input or exposure to the language, and to examine how much language learning is affected by the amount and type of input.

In order to answer this question, the effect of contact, both in school and out of school, on English writing proficiency has been investigated by assessing learners’ writings. Iranian students with no out of school contact, studying in a private institution where the classroom language is only English, have been compared to 4 groups of Dutch students (bilingual-regular, monolingual-regular, bilingual-religious, and monolingual-religious). Dutch students in regular schools have access to English popular media whereas students in religious schools have limited or no out of school contact to English due to religious reasons. Bilingual groups have high-input conditions at school whereas monolingual groups have low-input condition as they only receive a few hours of instruction a week. Taking into account that Farsi is very different from English while Dutch is quite similar to English, it is expected that bilingual-religious group outperform the Iranian students. In this study we see that having learned English through a specific communicative method, Iranian students performed better than the monolingual-religious group but the difference was not significant. The bilingual-regular group outperformed all the other groups, so we can assume that the amount of in school contact also plays an important role in the acquisition process.
Introduction

The constant need for good communication in English has produced a demand for English teaching throughout the world. Many people seek opportunities to achieve a good command of English in order to use it worldwide in different ways. Therefore, there is a need to improve the quality of English teaching and provide ways to increase the level of English communicative proficiency.

Previously, English teaching methods were based on a grammatical method. The principle was that the knowledge people have of a language accounts for the ability to produce a sentence in that language (Richards, 2006). As Richards puts it, grammatical methods produced a grammatical competence that referred to the knowledge of building blocks of language (e.g. parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and forming sentences. Many English practice books used to focus on grammatical competence as their main concern.

While grammar remains an important aspect of language learning, obviously it is not all that is important in learning a language. It is possible that someone masters all the rules of a language but still has problems in successful using f the language. This can be known as the term community competence (Richards, 2006). In the following paragraphs, more will be discussed about communicative method of language teaching and its principles.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

In the past 30 years, the concept of second language learning has changed in our minds. CLT is formed in response to these changes of understanding (Richards, 2006). Earlier, the focus of language acquisitions was primarily on grammatical competence and language learning was considered to be a mechanical habit formation (Richards, 2006). It was believed that preventing students from making errors and encouraging them to make correct sentences is a kind of good habit formation. They minimized the chances of making errors by performing drill tasks and memorizing dialogues. This whole process of learning was in complete control of the teacher.

In recent years however, language learning is viewed utterly different. Nowadays, the principles of a communicative method are based on input, interaction, and output. In an effective, communicative classroom, learning can take place through interaction between learners and the
teacher, collaborative production of meaning, creating meaningful interaction using the language, negotiation of meaning, learning through applying the feedback received, and experimenting different ways of saying things (Richards, 2006).

Moreover, CLT also brought out new roles for the students as well as the teachers. Unlike past years, learners now have an active role in the classroom and the tasks are more cooperative rather than individualistic (Richards, 2006). Students are becoming more used to listening to their fellow classmates and receiving feedback from them. This has increased the level of students’ responsibility for their own learning. Teachers, on the other hand, are seen as a facilitator and monitor rather than a model for correct speech. They no longer have to stop students from making errors, but rather facilitate the language learning through students’ correct or incorrect production of language.

In this thesis the principles of communicative language learning (input, interaction, and output) are focused on in more detail, and also the role of explicit grammar instruction, and whether we should avoid explicit instruction is focused on in detail. The question to be asked here is whether an effective CLT program for a limited number of hours per week is enough to teach students English, or is in addition to the CLT classes out of school contact with the language needed?

Berns, et al (2007) have investigated the relationship between language contact and English proficiency in several European countries. In their study, they emphasize that developing English proficiency is not only related to school lessons but also to the context out of school. They referred to factors such as parental language proficiency, parental education, media, and contact with English through personal network, as being helpful for developing language proficiency. Dutch students, in addition to Belgian, German, and French turned out to be the most proficient students in the study, and these students claimed that over 40 percent of their English knowledge is learned through out of school contact. This is mostly because of the media in the Netherlands which has an abundance of English programs. Clearly, students do not learn all their English from school lessons, and it would be unrealistic to ignore the Dutch context which is full of meaningful input. Moreover, the languages Belgian, German, and French are quite similar to English.

In other investigations on the relationship between out of school contact and English proficiency Verspoor, et al (2007) found that there is significant relation between the amount of
media contact and English listening skills. In these studies, they compared students in strictly religious schools to students of non-religious schools. Students in religious schools seemed to have less contact with English media, and therefore scored lower in listening skills. All these studies indicate the importance of out of school contact in improving English proficiency.

In the chapters below, I will explain in detail the studies conducted on bilingual, regular, and control Dutch students and compare them with Iranian students of about the same age who learn English in a communicative method in a low-input context.
Chapter 1

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research focuses on the way languages are learned. Over the last two decades a large number of studies have focused on this topic, but still understanding the details of SLA process is difficult. De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor (2005) believe that language acquisition is a dynamic process (Dynamic Systems Theory) in which a person’s knowledge keeps on changing and developing as long as it is used, otherwise it may lead to loss of skills. Moreover, many factors have effect on this constant development and loss; attitude, motivation, intelligence, and previous learning experiments. These factors interact all the time, which makes it impossible to consider their specific effects in isolation. However, we can investigate the effects these factors may have in general.

All languages are complex systems that continuously change (DST). People never use the exact same two utterances two days in a row. This variation and other external forces cause languages to change over time. This is similar to the process of SLA; a learner may experience some variability in use of a certain language form until it stabilizes. Some believe that this variability may be caused by the influence of the first language on the second language and vice versa. Others, especially within a UG framework, claim that SLA is not that different from first language acquisition. No matter what the theoretical perspective is, most researchers agree that input, output, interaction, and perhaps some focus on form is needed to acquire or learn a second language. In the following paragraphs we will review these factors.

**Input**

Input is the language that is available to the learner in any way (listening, reading, body language) (Gass & Mackey, 2006). In the field of SLA all theories consider input as a fundamental element in the process of acquisition. Input is the raw data learners use which functions as linguistic evidence for them to detect patterns about the second language system (Gass & Mackey, 2006).

Although all approaches to SLA consider input as an important component, they do not attribute the same value to it. As an example, Chomskyan Universal Grammar followers consider
input as a stimulus that communicates with an innate system. Or Krashen argued that people learn languages by being exposed to meaningful input and communicating in it, not by studying the rules of grammar. He took components of fields of first language acquisition, developmental studies, and neuro-psychology and connected them to the field of SLA. His work strongly motivated the “communicative approach” in second language teaching, and SLA research. He also advanced five theoretical hypotheses in this regard; 1- the acquisition vs. learning hypothesis, 2- the monitor hypothesis, 3-the natural order hypothesis, 4- the input hypothesis, and 5- the effective filter hypothesis.

According to Krashen’s input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985: 100) no matter what the learner’s L1 is, how old he/she is, or how much input he/she receives, the learner acquires the language along a natural order through second language input. This input should be one step beyond learner’s knowledge of language. As an example, if a learner is at stage “i”, he/she should be exposed to “i+1” for the acquisition to take place. This hypothesis is compatible with DST because of the idea that a learner needs to be exposed to unknown knowledge in order to advance. The question to be asked here is whether the input alone is enough for the process of second language acquisition.

Researchers with different beliefs include those who believe in the role of frequency of input (see Ellis, 2002). In this regard, Ellis suggests that language forms are learned “through using language, engaging in communication” (p.101). This means that learning the language constructions take place through language use along with exposure to input. Frequency seems to be an important element for language learning, and it is quite clear that input plays an essential role in this process.

If we want to look at input from a DST point of view we see that unlike other theories on input (a trigger of association, Elman et al., 1996; a building block of representations, McClelland & Rumelhart, 1985; a trigger of combinations of innate parameter settings in syntax, Chomskey, 1986), there is something added in a DST approach: the ever-changing interaction between a system and its input. Van Gelder and Port (1995) argue in the introduction to *Mind as Motion* that the most important issue is change as time passes:

The cognitive system is not a discrete sequential manipulator of static representational structures: rather, it is a structure of mutually and simultaneously influencing change. Its processes do not take place in the arbitrary, discrete time of
computer steps: rather, they unfold in the real time of ongoing change in the environment, the body and the nervous system. The cognitive system does not interact with other aspects of the world by passing messages and commands: rather, it continuously coevolves with them. (McClelland & Rumelhart, 1985:3)

A dynamic system theory depends on resources, adapts and interacts as well as continuously co-evolving with its environment (Verspoor, et al, 2008).

Input can be seen as a resource that helps the process of learning (Krashen, 1985). As any other natural systems, language is likely to deteriorate when not used. This even applies to the first language. That is why input is needed as a resource for keeping the system and helping it develop.

In L1 research there is now a growing interest in measuring the relationship between the input that a child receives and development (Verspoor, et al, 2008). As it is indicated by Tomasello (2000), and Diessel and Tomasello (2000) the relationship between the two is very close especially in the first stages of L1 acquisition. There are not enough studies on the relationship between L2 development and the effects of input and its frequency, but as an example, Larsen-Freeman (1976) has done studies on morpheme order in terms of frequency of occurrence, and written an issue in Studies in Second language Learning (2002:24(2)). These studies indicate that many complexities in a second language can be explained by their relationship with the frequency of occurrence. In that very same issue Ellis (2002) has written a review on the literature about the effects of frequency and language learning.

Input leads to acquisition only when it is processed by using those procedures that help connecting language forms to their meanings during comprehension. However, it should be noted that comprehension is not limited to language processing; people can comprehend a message by looking only at a picture. Therefore, we can replace the idea of ‘input’ with ‘processing’ and look at ‘processing’ as ‘acquiring’ and ‘learning’ (Verspoor, et al, 2008). Previously, input was thought of as a one directional flow of information from the environment to the language user which was considered as a stable system. But if we take VanPattern’s idea into account, we can see that the input learners receive while interacting with the world may be processed in different ways at different times (Verspoor, et al, 2008).

Frequency of input is also an important issue in second language acquisition. Hart and Risley (1995), conducted a longitudinal study on 44 American children from different
socioeconomic backgrounds and they found out that the quality of interaction is important as well as its quantity. Verspoor & Behrens (2010) write about the importance of frequency of input: “A child that hears 50 utterances per hour on average has been exposed to 250,000 utterances by age 4, but a child that hears an average of 800 utterances per hour has an experience of 4 million utterances”. This shows that the amount of communication has effects on language learning, and as reported by Hart & Risley the quantity of interaction can be considered a guarantee to later success at school.

In usage-based theories of language development frequency is considered to be an influential factor. However, it is important to know what we count and how to store the information. Therefore, it is important to make distinction between type and token frequency. Token frequency counts the number of times a certain type appears: For example, the word “dog” might appear 25 times in a conversation. This type of frequency leaves a trace in the memory, therefore, the more we do something the clearer its image becomes. On the other hand, this type of frequency does not cause generalization. That is why type frequency or variation is needed. Think about hearing the word “dog” 10 times rather than hearing two tokens of “dog”, five tokens of “poodle”, and three tokens of “terrier”. In this case there is variation and by having enough knowledge about the context we can conclude that “poodle” and “terrier” are sub branches of the general category of “dog”. If we consider their language use, we can see that they have the same grammatical characteristics as what we call “nouns” as, for example, they can be preceded by adjectives or determiners (MacWhinney 2008; Redington, Chater & Finch 1998).

As claimed by Ellis (2002) language processing can be strongly influenced by input frequency. Frequency can affect the processing of phonology, reading, spelling, lexis, formulaic language, comprehension, grammaticality, sentence production, and syntax (Ellis, 2002, cited from Ellis & Collins, 2009). As Ellis and Collins (2009) put it: “Sensitivity to input frequency entails that language users must have registered patterns of occurrence in processing. These frequency effects are thus compelling evidence for usage-based models of language acquisition, which emphasize the role of input.”
Comprehensible input via media

There are studies that identified T.V. as a source of comprehensible input (see Garza, 1991; Tudor, 1987). Television, as an out of school source of contact can improve the process of second language learning because it watching T.V. can increase the cognitive investment of the second language learners (Meskill, 1998). Moreover, as claimed by Garza (1991) watching T.V. is considered as an activity that regardless of learners’ unfamiliarity with the language or culture implies learners’ understanding. People with limited knowledge of the target culture and language can decode the novel input by watching television. Research in this area indicates that schema that is activated during the process of watching television can facilitate comprehension of complicated second linguistic input (Mueller, 1980, as cited in Meskill, 1998).

D’ydevalle & Pavakanun (1997) have supported the idea that watching T.V. is a source of comprehensible input. They suggest that frequent T.V. subtitled programs watching gives small language communities, such as Dutch-speaking Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands, the chance to learn many languages. As an example, in Belgium many children can speak English even before they learn English at school. This can be at least partly due to T.V. watching. Likewise, Königs (1999, p. 255) suggests that extreme contact with media at young ages makes it probable for late beginners of English curriculum to reach the same proficiency level as their peers in a shorter time (as cited in Berns, et al, 2007).

Interaction

As mentioned before, input, output, and interaction are required in order to learn a second language. For many years, focal attention has been paid to the role of interaction in the study of language acquisition theory. As an example, many constructs with relevance in interactionist research up until now, were conceptualized by Vygotsky and his colleagues in Russia in the 1920s. As more focus was on interactionist viewpoints in SLA, there was more emphasis on empirical studies of learners’ interaction and discourse (Gass & Mackey, 1998). Many analyses of input and interaction investigated how learners manipulated their interlanguage (IL) resources when asked to make a more intelligible message. These manipulations then, caused learners to reconstruct their IL to greater accuracy and complexity (Gass & Mackey, 1998).
A large number of studies have dealt with input and interaction in SLA and, in fact, these studies have provided abundant information, but still, the exact role of interaction in development of L2 knowledge has kept on challenging researchers. Up to 1970s, researchers believed that conversational interaction reinforces communication in SLA. By means of interaction, learners could apply the grammatical features, rules, and structures used in the classroom and tasks, to a spoken conversation to present particular grammar structures. This common belief was changed by Wagner-Gough and Hatch’s illustration in 1975 on learners’ interaction in conversation who argued that conversation is more than a simple practice form. They suggest that L2 grammar may develop from discourse rather than just feed into it.

This fundamental understanding was the basis of a number of studies describing L2 interaction and intending to relate it to the linguistic need of second language learners. This was particularly for the need of a comprehensible input, which at that time was thought of as the motivational power behind the acquisition procedure (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1983a, 1983b). In the 1980s, Long used these studies to clarify the relationship between input and SLA. Pointing out the difference between the talk directed to second language learner by native speakers (NSs) and the interaction in which they involved was one Long’s primary contributions. He distinguished such interactions from native speaker-nonnative speaker (NS-NNS) conversation regarding conversational structure. Long pointed out differences such as clarification requests, confirmation of meaning, and comprehension checks. In his studies, Long presented that these conversational modifications were not solely found in nonnative discourse, and in fact, were also found in NS conversations. Nevertheless, Long indicated that these conversations can play a role in providing L2 learners with the comprehensible input they need for SLA because they occurred considerably more in conversations involving L2 learners and even more in conversations between learners therefore, he presented a two-step proposal regarding the relationship between conversational interaction and acquisition.

The two steps of Long’s proposal (1980) are as follows: First comprehension fosters acquisition, and second conversational modifications cause better understanding. Therefore, we can conclude that conversational modifications foster acquisition (Gass & Mackey, 1998). As it is argued by Long, the first part of the proposal was previously supported, although not directly due to a lack of evidence that there had ever been a successful language learner without comprehensible input. In order to support his idea, he referred to results of research on the
hearing of children with deaf parents who acquired language with delay or were not able to acquire it completely because of the lack of comprehensible input through interaction with parents (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). As for the second part of the proposal, Long consistently supported it by his own research (Long, 1985), and also other researchers supported the idea in their studies (Blau, 1982; Gass and Varonis, 1985a, 1985b; Johnson, 1981, and Pica, Young, and Doughty, 1987). Therefore, during the 1980s, many researchers attempted to establish links between conversational modifications, understanding (comprehension), and acquisition.

Although the results of the early research were promising, the effect that interaction may have on acquisition has remained a complicated matter. In 1985, Long suggested that comprehensible input alone is not enough to foster the acquisition process. Hence, interactional modifications, by themselves, could not be the reason behind learners’ L2 development. In 1986, Sato started criticizing the idea regarding a forthright relationship between interaction and acquisition. Her claims were based on her early studies on two Vietnamese learners (boys, at the ages of 10 and 12) of English as a second language (ESL) whose main source of input was conversational interaction with their teacher and friends at school, their adoptive parents, and Sato herself. She studied these subjects intensively for 10 months. What she found was that the subjects did not have a significant progress towards L2 proficiency, in particular regarding their usage and control of past tense grammar, despite the fact that they had the chance to hear and produce these linguistic features in their social conversation every day. Sato’s investigation on her own interactions with the boys showed that they were capable of making time references in ways that were understandable but no complex grammar or vocabulary was used. In their conversations, they relied on the knowledge they shared with their interlocutor, conversational features, and their own usage of adverbial phrases and time expressions to refer to a certain period of time, which made them able to have a comprehensible discourse without using complex structures.

Based upon her research, Sato (1986) did not deny the importance of interaction in learners’ access to past time marking input but indicated that it played more as a source for linguistically remarkable features like adverbial phrases and time expressions than for verbs and other less understandable structures in conversation. Moreover, she suggested that the effect of interaction on acquisition was more complex than it had been thought to be up until now. It was
becoming obvious that there was a need for researchers to come up with other interactional processes that could help learners to have access to those L2 forms that were not readily obvious in comprehensible input produced by conversational interaction. One of these kinds of interactional processes was proposed by Swain (1985) which has been continued by her until recent years (Swain, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Swain (1985) has argued for the usefulness of what she refers to as “comprehensible output”. Her research has broadened the effect of conversation on SLA. She has claimed that conversation specifically and production generally, force learners to use grammatical structures in their conversations. In comparison, in comprehension, it is not necessary for learners to make use of L2 syntax knowledge. Therefore, regarding more complex structures of L2 syntax, it is necessary for learners to try to be more comprehensible in responding to interlocutor feedback, instead of reaching comprehension of his/her input. This can play a fundamental role in acquisition process.

The importance of feedback has also been mentioned by White (1987). He tried to point at feedback as a source of negative evidence and as a way of explaining the insufficiency of learners own rule systems (Gass & Mackey, 1998). He claimed that comprehensible input is not necessary for L2 development, but incomprehensible input is. What she means is that incomprehensible input that triggers modifications in language provokes learners to acknowledge the insufficiency of their own rule systems. In 1997, Gass suggests that incomprehensible input can provoke learners’ acknowledgement of differences between their IL grammar and L2. Basically, this is the main point of this argument concerning the role of interaction in SLA. In 1985, Gass and Varonis illustrated that problems in understanding or as they put it “instances of non-understanding” make learners understand that it is important to have linguistic modifications. Therefore, essentially these conversational modifications or “negotiations” (the term that has long been used by Gass and Varinos, and other SLA researchers) can help learners to focus on the parts where they are more likely to make mistakes during their conversation, and provide them with information that can help them through IL modifications. Subsequently, these modifications can lead to stabilization or a change in the language. Non-native speakers (NNSs) can get more useful input helping them through their effort to understand the target L2 through conversational clarifications. Moreover, the elaborated input can focus learners’ attention on IL forms that are different from the L2. This differentiation between IL forms and target language
features provokes learning. Thus, negotiation together with classroom exercises followed by teacher’s explanation can help learners realize particular features, which enhance the input (Sharwood Smith, 1985) and make it more salient. This viewpoint on the connection between interaction and SLA has motivated a substantial scope of research. In 1996, Long offers a comparable idea of the effect of interaction/negotiation on SLA. He focuses on how negotiation “connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p.452).

**Output**

Output is another factor that is important in learning a second language. As Gass and Mackey (2006) put it, output refers to the language that learners produce. Research on interaction often concentrates on output that is modified following feedback (Ellis and He 1999; McDonough 2005; McDonough and Mackey in press; Muranoi 2000; Shehadeh 2002; Swain 1985, 1995, 2005). It has been argued that this modified output can improve learning because it makes learners reflect on their original language (Gass & Mackey, 2006). As Swain argues, producing language “may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing” (1985:249). Many researchers believe that output gives learners a chance to receive feedback, encouraging them to produce more accurate, complex and understandable sentences (Swain 1993, 2005; Swain and Lapkin 1995; Long 1996; Pica 1994). Swain (1995) also argued that output gives learners the opportunity to test the hypotheses they have made about the target language and make modifications if needed.

Most interaction researchers believe that if the learners need to produce a more useful modified output it is necessary for them to focus on the relationships between the errors they make, the feedback they receive, and their output (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Moreover, even when feedback is received but the correct form is not provided in it, learners should be able to figure the right form out to correct their errors.

Now that we have pointed out the importance of input, interaction, and output it is worth reviewing some studies on the importance of input.
Case studies

What we have learned so far is that a learner receives input through a dynamic process, that is different from learner to learner, and time to time, and that interaction is considered as a focal step in the process of learning a second language. Now, we want to see if an Input-Only approach can be effective in second language learning. Here we will report on case studies that show that an input-only (comprehension based) approach can be as effective as a combined approach (input and interaction) for teaching general language knowledge.

Verspoor and Winitz (1997) have conducted a study on the assumption that input should be just above the learner’s language knowledge. They reject Krashen’s (1981) proposal indicating that language input can consist of a increasingly complex language with discrete levels of comprehensibility in terms of morphosyntactic complexity (Verspoor et al., 2008). They made a universal comprehension for Comprehensible Input with reference to lexicon (Verspoor et al., 2008), instead. They designed this approach in a way to teach language components of different lexical fields through implicit teaching, while concentrating on a specific lexical field like ‘walking’, ‘school’, or ‘telephone’. Learners were provided with audiotapes and booklets that had written texts and pictures in them to help make the message clear. Students themselves decided on how often they listened to a tape, therefore, the language course was completely self-paced. This method turned out to be successful even though it did not contain any explicit or implicit focus on form(s), and no specific grammar lessons were designed for it. The course did not provide interaction or negotiation. Students that participated in only listening comprehension approach were compared to students that had instructions on writing, reading, and speaking. The results showed no significant difference between the two groups in the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (the test consists of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension sub-test and a listening comprehension sub-test (Verspoor et al., 2008).

In the above-mentioned study only receptive skills such as reading and listening were tested. We can also find case studies where a comprehensible based (input-only) approach, positively affects output. As reported by Lightbown (1992) and Lightbown, Halter, White, and Horst (2002) students in comprehension-based program performed at least as well as students with regular ESL program. They conducted a longitudinal study on 800 young students in French-speaking
Canada. They were given tests, questionnaires, and tasks before beginning the course, at the end of the first year, and at the beginning and end of the other 2 years. The control group received a regular ESL instruction, and the experimental group read stories and other materials and listened to the related tapes. They did these activities independently, with no instructions, and feedback from the teachers. The tapes contained audios of texts read slowly and clearly by a native speaker. Students were not graded on the readers but they were interested in reading from Menu 1 before Menu 2 (the first menus contained more simple texts). As reported by Lightbown et al, not only did the experimental group perform as well as the regular group in listening and reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition, they also performed as well on measures of describing a picture and oral elicited imitation task. According to these findings, they claimed that the input-only program let students have a kind of ‘quality input’ that is not usually available in other methods of teaching.

The question to be asked here is if grammar teaching should be excluded from teaching programs. In the following paragraph, we will briefly review the history of Grammar teaching and try to find an answer to the mentioned question.

**Grammar Teaching**

Since the introduction of Direct Method at the end of nineteenth century (Richards and Rogers, 1986) there has always been a debate about teaching grammar and whether or not it should be taught explicitly. However, explicit grammar teaching persisted in different forms all through the twentieth century. But still, as the work of the theorists shows (Prabhu, 1987; Rivers, 1983; Widdowson, 1978), the pedagogies of the 1980s and 1990s had a cautious view towards grammar teaching. In this part, in order to analyze this debate, we want to consider the link between pedagogy and research by identifying research in two fields.

First, research, such as a series of studies on morphemes, was carried out to find out if the development of grammar rules was influenced by natural inborn faculties as in the series of morpheme studies (e.g. Bailey et al., 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1976) and in the field of teachability (Pienemann, 1984) and in developmental readiness (Spada and Lightbown, 1999; Mackey and Philp, 1998). The second field of research concerned the importance of input and interaction in order to make acquisition possible without explicit grammar instruction (Krashen,
1985; Long, 1981; 1983; Swain, 1985). On the other hand, contrary to research conducted in these fields, we can find evidence that shows that in spite of immersion in a language, learners keep making grammatical errors (Harley, 1989), they do not seem to progress sufficiently with competence in courses with low-input (Sharwood-Smith, 1981; 1994; Mitchell, 2000), and they cannot learn some grammatical forms with the help only of comprehensible input (White, 1987). There has also been the idea that a teaching style with a focus on analyzing the L2 grammar may be useful for academically gifted students (e.g. Cook, 2001).

Although we can find evidence that it is useful to focus on some grammatical parts of the L2, the evidence about explicit teaching of grammar is not sufficient enough to have influence on pedagogy. In particular, the matter of whether being taught grammar rules explicitly can lead to successful internalization of the rules is still unclear (Macaro & Masterman, 2006). This uncertainty seems to be related to the doubts about the nature of the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge, and between knowledge that is acquired implicitly and the implementation of the knowledge (Macaro & Masterman, 2006). However, evidence that research provides seems to support an interaction between these constructs instead of a complete division. Therefore it would be worth questioning explicit grammar teaching.

**Linguistic distance**

Research conducted on immigrant adjustment to the language of the destination country indicate that even after controlling personal characteristics immigrants from some countries seem to be less proficient in the target language than some other immigrants. This may be because of different levels of motivation in learning the target language; for example the period of migration or access to language learning courses can play roles in learning process. It may also be because of differences in the “distance” between the various languages and the target language (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). If English is “closer” to European languages such as German and French than it is to Asian languages such as Chinese, we can expect that European immigrants in English speaking countries become more proficient in English than Asian immigrants (see Corder, 1981, pp. 95-102).

Languages are complex systems that differ in vocabulary, structure, alphabets, grammar rules, and other characteristics. This makes it difficult for learners of distant languages to learn
the target language. Knowing about linguistic distance can be of great value for comparing different learning groups of a target language, linguistic issue regarding indigenous linguistic minorities, and intricacy of adapting in multilingual societies such as India (Chiswick & Miller, 2005).

Crystal (1987) describes linguistic distances: “The structural closeness of languages to each other has often been thought to be an important factor in FLL (foreign language learning). If the L2 is structurally similar to the L1, it is claimed, learning should be easier than in cases where the L2 is very different. However, it is not possible to correlate linguistic difference and learning difficulty in any straightforward way, and even the basic task of quantifying linguistic difference proves to be highly complex, because of the many variables involved”.

In many studies it has been shown that linguistic distance has an effect on immigrants’ choice of destination. As an example, Chiswick & Miller (1994) claim that immigrants from Romance languages are more likely to live in Quebec when immigrating to Canada than English speaking parts of Canada. Furthermore, among people who have immigrated to Quebec those immigrants that have Romance language background are more likely to learn French, while other non-English origins are more likely to learn English.

As claimed by Beenstock, Chiswick and Repetto (2001) among Jewish immigrants to Israel, Arabic speaking immigrants become the most proficient in Hebrew. They propose that this is because of the short linguistic distance between Hebrew and Arabic (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). Hebrew and Arabic are both part of Semitic branch of Afro-Asiatic family of languages Crystal (1987).

As we discussed above, we know that factors like interaction, output, input, and especially frequency of input are important for language learning. We also discussed that linguistic distance can also affect second language acquisition. In the next chapter I am going to compare different schools and the amount of English contact they have to investigate the effect of contact with the language on proficiency.
Chapter 2
Contact with English in participating groups

In this section I am going to look at traditional methods of teaching English in Iran and the Netherlands, as well as a particular communicative English teaching method used in a private English institution in Iran and bilingual education in the Netherlands. Having collected information about Dutch and Iranian foreign language educational system, I am going to compare the writings of Iranian students with Dutch students. In the following paragraphs information about all these schools are provided.

Traditional English instruction in Iranian schools

In Iran, English is a foreign language and is taught through a context-restricted environment. In this environment language is learnt by classroom practices that include particular textbooks and teachers’ classroom work management. There is no support from social contexts outside the classroom. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, English was formally taught from the second grade of junior high school. Presently, English is taught from the first grade of junior high schools (at the age of 10-11). The textbooks used at schools are compiled, developed, and published by the Ministry of Education. They also publish teaching materials for public and private high schools nationwide. Therefore, the curriculum for all the schools is the same. Earlier than the 1990’s, the focus of English education was on reading skills to let students read and translate English texts easily. Thus the general curriculum was focused on developing students’ grammar knowledge in reading and translation. As a result, the method used by high school English teachers was basically grammar translation so that they can prepare students for the expectations of the national curriculum. The modified high school curriculum for English education in the last decade appears to have emphasized more on communicative competence. However, it is still very different from what is called “communicative”. Teachers still use the grammar translation method through textbooks that do not have many listening and speaking activities and use grammatical exercises disguised as ‘writing’ activities (Hosseini, 2007).
Students receive about 150 minutes of instruction per week. The reason for their current method of teaching is that the students have to take the standardized national exams which are still mainly structural in orientation.

**Methodology used in Iranian Private English Institutions**

As English instruction at school does not seem to suffice for language learning most of Iranian students enroll in private English institutions to learn English as an extra curriculum activity in after school hours, for 3 hours a week. In this study I am going to investigate the method used in a particular institution called “Milad”. The institution is situated in Tehran and has two branches for girls and one for boys. The teachers are mostly non-native young girls (with the exception of a couple of native speakers, and men) most of whom have learned English in the same institution; therefore, they are quite familiar with the environment and the teaching styles. Students normally enroll voluntarily because they like to be taught by young teachers (as opposed to their school teachers) and as they say, they like the material taught there as they learn about the world of music, arts, technology, and so on, as well as English grammar rules. So even the material they learn is something other than what they learn at school.

This institution hires teachers based on their English knowledge, correct pronunciation, attitude, and sometimes appearance. For those applicants that have learned English in Milad institution there will be no placement test and no pronunciation tests. For the applicants other than the students there will be tests on English proficiency and pronunciation. After they are approved of English knowledge and correct pronunciation they will have to take part in a three month TTC (Teacher Training Course) in which they will learn how to use their English knowledge to teach the students. Items such as how to teach a particular grammar lesson, a reading passage, and a listening lesson will be taught as well as how to manage the time, and students. In this course the participants will have to perform teachings several times and they will be observed by more experienced teachers. They will even be given tips on how to react in different situations in the class room, or even what type of outfit is it better to wear (in order for the students to be attracted to the teacher and for the teachers to be different from school teachers). After successfully passing the course, teachers will be selected from the applicants. This is when the teachers to be have to observe classes of experienced teachers. After observing
a certain number of classes they will be given classes of their own. The TTC does not finish after three months, but all the teachers (experienced or inexperienced) will have meetings in which they share their experiences, ideas, and suggestions. The new teachers will all be introduced to a mentor to whom they can refer whenever they have problems and the mentor also will check their lesson plan.

As it is obvious from what I just mentioned, the teacher selection of the institution is not an easy, short process. They invest on their students so that someday they can be one of their teachers. The teaching process is not a simple one either. This institution has teaching procedures for every aspect of language. They believe following the same procedures will help the students get used to their new teachers more easily as they all teach in the same way. At the same time, teachers can have innovations in following the assigned procedure.

This institution has three main levels: children, juniors, and adults. The text books for children level are different from those of juniors and adults. Usually, children under the age of 7, that still don’t know how to read and write, are placed in children level. They can continue this level even until they are 9 and have learned how to write. The material learned in this level is simple and mostly with pictures. As they pass more levels, the material gets more difficult and more reading and writing will be added. The children level itself contains of 9 levels. So a student starting from first level will be taught picture naming, simple sentences, and classroom language. Junior and Adults levels as well, consist of several levels starting from the easiest one to the most difficult.

The textbooks used for children are different from those of juniors and adults. Children books are published by the institute itself. Many skilled teachers and researchers in the field of foreign language teaching have used the books. Children books are planned in a way that learners can start speaking even before they learn to write or read.

As for junior and adult books, they are taught with *New Interchange* books. These books are four-level, multi-skills English series for adult and young-adult learners. Each unit includes relevant content, additional grammar practice, and more opportunities to develop listening, and speaking skills. Focusing on accuracy and fluency, the multi-skills syllabus integrates themes, grammar, functions, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The series incorporates suggestions from teachers and students all over the world. Each semester, two units of the book are taught. The students are also assigned to read a certain story book and write the summary and their opinion
by the end of the semester, which can help them improve their reading and writing skills. They will be given feedback and a second chance to rewrite their writings. During the term they write at least 4 compositions on topics related to their lesson.

Grammar is taught explicitly in this institution but at the same time there is interaction between the students and, students and the teacher. One of the main points in the rules of this institution is *never* to use L1. Even in the beginner levels, the teacher has to act everything out or use her body language in order to make sure that students understand her. The grammar teaching starts by teachers’ making lots of examples with that certain grammar rule. For instance, if the intended grammar is past tense the teacher starts talking about the fabulous weekend she had (this is called warm up, and it does not have to be real. Most of the time teachers make stories, but what is important in this part is for the stories to be fun so that it can attract the learners). In TTC classes teachers learn that appropriate facial expressions and body language is almost as important as the lesson itself, therefore, in order to make the students focus on the past tense the teacher has to change her speaking tone, or show it through body language. This part takes about 5 minutes.

After making students quite aware of what the lesson (indirectly through example) the teacher starts asking questions from the students. Again if the lesson is past tense, she will ask students how *they* spent their weekend, or last summer. Students do not know the rules yet, so it is obvious that they will make mistakes. The teacher indirectly corrects the students. Now that the students know what the lesson is about and they also know that they need to learn past tense in order to make correct sentences about the past, the teacher puts the rule on the board as well as a couple of examples. The rule is usually provided to the students in form of a table. An example is provided in table 1. After providing the table, the teacher starts making examples while pointing at the table (to show exactly how the sentences are made). If the rule involves some exceptions, the teacher teaches it after the main rule. In past tense case, because there is regular and irregular verb, normally the teachers teach the regular verbs in one session and irregulars in the next, and use the dictionary to show them that they can memorize the irregular verbs.
# Regular Past Tense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Infinitive</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>watch</td>
<td>+ed</td>
<td>TV on the <strong>weekend</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She/He</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>+ed</td>
<td>to school <strong>yesterday</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>work</td>
<td>+ed</td>
<td>a lot <strong>last month</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>talk</td>
<td>+ed</td>
<td>two hours <strong>ago</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td>snow</td>
<td>+ed</td>
<td>in the <strong>Winter</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exceptions**

- Study+ed+ **Studied** *the rule will be explained*
- Watch+ ed is pronounced→ watch/t/ *the rule will be explained*

### Table 1. Regular past tense

The students are provided with the rule and are now ready to make examples of their own. The teacher asks the students to work in pairs and make examples of their own (in our example, they can start talking about a past event, such as their last birthday). After pair work, they present to the class what their partner just said. This will help their accuracy. In the end, when they are taught both regular and irregular verbs, in order to help their writing, the teacher assigns them to write about a certain past event. Here, the teacher gives them ideas about the words they can use and especially emphasizes the use of the new grammar.

As mentioned before, New Interchange textbooks contain different units, each unit focusing on a certain subject and one or two grammar rules. There are also conversations and readings included, in which the new grammar is used, and new vocabulary is provided. Students are assigned to look up the new words at home and read the passage to get an idea of the whole text. Like grammar teaching, teaching a reading also involves a warm up.

The teacher starts by asking relevant leading questions from the students and makes them start communicating and exchanging ideas about the topic, then asks a couple of students to read the text out loud. When confronting a new word, the teacher elicits the meaning from the students *indirectly* (i.e. not by asking the meaning of that certain word, but rather by making students try to make examples. For example, if the intended word is *popular*, the teacher would say: do you know of a popular person? Why is she/he popular? Are you popular?). This is when the teacher provides students with related vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, and parts of speech.
The teacher should preferably do all these indirectly (for example, she should say: what do we call a person who is not popular, and let the students guess which most of the time students guess correctly or there is at least one student who know the answer. If not, the teacher can answer, herself). After going through the whole text, they listen to the related CD, in which the text is read by a native speaker, and they repeat the new words out loud. Usually, the teacher asks a couple of students to read out parts of the text again to emphasize on the correct pronunciation of the words.

In the following session, student should have worked on the new words they learned and be prepared to answer questions about the text. They should have also listened to their CD so that they can read the text quite as the native speaker does.

In New Interchange there are conversations in each unit related to the topic. The conversations are usually dialogues between two people or more. As always, the teacher starts by a warm up asking students relevant questions about the conversation and works on the new vocabulary exactly the way they do it in a reading. Then they listen to the related CD and repeat the sentences out loud and try to sound like the native speakers as much as possible.

The teacher then gives students time, and asks them to work in pairs and act out the conversation. The teacher walks in the class and corrects their mistakes. In this part not only is the focus on the correct grammar and vocabulary use, but also on intonation and correct pronunciation. After working in pairs, a couple of groups present, and the teacher assigns them to listen to their CD and try to pronounce like the speakers.

On the whole, in this institution, there is a lot of focus on communication and correct pronunciation, as well as using the correct grammar and being fluent. By speaking English all the time, students become fluent after a couple of semesters, and by being corrected (mostly indirectly by the teacher, or sometimes by their peers) they learn the correct language and try to apply that in their speech, which helps their accuracy. What students like about the institution is its friendly environment and teachers. They never feel ashamed to speak English and they are always encouraged to sound native by watching lots of English movies and listening to English music. The problem is that, there is no English on T.V. so they have to either watch satellite T.V. that not everyone has one, or they have to download from the internet.
Traditional English instruction in Dutch schools

According to the study conducted by Blondin et al. (1998), English teaching in the Netherlands starts at the age of 10 and continues to an average of 8 years usually for 150 minutes a week. A rapidly growing number of primary schools however, have started teaching English from the first year of primary school (Verspoor et al., 2007). They aim at developing levels of English proficiency and maintaining a good pronunciation through an early start. By the time these schools started their early English teaching program, there were concerns that this may interfere with the development of mother-tongue. But recent evaluations indicate that both languages will develop well in this system (Goorhuis-Brouwer & de Bot, 2010).

Despite these developments in the Dutch education system, most students enter high school with a low level of English proficiency (Verspoor et al., 2007). In various types of secondary education system, English is taught from two to four hours a week from the first year (Verspoor et al., 2007). It is expected that the students reach a level of A2 proficiency according to the Common European Framework of References (CEFR). Students in the schools which offer access to university are expected to have reached a B2 level after 6 years of English instruction.

As mentioned above, there are schools that offer early English teaching in primary schools. This can cause a problem in the education system as students enter high school with different levels of proficiency. Therefore, teachers have to solve this problem by providing differentiated teaching. Some studies have investigated English teaching programs in schools (Bonnet, 2004). Generally English is taught traditionally at schools, with limited computer assisted instruction. The most important part of teaching is the textbook, which supplies students with language they need to learn to pass the examination.

Bilingual education in the Netherlands

As the traditional methods of English teaching were somehow disappointing, a group of motivated parents and teachers convinced their schools to start the new line of teaching known as bilingual education. This system of education is known for providing ways to increase the productivity of foreign language teaching in secondary schools of the Netherlands.
In English bilingual education system, at least half of the school subjects are taught in English. In the first three years, at least 50% of the courses are in English, and there are also readings and books for these subjects which are also in English. All in all bilingual students receive about 15 hours of English instruction per week. Bilingual schools prefer to hire native speakers, and other teachers should at least have a B2 level of English proficiency according to CEFR. In these schools students take part in international exchanges and e-mail projects as a part of internationalization program of the schools (Verspoor et al., 2007).

In order to be accepted in these schools, students are required to have a high score in the test they take at the end of primary education. Bilingual schools aim at enabling students to reach high levels of English proficiency. According to research conducted by Huibregtse (2001), this approach leads to expected higher levels of proficiency in English without negative influence on students’ L1 proficiency and their performance in school subject. By the year 2009 there were more than 100 schools in the Netherlands which offered a bilingual education which shows that this approach has been attractive to many schools.

**Other sources of English acquisition**

School seems to be an important source of learning a foreign language, but there are other sources that can play an even more important role in this process. For example, the lyrics of popular songs, English video games, T.V. programs, and English movies can be considered significant sources of input (Bonnet, 2004; Berns, de Bot & Hasenbrink, 2006). According to an investigation by Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics in 2002, all age groups watched T.V. for 163 minutes in average every day in 1999 and 2000. This number was increased to an average of 165 minutes spent on T.V./video/radio for the age group of 12 to 17. Interestingly, Bonnet (2004) presents findings that show pupils spend 6 hours listening to English music and watching English T.V. programs.

English is very popular in the Netherlands and used by almost everyone. One of the reasons for this popularity can be that English movies in Dutch television is subtitled rather than dubbed, therefore, they can play the role of an important source of contact with foreign languages. Many of the programs of Dutch television are actually in foreign languages, as well as the popular English channels such as MTV, or Discovery Channel. That is why the viewers
receive an input of at least one hour of English every day (Verspoor et al., 2007). Besides T.V. programs, advertising also seems to play a role in improving Dutch people’s English. According to the investigation by Gerritsen, Korzilius, van Meurs, and Gijsbers (2000), almost one third of the T.V. commercials were in Dutch (partly or completely).

As mentioned above Dutch pupils are exposed to high amounts of English input. This is often mentioned as one of the most important reasons of the effectiveness of language teaching programs in the Netherlands. However, a small group of Dutch educational system is not as much exposed to T.V. or other media due to religious reasons. Some particular Dutch religious schools don not allow their students to listen to the radio, watch television, or use the internet extensively. These students receive the same education as other regular Dutch students but by the time they enter secondary school, they have not been in contact with English media. Thus, their English scores were much less than students of regular schools. Therefore, several religious schools decided to start bilingual programs to make up for the students’ lack of input.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Studying English acquisition of these students, as well as previously mentioned Iranian students, and comparing them with regular Dutch students who are exposed to a lot of input can help us determine the role of input in learning English as a foreign language. In this thesis, Iranian students’ writings will be compared to those of Dutch students of four different levels to see which level has grades more similar to Iranian students’ grades. Four levels of Dutch students include 1. religious monolingual group, 2. religious bilingual group, 3. regular monolingual group, and 4. regular bilingual group. It should be taken into account that the participants of both groups (Iranian and Dutch) are almost in the same age group (14 to 16) and have been studying English for 3 years.

The hypotheses are that students in bilingual education will outperform students in regular education in general English proficiency, and that during a year of instruction, bilingual or regular, students will learn the second language at an increasing rate. Moreover, Iranian students will perform as well as religious monolingual Dutch students as both groups have limited access to English input and receive a couple of hours of weekly English instruction. The question is whether bilingual education helps the development of second language in a way more effective than regular education? How do writing skills develop through a year? And, is the communicative method used by Milad English institution effective for students who have limited contact with English outside the class? Does this method compensate for the lack of out of school contact of Iranian students?

In this section information about the participants, the materials, and procedures will be provided. The method section includes descriptions of the study design and the analyses used to answer the research question.
Subjects

Four Dutch schools and an Iranian private English institution participated in this study. The Dutch schools all offer both monolingual and bilingual programs. The data from the Dutch schools are gathered by Verspoor et al. (2007) as part of a larger project as a follow-up to Huibregtse (2001). One of the Dutch schools is a religious (reformed) monolingual school in a rural environment where traditional Protestantism is prevalent. The other three schools are in towns in the centre or the west part of the Netherlands. The Iranian institution is located in the capital Tehran. Table 2 shows the number of students in each group. It is worth mentioning again that all students in each group have almost three years of English instruction at high school level. The students in bilingual schools are taught 50% of their courses in English. They have lessons in English 15 hours a week. The students in monolingual schools have regular English instruction of 3 hours a week. Regular school students are exposed to English media whereas religious school students are not allowed to watch T.V. therefore, are not exposed to English media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Monolingual</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Monolingual</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Iranian-Communicative low-input method</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number of students in each group
Materials and procedures

Participants in each group all had to write writing assignments on personal topics (e.g. Dutch students were assigned to write about: Pretend you have just won 1000 Euros. Write a short story (± 150 words) about what you would do with the money. Iranian students were assigned to write about an interesting book they read and write reading habits.)

In order to assess the compositions written by Dutch students, a holistic score was given to each text by a team of 8 experienced EFL teachers (Verspoor et al., 2007). Each evaluator first evaluated the texts individually to determine which texts were strong and which texts were weak. Then the evaluators discussed the proficiency of a group of texts according to their vocabulary range, sentence complexity, use of L1, use of tenses, use of authentic expressions, accuracy, etc. Then they classified the texts into the rank order of 0 to 7 (the evaluation criteria is provided in the appendices). They considered the characteristics of each level and classified the texts individually and then compared the scores to come up with a united opinion.

As for the Iranian students’ writing, 5 evaluators classified the texts following the same procedure as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The grade that had occurred more for each text was chosen as the rank grade of that text.

Design

In this study the data related to Dutch students is from the OTTO project which is a cross-sectional, semi-longitudinal study. I am going to look at the third year students which have been studying English for the same amount of time as the Iranian students. The participants of the OTTO project were observed during the course of one school year, but I am going to look at only their last writing (to see the effects of their bilingual/monolingual high/low input instruction).

The effect of bilingual education

In order to compare bilingual education with monolingual education, CITO (Centraal Instituut voor Toetsontwikkeling/Dutch Testing Institute) scores of the students in bilingual system was compared to the scores of students in monolingual system. CITO exam is taken by most popular
Dutch educational systems at the end of primary school. Students are determined what type of high school they can enter according to their CITO scores. The maximum score for this test is 550, and the group we looked at, scored higher than 535. As only the brightest students are allowed to enter bilingual schools, it is expected to be a difference between the score of monolingual and bilingual students. Table 3 shows the CITO scores of students in each group after the third year of instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CITO scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual-Religious</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual-Religious</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual-Regular</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual-Regular</td>
<td>545</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. CITO scores of students in each group

One-way ANOVA tests were used to examine if Bilingualism affects the outcome of the CITO tests, and post-hoc comparisons were used to examine the differences between the groups. The result is that there is a significant difference between groups ($F (3, 192)=7.205, p<0.01$, $partial \eta^2= .101$). No significant differences can be found between the two monolingual groups.
or two bilingual groups. On the other hand, as we expected, the monolingual groups scored significantly lower than the bilingual groups. The Monolingual-Religious group scored lower than Bilingual-Religious group ($p<.01$), and Monolingual-Regular scored significantly lower than Bilingual-Regular ($p<.01$) and Bilingual-Religious ($p<.01$). These findings seem to indicate that bilingual education in fact leads to a higher proficiency level.

**The effect of out of school contact**

Here, we want to find out if there is a difference between regular schools that are exposed to a rich language input, and Iranian or religious groups that have limited access to authentic input. In order to find out results, writings of 5 groups of students were graded according to 0 to 7 ranking order explained previously. Table 5 shows the number of participants involved, and the average writing grade of each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Writing scores</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual-Regular</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual-Regular</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual-Religious</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual-Religious</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranians</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Writing score of all groups

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to see if learning condition (low-input/high-input) affects the writing scores. A Post Hoc test was performed to find out the differences between the groups. The results show that there was a significant effect of the leaning condition on writing scores, ($F(4, 208) =30.40, p<0.05$). A post Hoc analysis revealed that the scores of bilingual-regular group (M=5.56, SE=.12) differed significantly at $p<0.05$ from all the other groups. Moreover, writing scores of monolingual-religious group (M=3.55, SE=.17) differed significantly from both monolingual-regular (M=4.53, SE=.10) and bilingual-religious group (M=4.84, SE=.18). Finally, writing scores of Iranian students (M=4.18, SE=.12) was significantly different form bilingual-religious group. As it is obvious from table 6 the bilingual-
regular group scored higher than all the other groups, monolingual-religious group scored lower than all the other groups, and Iranian group scored higher than monolingual-religious and lower than bilingual-religious. The graph (figure 1) below shows these differences which show that being exposed to meaningful input and out of school contact does have an effect on L2 improvement.

![Mean score of all groups](image)

Table 6. writing scores in different conditions

![Writing scores in different conditions](image)

Figure 1. Writing scores in different conditions
From the analyses above we can conclude that bilingual education and being exposed to the language through out of school context positively affects learning.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this thesis we investigated two research questions; does bilingual education affect the process of language learning? And does out of school contact affect the process of language acquisition?

In order to answer the question about bilingualism, 2 groups of bilingual students were compared with two groups of monolinguals. The results showed that the scores of monolinguals were significantly lower than the bilinguals. The point is that one bilingual group belonged to a religious school in which there was little out of school contact and little access to media, and one monolingual group belonged to a regular school in which students do have access to media and out of school contact, yet the bilinguals scored significantly higher. It can be concluded that bilingual education can even compensate for the lack of out of school contact.

In order to answer the question about the effects of context variable on writing skills, 5 groups of students, four Dutch groups and one Iranian group, wrote writings of about 200 words. After grading the writings according to the ranking order of 0 to 7, we came up with the results that the mean score of the bilingual-regular group, which is exposed to the language more than all the other groups, is significantly higher (5.56). The lowest score (3.55) is for the monolingual-religious group. Iranians scored higher than monolingual-religious group (4.18). From these results we can conclude that the more exposed students are to the language, the better their writings become. Iranian students do not have out of school contact and do not have English classes for 15 hours a week as the bilingual students do, but in their three hours of English instruction they are exposed to a lot of input from their teacher.

Except the hours of exposure to the language and the amount of input, there are other factors that have to be taken into account with regard to the Iranian students and Dutch groups. First, Farsi is very different from English regarding its grammar structure, alphabets, vocabulary, etc. on the other hand, Dutch is very close to English. English is not a totally strange language for Dutch students as they at least know the alphabet and they also have many words in common, but Farsi is not even remotely close to English. Farsi writers write from right to left, but both
Dutch and English are from left to right. We can understand this difference more if we take the simple example of “I go to school every day”.

**English:** I go to school every day.

**Dutch:** Ik ga naar school iederdaag.

**Farsi:** من هرروز به مدرسه میروم.

The structure of both English and Dutch sentence is subject, verb, and object but the Farsi sentence is subject (which can even be removed), object, and verb. If we translate the Farsi sentence into English it would be “I everyday to school going” which can be much more complicated and different from English in longer sentences. Having the verb at the end of the sentence makes it difficult for the readers to understand long sentences, which is one of the common mistakes Iranian students make when making English sentences. As it is obvious that learning English writing for an Iranian student is like learning to write for the very first time as it is a whole new alphabet.

Another factor that needs to be taken into account while comparing Iranian and Dutch students is tourism and travelling. There are lots of tourists in the Netherlands, even in small cities but in Iran there are only tourists in historical cities like Isfahan and Shiraz, and not many visitors in Tehran in which these Iranian students are learning English. Having lots of tourists makes it possible for people to communicate in English even if there is no access to media for the learners (because of religious reasons). Moreover, travelling can also play an important part in practicing a language. Travelling expenses from the Netherlands to other countries can be much cheaper than from Iran to other countries. For instance, Dutch people can easily travel to the UK without spending so much money or having a Visa, but not only is it extremely expensive to travel from Iran to the UK, it is hardly possible to get a British Visa just to visit UK as a tourist.

Therefore, with all these restrictions and difficulties it is expected that Iranian students hardly master English as a foreign language. However, as it turns out after studying English in this specific institution, almost everyone reaches a high level of English proficiency by the end of the 5th or 6th year.

In my research I had the problem of time limitations as I was in Iran for a couple of weeks and wanted to collect my data in those weeks. It would have been better if I could observe the writing progress of these students in at least a year and then compare them to Dutch students.
Another limitation was that I only observed two classes (that were at the same level) and had only 32 participants. This is because there were only two classes for each level and I didn’t have access to more students. I preferred to observe more students.

It can be a good research topic to also investigate the speaking abilities of these Iranian students as there is so much emphasis on correct pronunciation. Another topic which can be so controversial is to compare writing skills of Dutch students to Iranian students who study at this institution, and Iranian students who do not attend any private classes and learn English only through regular school.
References


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## Appendices

### Description of writing levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The 0 stands for the very beginning level where English is only barely emerging. There is usually very little text, and if there is text, it is mainly Dutch/Farsi. Very simple sentence structure with many Dutch/Farsi words and some English words thrown in, often misspelled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The 1 stands for English that has emerged to some degree. The language used is almost all English, with only a few Dutch/Farsi words, but the language is simple, with mainly simple sentences, present tenses, often Dutch/Farsi word order and Dutch/Farsi expression literally translated. Full of little errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The 2 stands for English that has emerged. The English is still quite simple, simple sentence structure, simple tenses, an attempt at some creativity in vocabulary and syntax; the English may contain a Dutchism/Persianism here and there, but it is mainly English. There are still many errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The 3 stands for English that has emerged. The English is still quite simple with simple and compound sentences, but one or two dependent clauses may appear. There are mainly simple present and past tense, but an occasional progressives or passive may appear. There is an attempt at some creativity in the vocabulary and syntax; even though the English still contains a few standard Dutchisms/Persianisms, there are also some authentic English collocations and expression. There are still some errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The 4 stands for English that has more variety in sentence structures (a few dependent clauses), some variety in tenses (past, future, progressive, passive and use of modals). There are some authentic English collocations and expressions even though the English still contains a few standard Dutchisms/Persianisms. Some longer sentences, less choppy. There are still some errors, but mainly in mechanism and spelling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The 5 stands for English that has more variety in sentence structures (dependent clauses and non finite structures), variety in tenses (past, future, progressive, passive and use of modals) where needed. There are several authentic English collocations and expression, but there may also be a few standard Dutchisms/Persianisms. There are still some errors, but mainly in mechanics and spelling. The language flows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The 6 stands for English that has native-like variety in sentence structure with dependent clauses and non finite structures, shows native-like flexibility in time/tense/mood/voice. It contains many authentic English collocations and expressions, but there are still one or two Dutchisms/Persianisms here and there. There are still some errors, but mainly in mechanics and spelling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The 7 stands for English that has native-like variety in sentence structure with dependent clauses and non finite structures, shows native-like flexibility in time/tense/mood/voice. It contains many authentic English collocations and expressions, but there still be a Dutchism/Persianisms here and there. There are still some errors, but mainly in mechanics and spelling.</td>
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