



## An analysis of native and foreign language competence of Turkish young learners

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### Abstract

Language acquisition is used for the process where a language is acquired as a result of natural and largely random exposure to language, whereas the term language learning refers to the exposure structured through language teaching. Children acquire language from 18 months to puberty. The child's grammar is semantically based. Children reflect their competence through their performance. The aim of this study is to analyse their competence in both native and foreign language written texts they produced. Additionally, this study discuss if there is a significant difference between their performative competence level in Turkish and English. Therefore, 28 fourth graders were given a coloured picture representing a daily life of a family and they were asked to depict the picture in English and Turkish. Their written texts were discussed by Content Analysis and a corpus analysis. It has been found that how language acquirers write a text in Turkish and how well they reflect their foreign competence. It has been also shown that they were unable to use required foreign language competence because of lack of native language competence. Besides, they committed some spelling errors in foreign language.

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*Keywords:* Language acquisition; native language competence; foreign language competence; corpus

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Theoretical background

As is known, language acquisition is used for the process where a language is acquired as a result of natural and largely random exposure to language, whereas the term language learning refers to the exposure structured through language teaching. Children acquire language from 18 months to puberty. They acquire all the phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules of grammar. The child's grammar is semantically based. The child's early language does not make reference to syntactic categories and relations (Noun, Noun Phrase, Verb, Verb Phrase, subject, object, and so on) but rather to semantic roles (like agent or theme).

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Children both overgeneralize and undergeneralize the meaning of words. After the “overgeneralized” meanings become narrowed and the “undergeneralized meanings” extended until the meanings of these words are those of the other speakers of the language. As a child is learning the meanings of words, she is also learning the syntax of the language and the syntactic categories. The syntax helps the child acquire meaning (Gleitman, 1982:10).

Over the past two decades, it has been believed that imitation and habit formation have to be replaced by notions which emphasize the child’s own creativity in constructing his knowledge of the language, that is to say his competence. According to Chomsky (1965), competence consists of the mental representation of linguistic rules which constitute the speaker-hearer’s internalized grammar, whereas performance consists of the comprehension and production of language. Therefore, a child’s performance can be viewed as windows through which the internalized rule system can be viewed in his production. Actual sentences or utterances of a child reflect his level of competence. Children are expected to have acquired the intricate system of their native language until the age of five and half. By then they are fully able to use their linguistic competence. If they are exposed to a second language during this process, they become bilingual. However, if they are presented the second language in a structured way in language classrooms, the second language becomes a foreign language to them.

Roger Brown (1973) studied how children acquired the fourteen of morphemes. His findings come to have a wide influence not only for studies in first language acquisition, but also in the field of second language learning. Children do not master each morpheme suddenly, from one day to the next, but gradually, over a period of time, which is similar for second language learners. Some other scholars (Lightbown, 1987; Krashen et al., 1976; Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982; Lee, 1981; Makino, 1980) agreed on Brown (1973), giving the following acquisition order:

**Table 1.**

ACQ. ORDER	MORPHEME	EXAMPLE
1	PRESENT PROGRESSIVE	-ING
2	PREPOSITION	ON
3	PREPOSITION	IN
4	PLURAL	-S (as in two books)
5	IRREGULAR PAST FORMS	(as in she went)
6	POSSESSIVE	‘S ( as in daddy’s hat)
7	UNCONTRACTIBLE COPULA	IS (in she is)
8	ARTICLES	THE and A
9	REGULAR PAST	-ED (She walked)
10	REGULAR THIRD PERSON SINGULAR	-S ( as in she runs)
11	IRREGULAR THIRD PERSON SINGULAR	SINGULAR FORMS ( she has)
12	UNCONTRACTIBLE AUXILIA	BE (She was coming)
13	CONTRACTIBLE COPULA	(She’s tired)
14	CONTRACTIBLE AUXILIARY	BE (as in he’s coming)

As is seen in above table there is an acquisition order of morphemes, which usually correlates with those in second language. Corpus-based approaches also help to find out the frequency of the words and morphemes acquired first by children. L2 learners may use both translation corpora, which represents their translations into one or more languages and comparable corpora, (Johansson & Hasselgard 1999 in Granger, Lerot and Petch-Tyson (2008:19). However, it should be borne in mind that there is a tremendous variation across learners in cognitive style and within a learner in strategy

choice in second language learning/acquisition. Additionally, it must be kept in mind that errors are both product and process of learning. Learners may commit errors systematically and nonsystematically because of overgeneralization, new category or rule, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules, transfer, developmental error types and simplification by omission. Therefore, in second language use, learners' or acquirers' current linguistic competence may affect their language use. In their production, implicit linguistic knowledge may be displayed by their current linguistic competence.

### 1.2. Aim of the study

This study aims at discussing how well Turkish-language acquirers reflect their linguistic competence during written performance in their L1 and L2.

### 1.3. Research questions

The study will discuss the following questions:

- 1) How well do Turkish language acquirers display their linguistic competence in Turkish and English?
- 2) Is there a significant difference between their performative competence level in Turkish and English?

## 2. Method

To answer the research questions above, a colored drawing, depicting the daily activities and life of a family in their house has been given to twenty six 4th graders attending a private elementary school. The pupils have been asked to write a description of the same drawing in English and in Turkish in 45 minutes. The content analysis of the data have been carried out in discussion with respect to the pupils' use of vocabulary, sentence types and modifiers in L1 and L2 through corpus analysis.



**Figure 1.**

The frequency of the words used by children has been analyzed by Compleat Lexical Tutor v.3 <http://www.lex Tutor.ca/freq/> Tom Cobb, 2015

### 3. Findings and Discussion

When the fourth graders' written descriptions of the house with the householders in both Turkish and English have been analyzed in terms of their linguistic competence through corpus analysis, it has been detected that they have used 1848 vocabulary items totally in English, whereas they have used 1577 in Turkish. However, the types of the vocabulary items were 334 in English, while they were 469, which indicates that they know more different vocabulary items in their native language although they use more repeated words in English because of memorization. The average number of the English sentences is 12.91, whereas it is 13.15. This indicates that they tried to use almost the same number of sentences in their bilingual descriptions because of both translation corpora, which represents their translations into one or more languages and comparable corpora. In English version the fourth graders generally seem to have used simple sentences made by routine patterns and prefabricated formulas, such as

*Salih is flying a kite; Ayşe is drawing a picture; Mom is cooking; in the bathroom he is swimming.*

In Turkish version they seem to express the actions not only by simple sentences but also by complex and compound complex sentences:

*Erkek banyoda gözlük, tüp ve paletle küvette yüzüyor; Kız resim yapıyor ve onun yanındaki erkek uçurtma uçuruyor; Anne çorba yapıyor.*

As is seen above, they are more expressive in Turkish with the use of compound complex sentences and detailed words as sea urchin, oxygen tube, sea palette, tub, and soup.

When the texts are analyzed in terms of the corpus analysis, it gives us the frequency of the words used in the developed texts of the fourth graders. According to the word classes, the following charts can be given:

**Table 2.** The number of the articles used by the fourth graders

Articles	A	An	The
Number	118	1	118
(N)			
%	6.39	0.05	6.39

The fourth graders seem to use definite article as frequently as indefinite articles «a». When we analyze the definiteness in their developed Turkish texts, they seem better in Turkish, since it is their mother tongue, as in:

*Mavi odada adam suya dalıyor. Adam çatıda uçurtma uçuruyo.*

*erkeğin evin tepesinde uçurtma uçurduğunu görüyorum. Banyoda bir çocuk var.*

In both languages to make the agents definite, they prefer person names. Common English and Turkish proper names are; Murat, Ahmet, Ayşe, Fatma, Zeynep, Esra, Yusuf, Gökhan, Hatice, Salih and Kezban.

**Table 3.** Prepositions

Prep.	in	on	to	of	at	out	with	from	for	down
N	81	20	6	6	8	7	3	1	1	6
%	4.38	1.08	0.32	0.32	0.43	0.38	0.16	0.05	0.05	0.32

When the prepositions have been analyzed, it is seen that the preposition “in” is the most used one. “Children’s first prepositions carry much the same information as street signs. They express locations and directions.” (O’Grady2005: 72). Therefore, here the prepositions “from” and “for” seem less used. In terms of language acquisition, it verifies the acquisition order of the prepositions.

**Table 4.** The verb Copula

Copula	am	is	are	was
N	0	143	7	1
%	0	7.74	0.38	0.05

Since they have written descriptive texts according to the given picture, the children have been able to use existential sentences, which can correspond to those of native language users in language acquisition.

**Table 5.** Personal Pronouns

Personal Pronoun	I	You	He	She	It	We	They
N	36	0	25	26	2	0	5
%	1.95		1.35	1.41	0.11		0.27

Children seem to have used personal pronoun “I” more than the other personal pronouns. As O’Grady (2005.76) claims they avoid using pronouns altogether in favor of names. In their descriptive texts of the picture, they have given some names they are familiar to the characters as we discussed before.

**Table 6.** Conjunctions

Conjunctions	And	So
N	65	1
%	3.52	0.05

According to the MLU (Mean Length of Uttenances), children seem to use at most four elements as in

*Salih is flying a kite. Ayşe is drawing a picture. Family eating dinner.*

When they decided to use two verbs they preferred “and”

*She is drawing and painting.*

*Family is playing game and drinking juice.*

Besides, they used “and” at the beginning of a sentence or to move on to another theme, as in following:

*Three chairs. One door. And they are very enjoy,*

*It is a farmer. And one blue car.*

**Table 7.** Modals

<b>Modal</b>	<b>Can</b>
N	10
%	0.54

Only one modal has been preferred by children. However, its frequency of use does not seem high.

**Table 8.** Demonstrative Adjectives

<b>Demonstrative Adjectives</b>	<b>This</b>	<b>That</b>
N	5	0
%	0.27	0

Since parents use fewer adjectives than nouns or verbs when speaking to children, it is perhaps not surprising that adjectives tend to be used less or acquired later. Not only demonstrative adjectives but also the other adjectives seem to have been used less than the verbs and nouns: Old, Tall, Bigger, Gray, Big, Young, Small, Interesting, and Blonde.

**Table 9.** Family Members

<b>Family member</b>	<b>Mom</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Grand father</b>	<b>Grand mother</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Sister</b>
N	4	1	4	4	6	1
%	0.22	0.05	0.22	0.22	0.32	0.05

Since the whole picture given to the children is about people living in the same house, they have given the descriptions according to the members of the family, considering the corresponding age. Therefore, they were able use them appropriately.

**Table 10.** Colors

<b>Colour</b>	<b>Pink</b>	<b>Yellow</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Blue</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>Purple</b>	<b>red</b>	<b>Orange</b>
N	9	6	5	1	1	1	1	21
%	0.49	0.32	0.27	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	1.14

All the color words given above have been used by the 4th graders.

**Table 11.** Parts of the House

House	Room	Kitchen	Roof	Bath	Garden	Bathroom	Bedoom	Attic	Hall	labs
N	60	11	7	11	5	2	2	1	1	1
%	3.25	0.60	0.38	0.60	0.27	0.11	0.11	0.05	0.05	0.05

The 4th graders know most parts of the house except for living room and study room.

**Table 12.** Possessive Adjectives

Possessive Adjectives	His	Her
N	1	0
%	0.05	0

In their descriptive text the 4th graders have used only once third person male possessive adjective not the other possessive adjectives.

**Table 13.** Existentials

Existentials	Var There is /are
N	92
%	5.83

The 4th graders have used only affirmative existential sentences. They used them in copulative inductive mood in the following sentences:

*Mavi bir araba var. Çorba yapan bir anne var. Havuç kesen bir çocuk var. Sol tarafta upuzun bir ağaç var. Bir ev var. Bir tane mutfak var. Mutfak ta üç tava (tencere) var... Sarı odada üç sandalye var. Bir tane mutfak var.*

*Yemek odasında bir merdiven var. Üst kattaki odada bir nene ve bir dede var. Dışarıdaki uzun ağaçta 58 tane yaprak var. Mutfakta ocaklar var. Kart oynayanların odasında bir tane kapı var.*

**Table 14.** Colors

Colours	Yeşil green	Turuncu Orange	Pembe Pink	Sarı Yellow	Kırmızı Red	Siyah	Mor Purple
N	20	20	10	8	6	3	1
%	1.27	1.27	0.63	0.51	0.38	0.19	0.06

Many studies have reported that color words are not used appropriately until around age four or later. Since in the experiment the children are older than four they seem to have acquired the color terms well. O'Grady (2005:71) gives the comprehension order of color words as red, green, black, white, orange, yellow, blue, pink, brown and purple.

In the study the 4th graders seem to have followed that order.

**Table 15.** Parts of the House

Parts of the House	Oda Room	Mutfak Kitchen	Banyo bathroom	Ev House	Çatı Attic	Salon Hall
N	48	9	12	9	3	2
%	3.04	0.49	0.76	0.49	0.19	0.11

When compared the words the 4th graders used with those in English they seem better in English. It may be because of topic based English lessons. Children can learn lexicon better in topic based teaching.

**Table 16.** Family Members

Family members	Aile	Anne	Baba	Nene	Teyze	Babanne	Dede	Büyükanne	amca	abi	anneanne	Büyük baba
N	5	18	5	4	1	1	4	3	1	1	1	3
%	0.32	1.14	0.31	0.25	0.06	0.06	0.25	0.19	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.19

The 4th graders seem to have better understanding in using family members. In Turkish, they were able to use the synonyms of «dede» and «nene» as «grandfather» and «grandmother».

**Table 17.** Personal Pronouns

Personal Pronouns	Ben (I)
N	3
%	0.19

Except for the first person singular pronoun with the percentage of 0.19, they did not use any other personal pronouns. However they used the following person names along with those we have discussed above in the descriptive texts in English.

Proper names in Turkish are Batuhan, Işıl, Cengiz, Veli, Utku and Fehmi. As is seen they give the proper names to the characters in the whole picture.

**Table 18.** Demonstrative Adjectives

Demonstrative Adjectives	Bu (This)
N	3
%	0.19

The graders used only «bu» (this) as demonstrative adjective as in English version.

**Table 19.** Possessive Adjectives

Possessive Adjectives	Onun (His/Her)	Onların (Their)
N	2	2
%	0.13	0.13



Unlike in English descriptive texts, graders here used third person plural possessive adjective along with the third person singular male possessive adjective.

**Table 20.** Content Words (Verbs) in English and Turkish

ENGLISH	TURKISH
PLAY	OYNAMAK
CUT	KESMEK
FLY	UÇMAK
LOOK	BAKMAK
DIVE	DALMAK
DRAW	ÇİZMEK
DRINK	İÇMEK
EAT	YEMEK
DO	YAPMAK
THINK	DÜŞÜNMEK
STUDY	ÇALIŞMAK
KNIT	ÖRMEK
COOK	PİŞİRMEK
SWIM	YÜZMEK
MAKE	YAPMAK

**Table 21.** Content Words in Turkish

AŞCI	HAVUZ
BAHÇECİ	İÇECEK
BEBEK	İZLEMEK
BELKİ	HAZIRLAMAK
BİRAZDAN	KENDİ KENDİNE
BİRLİKTE	KİTAP
ÇALI	MAYO
ÇERÇEVE	OBUR
ÇIKMAK	PALET
ÇIKAN	SEHPA
DİKİŞ	SOHBET
DUŞ	TUVALET
TAKIM	UZUN
TAVA	VEYA
TANE	YILDIZ
TENCERE	ZEMİN
TEST	TİŞÖRTLÜ
FENER	
FİDAN	
FIRIN	
FIRÇA	
GÖZLEMLEMELİK	
GÖZLÜK	

Apart from all the words used in the study, the above given tables show that the 4th graders seem more competent in knowing words in Turkish.

**Table 22.** Verbs in English

MAKE
ENJOY
HELP
WEAR
SPEAK
MEASURE
MIX
REPAIR
LIE

They used more words in English than Turkish. It may be because of verb teaching. Only in Turkish, different from English version «atlamak» is used by the graders.

**Table 23.** House Objects

ENGLISH	TURKISH
PICTURE	RESİM
PHONE/TELEFON	TELEFON
TABLE	MASA
LAMP	LAMBA
CHAIR	SANDALYE
COMPUTER	BİLGİSAYAR
SOFA	KANEPE
DOOR	KAPI
DESK	MASA
SHELF	KİTAPLIK
GLASS	BARDAK
TELESCOPE	TELESKOP
VIDEO	VİDEO
CAR	ARABA
BOAT	BOT

The following words were used by the graders in English: WINDOW, CURTAIN, WALL, LABS, MERDİVEN and OCAK are the words used in Turkish version.

**Table 24.** Common Adjectives

ENGLISH	TURKISH
OLD	YAŞLI
BIG	BÜYÜK
YOUNG	GENÇ
INTERESTING	İLGİNÇ

The fourth graders seem unable to use adjectives well in L1 and L2. Since they may be incompetent using adjectives in L1, they may not have used them in L2 efficiently. Developmental stages may have affected their adjective use. In English they have used «very», «finally» and «well» as adverbs. This indicates that the fourth graders' linguistic competence lacks most of the adjectives and adverbs required for the description of the whole picture given for the experiment.

**Table 25.** Food Items in English

<b>JUICE</b>
<b>SOUP</b>
<b>CAKE</b>
<b>CARROT</b>
<b>LEMONADE</b>
<b>COFFEE</b>
<b>FANTA</b>
<b>DINNER</b>

The fourth graders have only given food items in English as memorized routine patterns.

**Table 26.** Games

<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>TURKISH</b>
<b>GAMES</b>	OYUN
<b>PUZZLE</b>	PUZZLE/YAPBOZ
<b>CARDS</b>	KART
<b>KITES</b>	UÇURTMA

Since children's immediate interests are games, the fourth graders are able to use the names of the games in a correct way without spelling mistakes.

**Table 27.** Words about Nature

<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>TURKISH</b>
<b>TREE</b>	AĞAÇ
<b>SPACE</b>	UZAY
<b>SKY</b>	GÖKYÜZÜ
<b>PLANT</b>	BİTKİ
<b>GRASS</b>	ÇİMEN/OT
<b>FLOWER</b>	ÇİÇEK

The fourth graders are aware of the nature reflected in their descriptive texts by their linguistic competence.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study indicates that descriptive texts produced by the young language users are the mirrors of their linguistic competence in both L1 and L2. Young learners' current linguistic competence in L1 can be effective to some extent; however, since young learners are in the process of language

acquisition, they show progress in both languages. They committed grammatical errors in English descriptive texts along with some spelling mistakes.

Corpus studies are very helpful to decide to teach L1 and L2 words. The young learners' uses of vocabulary in the texts are among the first 20 vocabulary items in Turkish National Corpus. (Aksan, Mersinli ve Yaldir 2011).

This study will help elementary school teachers to raise their awareness of language acquisition in learning a second or a foreign language.

## 5. Suggestions

School teachers should take the young learners' mother language competence into account. Turkish National Corpus should be known before teaching foreign languages.

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## Türk çocuklarının anadil ve yabancı dil yetilerinin çözümlenmesi

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### Öz

Anadil edinimi, çocukların doğal ortamda rastlantısal olarak dile maruz kalmasıyla ilgili iken, yabancı dil öğrenimi sınıf ortamında koşullu olarak dile maruz kalmayla ilgilidir. Zihinsel açıdan özürlü olmayan her normal çocuk, 18 ay ile ergenlik dönemi arasında anadilini edinir. Anadilini öğrenen çocuğun yapıbilgisi anlama dayalıdır. Anadili edinen çocuklar, dil yetilerini kullandıkları dil ile yansıtırlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı Türk çocuklarının kendi anadilinde ve yabancı dilde ürettikleri yazılı metinlerde dil yetilerini nasıl yansıttıklarını çözümlenektir. Ayrıca, çocukların yazdıkları metinlerle anadil ve yabancı dil yetileri arasında anlamlı bir fark olup olmadığını araştırmaktır. Bu amaçla 28 dördüncü sınıf öğrencisine bir ailenin günlük yaşamını anlatan renkli bir resim verilmiş ve çocuklardan resmi İngilizce ve Türkçe anlatmaları istenmiştir. Çocukların resimle ilgili ürettikleri yazılı metinler içerik analizi ile çözümlenmiştir. Metinlerde kullandıkları derlem çıkarılmıştır.

Dil edinim sürecinde olan bu çocukların ürettikleri metinler, çocukların anadil yetileri çerçevesinde yabancı dil yetilerini kullanarak nasıl metin üretebildiklerini göstermiş; anadilde sahip olunmayan yeti yabancı dilde de kullanılmamıştır. Yabancı dilde yazım hatalarına rastlanmıştır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Dil Edinimi; anadil yetisi; yabancı dil yetisi; derlem

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