Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions about Skills Acquisition and Error Correction Treatment in Bosnian EFL Context

Senija Ogric-Kevric\textsuperscript{1} & Vildana Dubravac\textsuperscript{2}
\textsuperscript{1}MA Candidate
\textsuperscript{2}Asst. Prof.

Abstract: The presence of the English language in various domains of everyday life cannot be neglected, since it is easily encountered in politics, social networks, media and newspapers worldwide, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, where especially the conditions of the post-war period contributed to the need of learning it. Even though English is widely present as a foreign language in elementary and high schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, its acquisition has not been largely investigated. The current paper aims at exploring students’ and teachers’ perceptions regarding the development of language skills in English, as an important aspect of acquiring a language and one of the key prerequisites for its successful use.

1. Introduction

The presence of the English language in various domains of everyday life cannot be neglected, since it is easily encountered in politics, social networks, media and newspapers worldwide, including Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), where especially the conditions of the post-war period\textsuperscript{1} contributed to the need of learning it. The existence of international foreign offices, different organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, made a significant difference in the status of the English language [1] making it much more than a foreign language, and thus contributing to the current position of English in B&H as the first foreign language of most children [2], which makes the exposure to English inside the educational institutions considerable in addition to the inevitable exposure to it via the media.

However, it is the planned, organized process of language acquisition that we should rely on, try to improve and use as efficiently as possible. One aspect of that process is investigated in the present paper exploring the development of four language skills, i.e. reading and listening as receptive skills, on one side, and speaking and writing as productive skills, on the other side. Although all four are considered core language skills that need to be developed on daily basis, the primacy has been usually given to some of them. While reading was dominant in traditional ways of language learning being usually accompanied by translation into the learners’ mother tongue, speaking presents the skill mostly promoted nowadays, when the focus is on the communicative aim of language learning. Writing seems to be present in different periods, while the status of listening has been usually associated with the status of speaking.

Whichever skill is developed the question that arises is whether the emphasis should be on accuracy or fluency, i.e. in which direction the corrective feedback should be oriented. After the methods that considered error correction necessary in all conditions (e.g. audiolingual method), and those that proposed no error correction (e.g. natural approach), the most accepted view seems to be the one according to which errors should be treated [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9] since the error correction promotes noticing eventually leading to better language acquisition, although no definite answers have been provided with respect to the type of the most successful error correction and the time of its provision.

The analysis of students’ and teachers’ perceptions will demonstrate which skills are prevalent in English language classrooms and whether there are some differences in the development of skills between elementary and high schools on one side, and between public and private schools on the other side. Since no study to our knowledge has analyzed the same issue in the Bosnian EFL context this research might lead to interesting and useful findings showing whether English language teaching and learning in Bosnian schools is communicatively oriented, whether speaking and listening are encouraged equally or more than reading and writing.

\textsuperscript{1}Post-war period refers to the period since 1995 (the end of the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina) until today. 
The focus in the current study is on the perceptions of students and teachers as the two key partners in the educational process, following the stance that understanding the attitudes and perceptions of students toward foreign language learning may be crucial in helping them succeed [10, 11] since it has been shown that learners’ beliefs impact their behavior in the process of language learning [12, 13, 14]. Therefore, gaining an insight into both students’ and teachers’ stances will enlighten some, so far unexplored, aspects of language learning in our schools.

1. 1. Core language skills

Four language skills are considered to be basic and have pivotal role in the successful language use: reading and listening as receptive skills, and writing and speaking as productive ones. The competence to read in a second language has almost always occupied a status of the basic skill and presented a main tool for independent language learning [15]. Many studies investigating the importance of this skill have been conducted in the past few decades, significantly refining and improving our insight into the nature of reading comprehension. After reading being mainly viewed as a passive and perceptual process in which readers were mere decoders of images imprinted on a page [16] it got the status of a psycholinguistic guessing game in which readers have the opportunity either to guess or presuppose the meaning of a text based on the information they have and activating the background knowledge, thus accepting or disproving their assumptions [17]. In this way learners became active readers [18] acquiring the meaning from the text by foreseeing it and using their background knowledge as well as language knowledge. A similar view was shared by the proponents of the schema theory [19, 20] who underscored the relationship between readers’ background knowledge and text understanding, thus describing reading as an interactive process [16], which is how we conceive it today.

Evidently, although approached differently reading was more or less present as a receptive skill in all periods, since different methods encouraged its development, promoting exposure to different written materials. On the contrary, students’ exposure to audio materials and authentic oral language, i.e. developing another receptive skill, has not been treated the same way. While many [21, 22, 23, 24] proposed listening as a core language skill, others (mainly the advocates and practitioners of the Grammar- Translation Method) disregarded its development, teaching the lessons in the students’ first language (L1), thus making it a passive skill being often disregarded within second, and especially foreign language classrooms [25]. Nonetheless, listening to a second language (L2) is considered as the most expanded language skill [23, 26] implying a very complex process in which spoken messages are understood in real time by making use of different sources such as phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic ones [24]. Therefore, its presence should not be disregarded, although it is usually taken for granted.

Listening---compared with speaking, reading or writing is used far more than any other single language skill in our daily lives. We listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read, and five times as much as we write. Yet most of us take listening for granted and have little awareness of our “performance” as listeners. [23].

Nowadays, since communication in the target language is seen as the paramount outcome of language teaching, developing listening skill is considered of a great importance together with developing speaking skill. Similarly, to listening, speaking for decades also occupied less important role in the language classrooms, while the emphasis was on enabling learners to write, read, or elaborate on some grammar rules [27]. However, in this day and age speaking is seen as one of the key language skills [28] but at the same time one of the most challenging skills language learners face [29, 30, 31, 32] since it implies not only the knowledge of language, but also the knowledge of discourse, well developed speaking skills and communication and discourse strategies [33]. Even though we are daily in situations when we need to use spoken language, second language learners often hesitate to use it, since it implies the spontaneous use of a language, usually without prior preparation, necessary if one lacks implicit knowledge of a language.3 The preparation in advance and more contemplation when using target language structures is usually implied in another productive skill, i.e. writing. [34] suggest that when a child writes, thoughts and knowledge are combined generating a unique meaning. Therefore, students tend to classify the skill of writing as more difficult than listening and reading [35]. Moreover, writing is the skill that most students are the least proficient in when acquiring a new language [36], which might be attributed to the differences between spoken and written style [37] the latter being more demanding for students, and the

2 For more on the status of different skills in various methods of language teaching/learning see Larsen Freeman, 2000.

3 For more on implicit and explicit knowledge see Dubravac & Pavičić Takač, 2013.
The importance of devoting time to developing all the aforementioned language skills has been pointed out by many [38, 39] as crucial in the process of language acquisition, since those with poor language skills are likely to have negative attitudes and perceptions toward language learning in general. Additionally, it has been argued that language skills are transferred from one language to another, which suggests that problems learning one language are likely to be encountered when learning another. Therefore, their development should be encouraged from the onset of the second language acquisition.

One important way of doing so is treating language development as process, and not product oriented, thus providing constant feedback to students while they, in the attempt to understand or produce linguistic features practicing different skills, commit errors [40, 41].

2. Methodology

Since this research investigates students’ and teachers’ perceptions of language skills development and error correction, the specific methodology used in this case was a mixed method, including both, quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the sake of completing the objectives of the study, i.e. accepting or rejecting the hypotheses a questionnaire was conducted among students. The questionnaire comprised 8 questions with 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix 1). The aim of the questionnaire was to explore the students’ perceptions of the practice of language skills and error treatment within Bosnian schools. The questionnaire was in the Bosnian language because not all the students who participated in this study were competent enough to answer the questions in English. The qualitative part of the study was based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with English language teachers. The interviews were firstly recorded and later transcribed and analyzed.

The investigative sites for this research were elementary and high schools, mostly located in the central and northeast B&H. With the aim of using the maximum of this research in terms of quality and applicability, the surveys and interviews were conducted both in public and private schools. Participants of this research study were teachers and students from four elementary and six high schools from Sarajevo, Visoko, Zenica, Novi Travnik and Živinice. Two of them were private schools, while the rest were public schools. The elementary school grades were from the 5th to 9th grade, while the high school sample included all four grades. The total number of respondents was 440, while 10 teachers in total were interviewed.

3. Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the present study:

H1: Teachers and students in Bosnian EFL classrooms consider speaking skill the most practiced in the English languages classes.
H2: Teachers make differences when evaluating different language skills, giving more importance to some of them.
H3: There is no statistically significant difference in the development of language skills between elementary and high schools.
H4: There is no statistically significant difference in error treatment between elementary and high schools.
H5: There is no statistically significant difference in error treatment between public and private schools.

4. Results and discussion

The obtained results providing evidence for proving or refuting the hypotheses are delineated in this chapter. First, general teachers’ and students’ perceptions regarding the development of different skills were studied. The analysis of the interviews carried out with the teachers suggested that most of them agreed that the easiest skill to acquire is reading, being among the first skills students acquire. This is a bit surprising finding taking into consideration that in the process of L1 acquisition it is listening followed by speaking that precede reading and writing which are usually developed in school-age children. This indicates that in the process of foreign language acquisition in Bosnian context the emphasis is on different skills, possibly as a reminiscence of traditional ways in which foreign languages used to be taught.

Most of the answers showed that the second easiest skill to acquire is listening. This might be attributed to the fact that this skill, due to its omnipresence, is sometimes taken for granted. Much harder skills, according to our respondents, are the productive skills, namely speaking and writing. The difficulties encountered in writing might be addressed to the problems with spelling, concerning which students’ L1 and English are markedly different. In addition to that, some students might find it difficult to express their ideas in writing even in their mother tongue, let alone in a foreign language. The reasons behind this stance might be different; students might find speaking difficult because they lack self-confidence, they are afraid to speak publicly, they do not
establish communication easily, or their foreign language knowledge is mainly explicit (based on learning language rules) and only partially implicit, which is usually required for spontaneous communication without much preparation. Furthermore, it might be that from the very beginning of language learning the focus is on the other skills (e.g. reading) so that teachers wait for students to acquire more words and structures to start using them in communication. Therefore, when students are required to use the language in communication they are aware of their competences, and avoid speaking in order to avoid making mistakes.

To check which skills students, see as the most practiced ones, their answers to the first four questions were analyzed (see Table 1). Although all mean values displayed were above average, the highest one (M= 3.61) showed that the learners consider they spend most time practicing speaking. Thus, the first hypothesis suggesting that both teachers and students consider speaking the most important and most practiced language skill was supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Mean values</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1: I spend most of the time practicing reading in English.</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2: I spend most of the time practicing writing in English.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3: I spend most of the time practicing listening in English.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4: I spend most of the time practicing speaking in English.</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second highest mean (M= 3.04) was obtained for reading, which might reflect the teachers’ perceptions related to the easiness of reading. On the other hand, it appears that students spend less time practicing writing and listening. Less time dedicated to writing might be due to the fact that for writing students usually need more time, so those activities are usually given for homework, and since in the classroom the emphasis tends to be on speaking learners express their ideas orally more often than in a written form. On the other hand, listening appears to be taken for granted, and it might be that students are not aware that while they are speaking they are also listening to one another, in addition to developing this skill while listening to a new lecture being read either by the teacher or a friend of theirs or being played on a CD. To gain a better insight into the status of different skills in language classrooms the teachers were asked whether, when assessing students’ knowledge and giving marks, they have different expectations. Most of the teachers agreed that they require students to read and translate for lower marks whilst for higher marks students are supposed to retell lessons and discuss them as well, as indicated by some of the teachers’ answers below. However, as can be seen students in private schools are asked to communicate more in English, even for lower marks since translation in L1 is not practiced, while in public schools it is well present. Interestingly, the teachers did not mention any particular evaluation of writing and especially listening when talking about giving marks. It might be that among all four skills these two are less paid attention to, which is also evident in the students’ stances displayed in Table 1.

This data provided evidence to accept the second hypothesis claiming that teachers make differences when evaluating language skills, considering speaking the most demanding, and reading (accompanied by translation) the easiest. However, this is present only in public schools, while in private schools, the communicative function of language seems to be more emphasized, with translation being totally excluded.

Whether elementary and high school students share the same opinion regarding different skills developed in English was another issue we tried to address. The data obtained from results suggests elementary school students consider speaking (M=3.84) as the most practiced skill. Even though in that period the repertoire of their vocabulary is not rich, students often tend to communicate in English, which might eventually lead to the desired competence in the target language. The second highest mean was obtained for reading (M=3.29) while it seems they spend less time practicing writing (M=3.26), and especially listening (M=3.01). The indications are therefore, that when it comes to receptive skills reading prevails over listening while in terms of productive skills speaking is more prevalent. However, since speaking implies listening it might be that students neglect its presence in the classroom considering that listening skill is developed only when they have some special listening activity like listening comprehension check following listening to some lesson played on a CD, in which they seem not to be often involved.
On the other hand, the results for high school students were slightly different. While the highest mean was again obtained for speaking (M=3.48) the second highest mean was obtained for listening (M=2.95) which is surprising since the students in elementary schools practice listening least. Thus, it might be that the older students are the more aware of the importance of listening they become. The less practiced skills seem to be reading (M=2.89) and writing (M=2.78). The comparison of the means indicates that in elementary schools students practice all skills more than in high schools, however whether the difference is statistically significant was shown by conducting an independent samples T-test (see Table 2).

Table 2. Independent samples t-test (elementary vs. high school students’ perceptions regarding the development of four skills)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1: I spend most of the time practicing reading</td>
<td>3.038</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2: I spend most of the time practicing writing</td>
<td>4.044</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3: I spend most of the time practicing listening</td>
<td>.459</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>.647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4: I spend most of the time practicing speaking</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results suggest that when it comes to students’ perceptions related to the time they devote to practicing language skills statistically significantly more time is spent practicing reading, writing and speaking in elementary than in high schools. However, the mean values regarding listening were not statistically significantly different between the two groups. Therefore, the third null hypothesis stating that there is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions between primary and secondary school students regarding different skills development might be only partially accepted. This might be addressed to the fact that high school students are considered more independent learners, so their teachers do not emphasize practicing different skills like the ones in elementary school. Furthermore, it might be that in high school learners become more aware of the importance of listening and probably take into consideration the exposure to English outside of the classroom as well.

Group statistics regarding the error correction treatment questions based on school level are presented as follows. The means (M=4.62; M=4.57; M=4.55) indicate that teachers in elementary schools correct students more while they read, write or speak which is in accordance with the answers elementary school teachers provided in the interview, in which they said it is important to correct students in order to avoid the fossilization of errors. Error treatment in high schools appears not to be emphasized to the same extent as in elementary schools, most probably because students in high schools seem to be more independent learners, and have more developed language skills. In order to discover whether there is any statistically significant difference between error treatment in elementary and high schools, an independent samples T-test was conducted. The results suggest that elementary school students are associated with more frequent error correction when it comes to reading (t=4.89; df=436; p=0.01) and speaking (t=4.085; df=438; p=0.01) while the analysis of the answers regarding writing did not show any statistically significant difference between the two groups of students. Thus, the fourth hypothesis might be partially accepted, since primary school students tend to be more corrected in all aspects except writing. This might also indicate that in high schools the focus shifts from form more towards meaning, and fluency development appears to be given primacy over accuracy at least in speaking and reading.

Group statistics based on the type of school are as follows: mean values for the public school students are higher for reading (M=4.42 vs. M=3.97) speaking (M=4.39 vs. M=4.31) and writing (M=4.45 vs. M=4.30) which suggests that teachers in public schools tend to correct students more often than teachers in private schools. An independent samples T-test revealed that between these two groups a statistically significant difference is found in error correction during reading (t=3.83; df=436; p=0.01) and speaking (t=3.14; df=437; p=0.02) while no statistically significant difference was observed in the treatment of errors in writing (t=1.43; df=436; p=0.14). Hence, the fifth hypothesis could be also partially accepted, since in only some respects no significant difference was observed. These results suggest that students in private schools are less corrected than students in public schools, which might portray the public school teachers’ fear of fossilization due to limited exposure to English. On the contrary private school teachers, might rely on the vast exposure eventually preventing the fossilization of errors. Moreover, this once more indicates that communicative aspect of language teaching and learning, with meaning and fluency.
focused on, is more present in our private than in our public schools.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed at exploring Bosnian EFL context in terms of the development of different language skills, their status in foreign language. The data gathered by the analysis of 440 surveys conducted among students from six different cities attending various public and private elementary and high schools and 10 interviews with their teachers allowed us to draw the following conclusions. It seems that, in the opinion of both, teachers and students, speaking is the most practiced language skill, which is in accordance with the current trends of communicative language teaching. The second most prevalent language skill in Bosnian EFL classrooms appear to be reading. The dominance of these two skills is also evident in the teachers’ answers related to giving marks, the highest being given for speaking and lower being given for reading and translation. Reading, accompanied by translation into L1 tends to be seen like the easiest skill, developed first, which might indicate that traditional way of language teaching and learning has not completely disappeared from our classrooms, since it is practiced a lot within public schools.

Writing and listening seem to be assigned subsidiary roles within the classrooms, the former being disregarded due to limited time and the latter usually taken for granted. Therefore, there is much space to include more authentic materials in the classrooms, and to encourage students to use them outside of it, thus enhancing all skills, while particular emphasis might be laid on the use of audio and video authentic materials, developing students’ listening skills, which seem to be disregarded in our context as indicated elsewhere [23]. It seems that students in elementary schools practice reading, writing and speaking more than students in high schools, but there is no statistically significant difference between these groups of students in terms of practicing listening skill. Therefore, high school students are considered more independent language learners and more attention might be paid to language development outside of the limited number of English classes provided at schools.

Moreover, the results demonstrated no difference between public and private school students in terms of developing writing, speaking and listening, but indicated the difference in terms of developing reading skill. It seems that students in public schools tend to practice reading more because they still face difficulties in reading whilst students in private schools are exposed to reading in different courses, which might be one of the reasons why students consider reading as a less essential skill. The results offer an insight in teachers’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding the development of language skills. Since this study is one of the first similar studies conducted in the Bosnian EFL context the present work might encourage further research as well as the reconsideration of the English language curricula used in our schools. Although communicative aspect of language learning seems to be present in our schools there is much more space for improvement, especially in terms of fluency development, the use of authentic materials and developing listening skills.

6. References


