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Published in:
International Journal of Bilingualism

Document version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

DOI:
10.1177/1367006917703455

Publication date:
2017

Citation for published version (APA):
Differences in pragmatic skills between bilingual Turkish immigrant children in the Netherlands and monolingual peers

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Abstract
In bilingualism studies, comparing the competence of mono- and bilingual speakers is common, but it comes with certain limitations. In immigration contexts, many studies concentrate on the skills of immigrant pupils in the mainstream language. In order to account for educational underachievement of minority children, gaps in their language development are often documented by comparing mainstream pupils with immigrant children. Competence in the first language (L1), on the other hand, receives very little attention, despite the fact that it is often assumed that L1 competence has an impact on second language acquisition. Here, we present the findings of an empirical study that compared bilingual Turkish immigrant children \( n = 30 \) in the Netherlands with monolingual Turkish peers \( n = 30 \) in Turkey. Contrary to most other such studies, we focus on the development of socio-pragmatic skills. The evidence shows that, from the viewpoint of monolingual conventions, the immigrant children lag behind in their command of these skills. Also after controlling for socioeconomic status, bilingual Turkish immigrant children display much lower knowledge of the socio-pragmatic skills than monolingual Turkish children. The causes of this difference can be attributed to the limited Turkish input in the immigration context.

Keywords
Bilingualism, language development, pragmatic skills, Turkish immigrant children

Introduction
As a result of workforce immigration in the second half of the 20th century, many Turkish immigrants have moved to European countries. Issues that result from this contact situation have been investigated in multiple disciplines, covering cultural, educational, linguistic, social and psychological domains. In sociolinguistics, language maintenance and shift, and acculturation more generally, have been studied extensively in the various national contexts. Now, after 60 years of immigration, a third generation of children and young adults with Turkish ancestry is attending
various types of schools in Western Europe. With a population of around 400,000, people of Turkish descent constitute the largest immigrant group in the Netherlands. Each year around 5000 students of Turkish background start primary school in the Netherlands. For an extensive discussion of the ecological environment in which Turkish immigrant children acquire Turkish, see Backus (2011).

The position of Turkish immigrant children in the Dutch context is comparable to other immigration contexts in Western Europe. Large-scale studies have shown that Turkish pupils in Dutch primary schools lag far behind their native Dutch peers in school achievement (Dagevos, Gijsberts, & van Praag, 2003; Extra & Yagmur, 2010). Given the value attributed to lexical development, receptive and productive vocabulary skills of Turkish immigrant children have been compared to those of native Dutch children in many studies (Aarts & Verhoeven, 1999; Dagevos et al., 2003; Driessen & Merry, 2011; Leseman, 2000; Tesser & Iedema, 2001; Verhoeven, 1994). On the basis of proficiency levels in the second language (L2), sizeable numbers of immigrant children have been diagnosed as language-impaired and sent to special classes (Yağmur & Nap-Kolhoff, 2010). Only a handful of applied linguistics studies also investigated the skills in the minority language (Leseman, 2000; Schaufeli, 1991; Verhoeven, 1994, 1999, 2007). On the basis of standardized tests, lexical depth in both Dutch and Turkish were found to be very limited among Turkish immigrant children (Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998). The mentioned studies mostly measured phonological awareness and lexical, syntactic and narrative skills. This paper contributes further complementary linguistic evidence to the discussion, presenting the results of a pragmatic skills test.

Socio-pragmatic skills

Socio-pragmatic skills are as crucial to normal functioning in a speech community, including school, as mastering words and grammar. In the context of an academic register, becoming a proficient speaker in this crucial register also involves knowing how to say things in a given situation. The Turkish skills of Turkish immigrant children have been assessed through a large variety of instruments. The focus of previous research has been on narrative, lexical, syntactic and phonological skills. Pragmatic skills, on the other hand, have received very little attention so far (Küntay, Nakamura, & Ateş Şen, 2014). A number of scholars have investigated the speech act realizations in different national contexts. Marti (2006), for instance, investigated cultural differences in the use of requests by German and Turkish adult speakers in Germany. A similar study on adults was conducted in the Netherlands by Huls (1989). Developmental pragmatics is concerned with the question of how a child acquires the pragmatic competence that underlies the conventionalized employment of speech in interpersonal situations (Ninio & Snow, 1999). In its broadest sense, pragmatic competence consists of a variety of skills, including the performance of speech acts such as apologizing, complaining, complimenting, requesting, thanking and so forth, as well as the ability to choose from among a range of stylistic options the verbal behaviour that best matches the social demands of the communicative context. Research evidence shows that young children pay attention to social norms and conventions in language use and express objections when people do not comply with them (Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). The assessment of pragmatic development is, therefore, an essential component for a full understanding of a child’s linguistic competence. However, because of the nature of pragmatics, it is almost impossible to construct a standardized test that accurately captures pragmatic competence. Making a pragmatic mistake is of a different order than producing an ungrammatical sentence or using a wrong word for a given concept: the response may be grammatically correct but pragmatically unconventional. Keeping in mind that ‘speech acts rarely occur in isolation, and much of their meaning is derived from their
position within a sequence of linguistic interaction’ (Cameron-Faulkner, 2014, p. 42), it is possible to elicit relatively natural production data. By means of carefully designed elicitation techniques and materials, it can be tested whether children produce responses in a given context that are in line with convention.

**Present study**

In order to document the variation in socio-pragmatic skills of Turkish immigrant children, the following research questions were formulated.

1. Is there a difference between bilingual children growing up in the Netherlands and monolingual Turkish children growing up in Turkey regarding the use of two basic socio-pragmatic skills needed to carry out speech acts needed in academic environments: expressing opinions and asking questions?

2. What factors account for any differences between bilingual and monolingual children’s pragmatic skills?

We noted above that many studies found immigrant children to have lower lexical and syntactic skills in Turkish. Lexical skills are particularly often used as a good indication of overall language proficiency. In order to see whether socio-pragmatic skills pattern with other linguistic skills, we ask a third question.

3. Is there a correlation between lexical skills and pragmatic skills in the Turkish of third-generation children?

We hypothesize that there will be considerable differences between immigrant informants and Turkish children in Turkey.

**Instruments**

Rather than translating an existing assessment instrument developed for a different language, we decided to develop our own instrument, appropriate for Turkish cultural norms. In addition to less extensive and less varied Turkish input in a smaller variety of domains of language use, immigrant children are also faced with a second set of socio-cultural communicative norms, as the pragmatic conventions of Dutch will not be the same, whether for linguistic or for cultural reasons. The data we report on are part of a larger study of the linguistic skills of Turkish immigrant children. For the purposes of this paper, the test results on active lexicon (40 items), passive lexicon (60 items) and pragmatics skills are presented. The lexical tests were taken from Verhoeven, Extra, Konak, Narain and Zerrouk (1990). The same tests were used earlier with Turkish immigrant children in Germany by Yağmur and Konak (2009). For details on the active and passive lexicon tests, see Yağmur and Konak (2009); the pragmatic skills test will now be described.

In developing an age-appropriate test for pragmatic skills for children aged 5 or 6, we focused on a number of functional language skills that are important for carrying out the everyday speech acts of expressing opinions and asking questions. Earlier research (Ninio & Snow, 1999) has shown that at the age of 5–6, a child can perform the following pragmatic acts appropriately: communicate cause-and-effect relationships; state a problem; answer wh-type questions; ask permission to use someone’s belongings; use politeness markers, such as Thank you, Please and You’re welcome; recognize another person’s need for help; and provide help when asked. Considering
the short attention span of children this young, we kept the task short, and concentrated on three kinds of declaratives (communicating a response, expressing an opinion and voicing a suggestion) and interrogatives (asking a question and communicating a request).

Children were presented with a discourse completion task in which they were provided with imaginary situations and were asked to complete dialogues in which they had to provide the speech act aimed for (e.g. a request). When they had to say how they would act in a given situation, a context was provided with specific referential support and a clear pragmatic motivation for the language forms and content to be produced by the child. This maximizes the chance that the response will contain some variant of the target form and function. The presented context and the elicitation prompt constrain the range of appropriate utterances, so that responses can be scored unequivocally.

In the elicitation procedure, the child was presented orally with a scenario upon which s/he needed to provide some verbal reaction, also orally. In each case, the child had to ask an appropriate question or provide a relevant comment. Differentiation of interlocutors was manipulated in each subsection so that we could discern whether the child would adjust his/her speech for different interlocutors. We were interested whether children would adjust their language use to fit the social context of the conversation, in keeping with cultural conventions and social roles. They needed to observe whether the given situations involved issues of politeness and formality depending on the age and status of the (presented) imagined interlocutor.

The elicitation tasks involved 15 items. In the first section, five scenarios were presented requiring the participant to provide a response. In the first item, for instance, the participant was presented with the scenario: Your friend has opened your bag without asking your permission. How would you tell your friend that his/her behaviour is not appropriate? In the second item, the participant was required to interact with a sibling; in the third item with a best friend, in the fourth with a teacher and in the fifth with the mother. By introducing a variety of interlocutors, the child was expected to pay attention to issues of formality and to social roles. In the second set of items, participants were asked to present their opinions. For instance, they were asked the question: Which season do you like the most, and why? The response needed to include some plausible reasoning. In the third set of items participants had to communicate a request to a given interlocutor. The following scenario was presented for example: Your teacher gave you some task but you cannot do it and you need the teacher’s help. To get help from the teacher, what would you tell him/her? In the fourth part, suggestions had to be made to a set of given interlocutors. For instance, one scenario that was presented was: You see some children playing in the middle of the street. What would you tell them? In the final section, the participant had to ask an appropriate question, in line with a given scenario. One example was: Your friend has a new toy. You want to know how it works. What would you say to your friend?

The children’s responses were scored for semantic and pragmatic appropriateness. A four-point scale was developed to assess the responses. If the child produced an inappropriate and irrelevant utterance for the given task 0 points were given. If the response was partly appropriate but lacked sensitivity to social interaction skills and/or register norms, 1 point was given. Two points were given if the response was to the point but not sufficiently sensitive to the pragmatic demands of the context. If the child fully assessed the social situation and produced an appropriate response complying with the social norms expected for the given situation, a score of 3 points was awarded. On the basis of this scale, scoring each response was relatively straightforward. The reliability analysis of the total scale confirmed our individual observations with an alpha coefficient of 0.86, which indicates a high reliability. The resulting individual scores are taken to represent the socio-pragmatic skills of the participants.
Participants

Thirty Turkish speaking children in the age range of 5–6 were recruited in three cities in the Netherlands. Through the Turkish-Dutch Education Foundation, mothers were approached first, and the aim of the study was explained to them. Oral consent was obtained from the parents. Fourteen boys (mean age = 68.64 months) and 16 girls (mean age = 66.06 months) took part in the study. They were all born in the Netherlands. For the Turkish data, four different kindergartens in a lower middle-class neighbourhood in Ankara were visited. In order to match the social and educational background of parents in the Netherlands, a purposive sampling approach was followed. First of all, the directors of the preschools were contacted for permission to work in the kindergartens. Class teachers were then consulted to point out potential children to involve in the study, that is, children without speech or behaviour problems. The mothers of those children were then approached for permission. The aim of the study was explained and parents were shown the instruments. Consent forms were distributed to the parents. The children whose parents communicated consent were included in the study. In the end, 16 girls (mean age = 67.5 months) and 14 boys (mean age = 66.36 months) took part in the study.

Results

This section starts off with some descriptive analyses to provide an overview of the findings. The main body of the section presents a number of comparative analyses, documenting differences between groups. Instead of presenting a descriptive table for each subtest, we calculated a scale score per subtest. On the basis of accumulated points from each subtest, each informant obtained a score for each subsection. In calculating the scale scores, the following procedure was followed. For the Active Lexicon test, the numbers of correct responses were added up so that a total score for each scale could be obtained. If a participant gave 35 correct responses to 40 questions, then 35 becomes the Active Lexicon scale score for that participant. The same procedure was followed for other subtests. Before testing our hypotheses regarding socio-pragmatic skills, we subjected each scale to a reliability analysis. We obtained rather high Cronbach’s alpha values for each subtest. As shown in Table 1, the scales for lexical and pragmatic skills are highly reliable.

In order to examine whether there was the expected gap between first language (L1) skills of bilingual children growing up in the Netherlands and their monolingual peers growing up in Turkey, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was done on each scale. As presented in Table 2, we found highly significant differences between the two groups of children, the bilingual children scoring much lower on all three tasks. The differences are larger for the active lexicon than for the passive lexicon. Such differences might be caused by many factors, but most likely they are related to the fact that the immigrant children are growing up with two languages, experience a submersion environment in school and receive limited input in Turkish. The large differences in active and passive lexicon as well as in pragmatic skills suggest that L1 development in at least this immigration context is compromised for a variety of linguistic skills. When we examine the type of lexical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Alpha coefficient</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Lexicon</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Lexicon</td>
<td>0.874</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics skills scale</td>
<td>0.857</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
items that immigrant children do not master as well as monolingual children, it appears that it is mostly infrequent words that are not known by many immigrant children. For instance, all the children in the Turkish context know the word kemik (bone) but only 33% of Turkish-Dutch children know it. In the same vein, there are significant differences between the two groups regarding the words yüklemek (to load) [67% in Turkey versus 20% in the Netherlands] and çekirge (grasshopper) [77% in Turkey versus 17% in the Netherlands].

Turning our attention specifically to the pragmatic skills, the answer to our first research question is that there are statistically significant differences between the pragmatic skills in Turkish of immigrant and monolingual speakers. The scores range from 1 to 28 in the Dutch context and from 7 to 40 in the Turkish context. So far, we looked at differences at the group level. When we examine the individual scores of the participants, it is clear that there are fewer immigrant children who performed very well. In order to see the in-group and inter-group variation, we examined the distribution of scores, using a percentiles procedure. In this procedure, the scores that belong to the lowest 10% of the scores are categorized as level 1, the next 25% as level 2, 50% as level 3, 75% as level 4, 90% as level 5 and the top 10% as level 6. In this way, we can clearly distinguish between high and low achieving participants. As shown in Table 3, the distribution differs considerably across the two groups.

The scores of the majority of the immigrant participants (n = 21) are in the lowest three levels (50% percentiles). In addition, there are no immigrant children who belong to the highest achievement level. On the contrary, the scores of most of the monolingual children (n = 20) belong to the top three levels, including five children at the highest level. In order to understand the nature of these differences, we applied two further procedures. First of all, by means of a regression test, we identified the variables that can explain the differences in a meaningful way. Taking the pragmatics scale score as our dependent variable, we investigated the effects of the children’s country of birth, and of the Active and Passive Lexicon scores on the pragmatics score. As presented in Table 4, the scores for Active Lexicon had the most significant effect.
In the task that measured pragmatics skills, children had to actively produce meaningful utterances. It makes sense that having a larger active lexicon has an impact on the ability to produce meaningful and appropriate responses. However, contrary to our expectations, Passive Lexicon had a much lower effect on the score for pragmatics. The country of birth of the participant did not have much of an effect either. On the basis of the regression analysis, we can confidently answer our second research question: of the factors examined, it is active lexical skills that account best for the differences in pragmatic skills.

In order to further understand the nature of the differences between immigrant and monolingual children, we examined the individual utterances the participants produced. Below, we discuss the most striking differences. Appropriateness is the key term in assessing pragmatic skills. It is not without problems, since changing norms or differences across subgroups in society regarding what is suitable behaviour in a given situation may make it inappropriate to hold participants to socio-pragmatic norms that do not hold for them. However, in what follows, we will use the monolingual data as a reference point, and remain agnostic about whether different behaviour of immigrant children should be interpreted as signs of reduced socio-pragmatic proficiency or of changing socio-pragmatic norms in the immigrant community. However, the use of monolingual behaviour as the yardstick is justified by the attitudes prevalent in the immigrant community itself, which tends to orient towards the norms of the verbal behaviour of Turkish society.

In examining the differences between immigrant and monolingual Turkish speakers, we observe more intra-group variation than inter-group variation. In both the Dutch and the Turkish contexts, some informants produce appropriate as well as inappropriate and irrelevant utterances. For the first task, the pupils were given the following scenario: ‘Your friend has opened your bag without asking your permission. How would you tell your friend that his/her behaviour is not appropriate?’ Below are some of the responses from both groups:

Turkish context:
(1) (Score 0): Yanlış. ‘Wrong.’
(2) (Score 1): Benim çantam. ‘(It’s) my bag.’
(3) (Score 2): Arkadaşım bir daha alma. ‘My friend don’t take it again.’
(4) (Score 3): Çantamı izinsiz almasın arkadaşım. ‘You shouldn’t take my bag without permission, my friend’.

Immigration context:
(5) (Score 0): Arkadaşım! ‘My friend!’

Table 4. Outcomes of the regression analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>R square</th>
<th>Standardized regression coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics skills</td>
<td>0.371***</td>
<td>0.556***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** signify that correlation is significant at 0.01 level.
Both groups produced all kinds of appropriate and less appropriate responses. In the immigration context, lexical choices are sometimes interesting. Colloquial forms are more common, for instance *söyliycen* (you [should] tell [me]) instead of *söyleyeceksin* (you are going to tell [me]). Note that this response received a score of ‘1’ because it does not refer explicitly to the permission but indicates that the owner should be informed first before the bag can be taken. There are also lexical interference issues resulting from semantic influence from Dutch. For instance, the utterance *Çantamı geri götür* (*Take my bag back*) would not be very appropriate in the given context; expected would be *Çantamı geri ver* (*Give my bag back*). The response is probably influenced by Dutch *terugbrengen* (literally, back-bring), which is common in Dutch in this context, and is here translated as *geri götür*.

There are many cases of deviation from the standard norm in the lexical choices. It is important to stress that we never judged such cases as inaccurate or incorrect. Coding fully concentrated on the socio-pragmatic relevance and appropriateness of the response in the given communicative setting. Nevertheless, the difference between monolingual Turkish children and their bilingual immigrant peers regarding the adherence to standard norms was quite large. Semantic and syntactic forms indicating politeness were much more common in the data from the monolingual speakers. In many cases, immigrant participants preferred short and direct forms. This can be illustrated with responses to the following task: *You were going to go to your best friend’s birthday party, but because you went shopping with your mother, you could not attend the birthday party. What would you tell your friend when you see her/him?* Here are some responses given by bilingual informants:

(9) *Doğum günün kutlu olsun!*  
Happy birthday!

(10) *Gelemedim!*  
I could not come!

(11) *Ben geç geldim!*  
I came late!

(12) *Sorry, ben gelemedim!*  
Sorry, I could not come!

(13) *Özür dilerim, gelemedim çünkü anneme yardım edicedim.*  
I am sorry, I could not come because I was going to help my mother.

(14) *Özür dilerim annem beni yollamadı; başka bir yere gittik.*  
I am sorry, my mother did not send me; we went elsewhere.

In the task, the informants were expected to apologize for not being able to attend the birthday party and to communicate the reason for not being able to go. In (9), the child simply omitted the apology and congratulated the best friend with his/her birthday. The responses in (12) and (13)
simply apologize without giving any reasons. Only the participant in (14) both apologized and
gave a reason for not being able to attend the party. Some monolingual children, on the other hand,
gave rather elaborate and appropriate responses:

(15) Arkadaşım doğum gününe gelemediğim için çok üzgünüm.
   My friend I am terribly sorry for not being able to attend your birthday party.

(16) Ben annemle alışverişe gittim onun için gelememi. Bir dahakine gelirim.
   I could not come because I went shopping with my mother. I will come to the next one.

It is clear that the assessment of pragmatic skills cannot be divorced from the syntactic forms and
lexical items that are required to effectively carry out those functions, suggesting that the correla-
tion between low Active Lexicon scores and pragmatic deviations might be a causal one. Providing
an argument for their choice was much more problematic for the immigrant informants. For
instance, the majority of the participants produced items like (17), without mentioning any specific
reason. Some would only provide what can be interpreted as the reason, but did not name their
choice, as in (18) and (19). Very few immigrant children mentioned both a season and why they
like that season, as in (20) and (21).

(17) Kış orası güzel olduğu için.
   Winter because then (it's) beautiful there.

(18) Kar yağmak.
   (It's) snowing.

(19) Kar.
   Snow.

(20) Yaz, çünkü o zaman parka gidebiliyorum.
   Summer because then I can go to the park.

(21) Yaz çünkü o zaman dondurma yiyebiliyorum.
   Summer because then I can eat ice-cream.

Addressing elderly persons requires more formal utterances, and immigrant children deviated con-
siderably from the expected forms. In addressing a teacher, monolingual informants showed keen
awareness of the cultural norms that govern how one should talk to a teacher. This was seen in the
responses to the following task: Your teacher gave you an assignment but you cannot do it and you
need help. What would you tell your teacher in order to get some help? Most monolingual inform-
ants produced appropriate utterances like, Öğretmenim bana yardım eder misiniz? ([My] teacher,
would you help me please?). The immigrant children preferred much more direct forms, for exam-
ple, Öğretmen! (Teacher!), or Ben yapamıyorum (I cannot do it!).

We end the results section with a test of the correlation between the three scales (pragmatic
skills, active lexicon, passive lexicon) we used in our investigation. As presented in Table 5, there
are significant correlations between lexical skills and pragmatic skills. This is very much in line
with the results of the regression analyses presented earlier. In the case of Turkish immigrant chil-
dren, reduced lexical skills go together with reduced pragmatic skills. That does not automatically
mean there is a cause-and-effect relationship between these findings, but it would not be an illogi-
cal hypothesis to suggest that immigrant children lack the lexical proficiency to provide pragmati-
cally appropriate language use in Turkish.
Discussion and conclusion

The pragmatic skills of immigrant children were clearly different from those of monolinguals. We can conclude that in addition to diverging lexically and structurally from the monolingual norm, the Turkish immigrants’ ways of speaking may also be changing pragmatically. As with most cases of contact-induced change, group-internal changes in socio-cultural conventions (e.g. higher acceptance of informal language use), direct Dutch influence and reduced proficiency in Turkish may all play a role. Most likely, however, it is the limited experience children have with relatively formal forms of language use, at least in Turkish, which prompts them to give answers to our test items that are vaguer, less to the point, shorter, etc. In many cases, they seem to lack the conversational routines typically used to carry out the socio-pragmatic tasks that were tested. For the moment, we may conclude that changes in these conventions seem to pattern with other kinds of contact-induced change. Further study is needed to find out whether this is because it is yet another side of the same coin or whether it is a direct corollary of changing lexical and grammatical skills.

Interestingly, what is simply considered contact-induced change in contact linguistics is often seen as limited proficiency in an applied linguistic perspective. This perspective relies on taking the way Turkish is used in Turkey, and the social conventions it serves, as the yardstick with which to compare the verbal behaviour of the bilinguals. It is important to consider the point that the deviations from standard norms will be seen as problematic by both parents and educational establishments. This exonormative stance, focusing on an outside norm as the convention to be acquired, is typical of immigrant communities. One may wonder to what extent the findings we have reported on have a bearing on the educational position of immigrant children in Dutch society. In the remainder of this discussion, we wish to attend to this issue.

As quite a few children of Turkish ancestry are reported to enter school with limited skills in the mainstream language (Becker, 2011; Scheele, Leseman, & Mayo, 2010), these pupils face many social, linguistic and educational challenges in European submersion schools (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007). Bilingualism and bilingual education have received extensive attention in recent years, with an almost exclusive focus on the mainstream language skills of minority children (Dagevos et al., 2003; Euwals, Dagevos, Gijsberts, & Roodenburg, 2007). Skills in the minority language, studied so extensively in contact linguistics, are not always valued by policy makers and mainstream schools, and hence have not attracted much attention in applied linguistics. In various educational contexts, immigrant bilingualism tends to be seen as a deficit, and only rarely as a resource. Immigrant minority languages are often associated with poverty, under-achievement in schools, social and cultural problems, and insufficient integration into the host society (Extra & Yağmur, 2010).

The position of Turkish immigrant children in the Dutch context is comparable to other immigration contexts in Western Europe. Large-scale studies have shown that Turkish pupils in Dutch primary schools lag far behind their native Dutch peers in school achievement (Dagevos et al.,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Pearson correlations between lexical and pragmatic scales (n = 60).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Lexicon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Lexicon</td>
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Note: ** signify that correlation is significant at 0.001 level.
Given the value attributed to lexical development, the receptive and productive vocabulary skills of Turkish immigrant children have been compared to those of native Dutch children (Aarts & Verhoeven, 1999; Dagevos et al., 2003; Driessen & Merry, 2011; Leseman, 2000; Tesser & Iedema, 2001; Verhoeven, 1994). On the basis of proficiency levels in the L2, sizeable numbers of immigrant children have been diagnosed as language-impaired and sent to special classes (Yagmur & Nap-Kolhoff, 2010). Only a few applied linguistics studies have investigated skills in the minority language (Leseman, 2000; Schaufeli, 1991; Verhoeven, 1994, 1999, 2007). On the basis of standardized tests, lexical depth in Dutch and Turkish was found to be very limited among Turkish immigrant children (Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998). The mentioned studies mostly measured phonological awareness and lexical, syntactic and narrative skills. This paper contributed further complementary linguistic evidence to the discussion, presenting the results of a pragmatic skills test.

Educational policies seem to reflect the idea that limited proficiency in Dutch is partially caused by the community’s maintenance of Turkish. This has its reflections in the hostile ways in which minority languages are sometimes approached in schools (Jørgensen, 2010; Stevens, 2008). This has not always been the case: until the early 2000s, the dominant idea in educational circles was that it helps to teach the minority language in school. However, bilingual education was later abandoned in many countries, in line with the current idea that minority language maintenance is bad for majority language learning.

As a result it appears that what is particularly at risk for immigrant children is proficiency in formal school-related domains, and some of the socio-pragmatic skills we tested tap into that. Turkish children grow up in a multilingual environment, and several language varieties are in their repertoire, most prominently the Turkish of parents, informal Dutch of the wider environment and the more formal Dutch they encounter at school. Absent in many cases is a more formal register of Turkish, as this is unlikely to be used at home, even in those cases where parents are able to use it, and there are few opportunities to encounter it in a school-like setting, especially since the abolishment of home language instruction.

It is clear that children have to acquire a substantial vocabulary in the mainstream language to succeed in school. At the same time, Turkish children also have to maintain and expand their L1 skills for all kinds of communicative purposes in the family context and their wider cultural community (Scheele et al., 2010). Research with monolingual children has established that children’s early language skills are strongly related to their experiences with language input in the home context (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011; Scheele et al., 2010; Schwartz, Kozminsky, & Leikin, 2009). Mothers’ involvement in children’s education and the extent to which features of an academic register are present in the linguistic input provided at home are crucial factors for subsequent school language development.

The potentially positive role of the L1 in the development of the mainstream language (Cummins, 2000) is overlooked by educational specialists. According to Verhoeven (1999), a higher level of development in the L1 paralleled a higher level in the L2. In the Dutch context, there is no societal and institutional support for L1 development of immigrant groups (Extra & Yağmur, 2010). Submersion education and general societal scepticism about immigrant bilingualism further undermine the use of the L1. In addition, as Turkish immigrant children mostly grow up in low socioeconomic status (SES) families, they do not always receive the rich and elaborated input that would help them build knowledge of an academic register (Leseman & van den Boom, 1999). If there is interdependency between L1 and L2 skills, as some argue (Cummins, 1979; 2000; Verhoeven, 1999; Baker, 2006; Schwartz, 2014), this would mean that the lack of academic language in the Turkish repertoire may contribute to delays in the acquisition of a Dutch academic register, already compromised by limited Dutch input.
The hypothesis of interdependency would suggest that the problems with pragmatic skills may well jeopardize their development of pragmatic skills in Dutch as well, which could have serious consequences for their further school career. Some of these skills would be further practised in school, since that is the primary site where children’s communicative competence gets broadened beyond what they need at home, and where they learn the more infrequent vocabulary needed to use language in accordance with the conventions of pragmatic appropriateness. By instituting policies that limit the use and acquisition of L1 skills for immigrant children, schools and policy makers may be contributing to limited L2 skills in these children as well, in addition to fostering negative attitudes towards the usefulness of their L1 and attendant implications for socio-affective well-being. Moreover, since language skills and cognitive skills are hypothesized to go hand in hand, this may also affect their conceptual and cognitive development. However, since much of the relationship between L1 and L2 skills remains hypothesized rather than shown, further empirical investigation is still needed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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