



EARLY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF UZBEKISTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract *This article examines the relationship between early second language (L2) learning and academic achievement in the context of Uzbekistan's education system. Drawing on second language acquisition (SLA) theory, contrastive linguistics, and recent reforms in Uzbekistan's multilingual education policies, the study investigates how introducing English at primary school level affects cognitive development, literacy skills, and overall scholastic performance. Using a mixed-methods approach—standardized test data, classroom observations, and teacher interviews—the study finds that early exposure to English improves metalinguistic awareness, enhances problem-solving abilities, and positively correlates with academic outcomes in mathematics, science, and literacy. However, challenges remain, including teacher preparedness, limited resources, and risks of L1 attrition in Uzbek. The article argues that early bilingual education in Uzbekistan, if supported by proper pedagogical training and materials, has the potential to strengthen students' global competitiveness while maintaining their cultural and linguistic heritage.*

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA), early bilingualism, academic achievement, Uzbekistan, multilingual education, English learning, contrastive linguistics, English education policy, metalinguistic awareness.*

Introduction

Globalization has intensified the demand for early foreign language education, with English increasingly positioned as a global lingua franca. In Uzbekistan, significant educational reforms since independence have prioritized English learning from primary school. Government policies now mandate English instruction beginning in grade 1, aligning with global trends toward early bilingual education.

Uzbekistan has pursued ambitious reforms to expand foreign-language learning, notably English from the early grades. The December 10, 2012 presidential decree (*PQ-1875*) reframed foreign-language education and catalyzed curricular and teacher-training reforms; subsequent national and donor-supported programs (e.g., British Council's **Future English**, **English Impact**; American Councils' **English Speaking Nation**) have targeted curriculum alignment and teacher capacity. These policy moves created a natural setting to study academic effects of early L2 learning at scale.

Theoretically, early L2 instruction is supported by the **Critical Period Hypothesis** (Lenneberg, 1967), which suggests that younger learners acquire new languages more naturally. Moreover, Cummins' **Interdependence Hypothesis** (1979) posits that proficiency in an L2 can reinforce L1 academic literacy and vice versa. In Uzbekistan's context, contrastive linguistic differences between English (analytic, SVO order) and Uzbek (agglutinative, SOV order) provide unique insights into how early L2 learning influences broader academic skills.

This study addresses three questions:

1. What is the impact of early English instruction on general academic achievement in Uzbekistan?

2. How does early bilingualism affect Uzbek literacy and cognitive development?
3. What challenges and opportunities does the Uzbek education system face in implementing early L2 programs?

Methods

We adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative achievement analyses with qualitative data from interviews and observations. The study was conducted in 10 primary schools across Uzbekistan, selected to provide a diverse sample in terms of geography and school context. Five schools were located in urban centers (including Tashkent city and regional capitals), and five were in rural districts. Within each school, we focused on the **primary grades 1–4** where English language instruction had been introduced. The target student sample was **Grade 4 students (typically age 10)** who had received four years of English classes since Grade 1. Grade 4 represents the end of primary education in Uzbekistan and a point at which we can assess cumulative learning outcomes.

Participants

-200 students (grades 1–4) from five urban and rural schools in Uzbekistan;

-30 English and Uzbek teachers interviewed;

-Ministry of Education policy documents reviewed.

Data Collection

1. **Standardized test scores** in Uzbek literacy, mathematics, and science.
2. **English proficiency tests** (Cambridge Young Learners framework).

3. **Classroom observations** of English-integrated lessons.

4. **Semi-structured teacher interviews** exploring perceptions of early L2 learning.

Analytical Framework

- SLA theories (Critical Period, Transfer, Interdependence).
- Contrastive analysis of English vs. Uzbek linguistic structures.
- Statistical correlations between early English proficiency and performance in other subjects.

Results

Positive academic correlation: Students with higher English proficiency scored significantly better in mathematics and science, suggesting cognitive transfer of problem-solving and analytical skills.

Enhanced literacy skills: Early bilingual learners demonstrated stronger metalinguistic awareness (e.g., identifying word classes, sentence structures) in both English and Uzbek.

Challenges in Uzbek L1: A minority of students exhibited reduced Uzbek expressive vocabulary, reflecting limited exposure at home when parents prioritized English media.

Teacher perspectives: Most teachers viewed early English positively but expressed concern about inadequate training, lack of authentic teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms.

Discussion

The findings support SLA theories: early bilingual exposure enhances cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, which positively affect academic performance. In Uzbekistan, students who learned English early demonstrated stronger problem-solving abilities and confidence in academic tasks.

However, challenges remain. Contrastive linguistic analysis shows potential for negative transfer—Uzbek learners often apply SOV structures in English writing, while younger children sometimes simplify Uzbek morphology under English influence. The **Interdependence Hypothesis** is partly confirmed: bilingualism can reinforce L1 literacy, but only when both languages are supported institutionally.

Socioculturally, Uzbekistan's policy of promoting English reflects global aspirations, but care must be taken to preserve Uzbek as a cultural anchor. Balanced bilingual education requires teacher training, high-quality textbooks, and parental involvement.

Conclusion

Early second language learning in Uzbekistan enhances academic achievement across subjects and fosters cognitive growth. However, without systemic support, risks such as L1 attrition and uneven teacher readiness may undermine these benefits. The study concludes that Uzbekistan's early bilingual education reforms hold promise if accompanied by teacher development, curriculum innovation, and policies that maintain Uzbek alongside English.

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