

## **Bernstein's Deficit Theory and Its Implication in Bengali Language**

Dr. Md Zahidul Islam<sup>1</sup>, Jashim Uddin<sup>2</sup>, Shamsul Haque Khan<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Bernstein during his teaching profession in English school notices that some children drop out early of the school and most of them are of working-class families. To detect the reasons behind it, he conducts an investigation on this issue and finds that it is the linguistic behavior of the children. This paper deals with the same issue in Bangla language in Bangladesh. It considers both the children of the middle-class families living in the city and those of working-class in the village. To reach to a target result, it analyzes four issues – sentence types and length, temporal and logical nature within the sentences, the use of vocabulary and pronunciation – to represent the different linguistic behaviours of the children in the working-class and middle-class families which afterwards lead to education failure. Here, it is stated that the city children successfully use the linguistic components but rural children cannot be successful in all the cases. Overall, this case study agrees with Bernstein's Deficit Theory. To do the work, it has chosen both qualitative and quantitative approach and includes the methods such as a picture description, face-to-face interview, and audio and video recording for survey. As this investigation has to choose a limited number of participants, we recommend further study on this issue.

**Key words:** Deficit theory, Elaborated Code, Restricted Code, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Linguistic Relativity

### **Introduction**

A general scenario is experienced that sometimes children drop out early of the schools across the world. This is observed by Bernstein in England when he was teaching in a school. To detect the reasons behind it, he conducted an investigation on this issue. He noticed that children of the middle class and working-class families speak with different linguistic behaviours. The linguistic behaviours spoken by the working-class children are named as restricted code; whereas, elaborated code is used to indicate the linguistic behaviours of the middle-class children. He also noticed that the ratio of dropping out is larger in the case the children of the restricted code. That means, the restricted code leads to education failure in consequence. This is called “Deficit Theory” proposed by Basil Bernstein.

In the literatures, it is observed that Bernstein's investigation provides with a good number of linguistic usages which can be summarised under these four areas: sentence types and length, temporal and logical nature within the sentences, the use of vocabulary and pronunciation. Children of the middle class can use the various structures of sentence, maintain the coherence and cohesion between the sentences, use a wide range of vocabulary and standard

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor in the Department of English, DIU

<sup>2</sup> Research Fellow and Lecturer, Department of English

<sup>3</sup> School and College, Demra, Dhaka

pronunciation and the result is elaborated code; whereas, the working-class children grow up with the same construction of sentences frequently used, inconsistent arrangement of the idea, a limited vocabulary and non-standard pronunciation and then they are consequently found themselves in the domain of the restricted code.

This research considers “Deficit Theory” to apply to the school children living in the village and in the city of Bangladesh to observe whether Deficit Theory can be applicable or not. The result the research has found is that the village children mispronounce, and have a limited number of vocabulary, though in some cases they have been successful. But, overall, they fail to show the capacity that we observe in the linguistic behaviours of the city children.

It must be admitted that the participants of the research are limited in number. This type of study needs to contact with a great number of participants to receive sufficient data for a credible result. It is expected that the further investigation can cover this limitation.

### **Literature Review**

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, believed that language serves as a psychological tool that enhances learning and development in addition to being a cultural tool that introduces children to the common knowledge and understandings of their community (Liamas et al. 158). Additionally, Vygotsky thought that when kids engage with each other and their surroundings, learning comes alive for them (Morrison). He also held the opinion that during their formative years, kids actively seek out and engage with adults. Children must acquire language in order for these interactions to take place, as language development improves cognitive growth (Morrison). That means, children's interaction is the key to enhance language-capability which plays an important role in developing cognitive development. Cross-culturally children grow up in such a circumstance where they go through interactions with adults, cultural norms which strengthen their cognitive faculty. Precisely, children on the sociocultural ground constantly enhance cognitive ability. That means, social-interaction seems to be a key to cognitive development by the way of linguistic development. This fundamental notion is regarded as a sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky that is opposite to Piaget theory.

It is stated that Vygotsky hypothesizes that social-interactions enhance cognitive ability; on the same line, a hypothesis came into being namely Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (or, the Whorfian Hypothesis) which concerns the relationship between language and thought. Between two different claims of Whorfian Hypothesis, the weaker version “linguistic relativity” is that language influences perceptions, thoughts and at least behaviour (Holms 343). That means, the human's thought process and the way of behaviour are influenced by language usages. Overall, language, thought and behaviour influence each other.

### **This Whorfian view “linguistic relativity” influences.**

Basil Bernstein holds that language use within a social structure is directly and reciprocally related to the type of social structure that exists, both in terms of its creation and upkeep (Wardhaugh 336), that means, the relationship of these two properties is bi-directional. This relationship is cyclical where a social structure leads to linguistic behaviour and in turn the linguistic behaviour builds up a social structure. It can be claimed that because of socio-cultural factors, the differences in language usages take place. Basil Bernstein between 1958 and 1961 noticed that all the differences of language uses are not only because of linguistic features rather by semantic features. Afterwards, he generated two terms “public language usage” and “formal

language usage” to legitimize this framework of communication (Bernstein 82). He did not, however, stop "formal language usage" from being linked with the standard form and "public language use" from being identified with a non-standard form (82). Once more, the phrases "formal language use" and "public language use" are changed to "restricted code" and "elaborated code." The range and combinatorial potential of syntactic choices for meaning structuring form the basis of these two codes. While restricted codes and their syntactic counterparts are less predictable, elaborated codes are thought to offer a wider range of combinatorial options.

Bernstein himself takes these two alternatives into consideration at the level of performance, not at the level of competence (83). In the definition of codes, Littlejohn defines it, “people learn their place in the world by virtue of the language codes they employ” (178). Bernstein explains the codes on the semantic basis: in terms of particularistic, local, context dependent meanings, restricted codes are defined; whereas, elaborated codes are thought of in the case of universalistic, less local, more context independent meanings (Bernstein 83). While securitizing the factors employed here for the definition, it is observed that the semantics/ meanings are context-dependent. In spite of meanings being context-dependent, they show difference in meanings in terms of local context and social assumption. In essence, these differences in meanings giving rise to restricted code and elaborated code are generated due to social relationships or social hierarchy.

Basil Bernstein also explains these differences by focusing on the close connections between language learning and socialisation (Mesthrie et al. 352). Inevitably, the differences in learning and response of language result from the social hierarchy speakers’ location within. He did not, however, stop "formal language usage" from being linked with the standard form and "public language use" from being identified with a non-standard form (82). Once more, the phrases "formal language use" and "public language use" are changed to "restricted code" and "elaborated code." The range and combinatorial potential of syntactic choices for meaning structuring form the basis of these two codes. While restricted codes and their syntactic counterparts are less predictable, elaborated codes are thought to offer a wider range of combinatorial options (352). That means, a social position fixes a speaker’s linguistic behaviour s(he) will use in the real-life situation. The family is the foundation of the social institution that triggers the dissimilarity of linguistic behaviour.

Bernstein mentions the code differences practiced in the families: working-class families used simpler codes, while middle-class families used more complex ones. As a result, in working-class households where social control is implemented through fixed-role relationships, children are expected to learn a restricted code. So, children learn to use language in relatively implicit ways, with short sentences containing few adjectives and adverbs, linked by repetitive conjunctions like ‘and’ or ‘then’ (Liamas et al. 160). In contrast, family members in middle-class families encourage the children to engage themselves into the conversations to tell their opinion. In this way, children are used to enhancing their world. Ultimately, children can build up an idea after reinterpreting the previous one.

Bernstein argued that speakers who make use of elaborated codes have access to a wide range of syntactic and semantic alternatives, which encourage them to utilise these options in imaginative and unpredictable fashions.

Conversely, speakers of the restricted code have many fewer linguistic alternatives available to them. When using a restricted code, speakers frequently omit significant portions of their remark, if not all of it. (Mestherie et al. 353). Bernstein elucidates the distinct features of these codes. As an illustration, elaborated code employs precise, or standard, grammatical order and syntax to control what is said; it also uses complex sentences with a variety of conjunction and subordination devices; it frequently uses the pronoun I; it carefully chooses its adjectives and adverbs; it permits qualified remarks (Wardhaugh 337); and, as Bernstein put it, "is a language use which points to the possibilities inherent in a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organizing of experience (169)". In contrast, restricted code employs short, grammatically simple, and often unfinished sentences of poor – in the sense of nonstandard – syntactic form; uses a few conjunctions simply and repetitively; employs little subordination; tends toward a dislocated presentation of information; is rigid and limited in the use of adjectives and adverbs; makes infrequent use of impersonal pronoun subjects; confounds reasons and conclusions; makes frequent appeals to "sympathetic circularity," e.g., You know?; uses idioms frequently; and is 'a language of implicit meaning' (Wardhaugh 337).

Bernstein like other sociologists claims that every speaker has the access to the restricted code because of intimacy between the members of a family or families, but all members seem not to find access to the elaborated codes, especially to the working-class children. The effects of this unequal distribution are significant, according to Bernstein (173). Children from lower working-class families in particular are likely to be at a disadvantage in school, where the complex code is used extensively.

He says: The divergence of experience focused through a constrained code only becomes a significant educational issue when the school establishes a disjunction between the child's symbolic orders and its own. Why should the kids react when our schools aren't designed with them in mind? Asking a youngster to move to an extended code that assumes new role relationships and meaning systems without carefully considering the necessary contexts may be confusing and possibly harmful for the child.

According to Bernstein, schools use elaborated code as a medium of instruction in schooling. When instructors start to inject the abstract ideas to the children, the children who use elaborated code become successful in this stage; whereas, when the children of restricted code encounter a new pattern of cultural and linguistic behaviour, such kind of encounter seems to have profound social and psychological consequences. This consequence is a kind of shift from one paradigm to another. At that situation, education seems to be complex. Some children can overcome this complexity, and some other fail. Eventually, education failure is likely to be the result.

Here, it is observed that children grow up with two distinct codes: restricted code and elaborated code. Restricted code is shorter, condensed, requires background information and prior knowledge; whereas, elaborated code can stand out alone because it spells everything out so that everyone understands it. There are two factors which contribute to the development of either an elaborated code or restricted code within a system: the nature of the socializing agencies (family, peer group, school) and the values present in the system. When socializing agencies are well-structured, children grow up with a restricted code. Conversely, where the agencies are malleable, an elaborated code is found. The society which values individuality

provides elaborated codes; whereas, a narrow society provides the restricted codes. The study is going to investigate the differences in restricted and elaborated codes school-children grow up with in the village and in the city of Bangladesh.

### **Methodology**

To reach to a target result, the research has chosen both qualitative and quantitative approach which deal with verbal descriptions and numerical calculation respectively. The survey strategy includes methods such as a picture description, face-to-face interview, and audio and video recording. The survey is done in Bengali language and the participants are chosen from Bangladesh.

In total, twelve participants are taken into consideration for this investigation and they are grouped into two: the members of the first group are taken from middle-class family in Dhaka and it is comprised with six members having two girls and four boys; whereas, those of the second group are of the working-class family of rural areas and it is comprised with the same number but having the equal number of male and female participants.

The participants of the first group represent the elaborated code and are studying from kg to the class six. In contrary, those of the second group representing the restricted code are studying in class six except one student. That means, the members of the first group are younger than those of the second group.

While collecting the data, they are asked to describe a picture shown before them [see Appendix I]. The responses found from them are recorded using both audio and video recorder. Overall, to receive more authentic data, the researcher visits the participants and takes the interview face-to-face situation.

### **Discussion**

As observed in the literature section Bernstein Scrutinizes some issues – sentence types and length, temporal and logical nature within the sentences, the use of vocabulary and pronunciation – to represent the different linguistic behaviours of the children in the working-class and middle-class families which after wards lead to education failure. In this research, we have considered the issues stated above to explore the differences of linguistic behaviours of the Bengali speaker children of the working-class families living in the village and the middle-class families being in the city.

### **Sentence Types and Length**

The analysis tends to begin with the examination of sentence types and length i.e., the variety of the sentence types and the length of the sentences. Children of the first group use 24 sentences to explain the picture; whereas, the second group speaks 32 sentences, but of 32 sentences, at least four sentences are unfinished found in Abu Sayeed's data which are: দুই পাশে লাইট পোস্টার (lightpost at the two sides, আর অইল গাছগাছালি (and also, trees), আর অইল বিল্ডিং (and also, building), বেগ আর বই (bag and book). Moreover, there is no word like লাইটপোস্ট in English rather it should be "lamp post". On the other hand, the data collected from the middle-class children does not give any unfinished sentence though two participants in this group are very young. Apart from the four poor unfinished structures, all of them spoken by the two groups are simple in terms of traditional classification of sentence. It is also to note that the number of the words

which comprise the sentences are from three words to the highest twelve words. With the twelve numbers of words, the participant, Mahmuda Akter, of the second group forms a sentence: তার মধ্যে একজন মেয়ে আর একজন ছেলে পায়ে রসি বেঁধে দাঁড়িয়ে রয়েছে (among them, a girl and a boy stand tied with the rope), but the long sentence by the first group is formed by ten words: একটা ছেলে এবং একটা মেয়ে পায়ের মধ্যের সিব্বি ধরে খেছে (a boy and a girl are tied with a rope) detected in Zarif Ahmed's data.

Under this section, the investigation will detect the beginning and the end of the sentences. The five participants of the first group begin the sentences except one with: ছবিটিতে দেখা যাচ্ছে (It is seen in the picture...); on the other hand, the four participants of the second group start the sentences uttering: একটি ভবনের সামনে (In front of a building...). If we go to zoom these two different patterns, we can observe that the first group begins to explain the picture with outer side and then go inside the picture; whereas, the second group begins with the internal explanation. To begin from external to internal is a kind of capacity city children learn from the middle-class children. The investigation also detects what the sentences end with: there is a common word: আছে (there is/ are) used 7 times by the second group, but 1 time by the first group. That means, the use of the same pattern does not present variety in the constructions of the second group.

Overall, in the case of the number of sentence and the length of the sentence, the children of the restricted code show talent more than those of elaborated code, but it is true that in the consideration of age, the children of the restricted code could not show much distinction at all. Moreover, it must be said that unfinished construction is found in the village children, but absent in the data of the middle-class children in the city. In the consideration of the beginning and the end of the sentences, the first group shows variety; in contrast, in the sentences of the village children, the repetitions of the similar pattern are observed. Therefore, the middle-class children are more successful on the account of language usage.

### **Range of Devices Used for Relationship between the Sentences**

Here, we will identify the presence of a range of devices which build up the ideas combining the sentences by the use of conjunction and subordination as well as by the use of prepositions. The use of these devices appears in the elaborated code generally but if the same device is repeatedly used, it fails to be elaborated code, rather the repetitive use of the same device is notified in the restricted code.

At this stage, a classification of the sentences can be observed based on the action verb and non-action verb. The sentences which are comprised with the action verbs can be called as action sentence; opposite to it, the sentences are called as non-action sentence. The action sentences are formed by action verbs like: play – আশে পাশে কয়েকটি ছেলে মেয়েরা খেলা করছে (around, several boys and girls are playing); তাদের মধ্যে দুইটি ছেলে মেয়ের পায়ে দড়ি বাঁধা রয়েছে (among them, two boys and girls are tied with rope); একটি মেয়ে সেই দড়ির উপর দিয়ে লাফ দেয়ার চেষ্টা করছে (a girl is trying to jump over that rope) [data from Abu Obaidullah]. The non-action formation is such as এখানে মোট চারজন ছেলে মেয়ে (Here, there are four boys and girls). Most of the participants in the first group maintain the relationship between sentences where action sentences precedes the non-action sentences, on the other hand, the participants of the second group use both types of

patterns: for some sentences, the action sentences precedes the non-action sentence and for others, the action sentences follows the non-action constructions.

To connect the sentences, both groups use: এবং (and) and ও (and) equally, but the second group use আর (and) to indicate the same meaning. It is also observed that when they combine two words, they use ও (and), but when they combine two sentences, they take এবং (and). Another interesting usage is observed: the city children use ছেলে-মেয়ে (boy-girl) as a compound word; whereas, the village children use ও (and) to combine ছেলে-মেয়ে into ছেলে ও মেয়ে.

In the overview, to bind the unit of information into a complete idea, it is difficult to tell which group is successful. The comparison would be almost equal in the linguistic analysis.

### **Usage of Vocabulary**

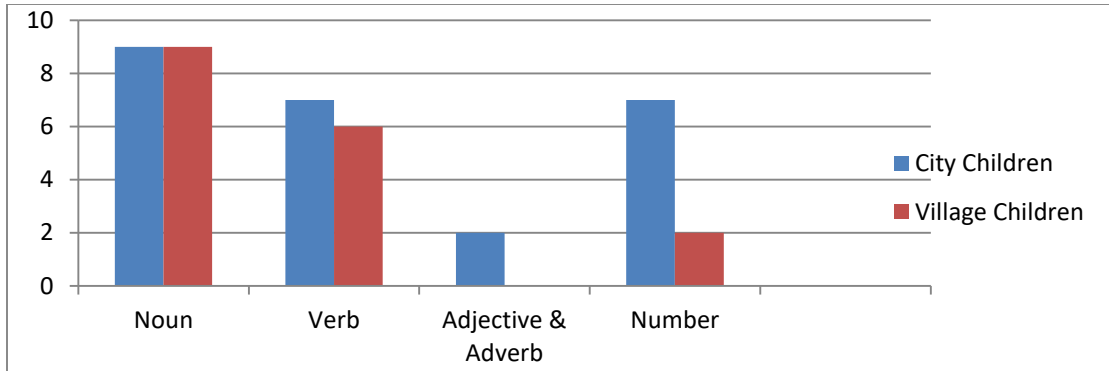
The middle-class family children grow up with the capacity to use a wide range of vocabulary especially with adjectives, adverbs or other types of words. In this case, children have a very rigid and limited capacity to use vocabulary. Here, in this research, the ranges of vocabulary we have detected are nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and numbers within the data of the first group, but the second group could not use any adjectives or adverbs at all. Another interesting dissimilarity observed is where the first group brings seven kinds of numerical words; the second group uses only two. That means, the capacity of the second group is delimited to use a wide variety of vocabulary explaining the picture.

Children of both groups take the same number of nouns which are: পা (leg), দড়ি (rope), বাড়ি (house), গাছ (tree), লেম্পপোস্ট (lamp-post), বৃত্ত (বৃত্তের) (circle), ফুটবল (football), গোল (score), গোলপোস্ট (goal-post) [nouns of the city children]; পা (leg), দড়ি (rope), গোলকিপার (goal keeper), লাইটপোস্টার (lamp-post), গাছগাছালি (tree), বিল্ডিং (building), বেগ (bag), বই (book), ফুটবল (football) [nouns of the second group]. If we look at the misuse of the noun in the first group, we see that a participant uses the word বৃত্ত (বৃত্তের) (circle), but the picture does not show any “circle”. The second group uses a word লাইটপোস্ট (light-post) wrongly, rather it should be লেম্পপোস্ট (lamp-post). The first group uses the Bengali word বাড়ি for building, but the village children use English word “building” in Bengali spelling বিল্ডিং for building.

In the case of verbs, the second group uses seven verbs: বাঁধা (tie), লাফদেয়া (jump), বলমার (kick), দাঁড়িয়ে আছ (stand), আটকাচ্ছে (defend), গোলকরতেছিল (score), খেলছে (play); whereas, this group uses one word less than the first group. If we detect any word used wrongly, we can get it from the second group আটকাচ্ছে (defend). There is no situation to use the word আটকাচ্ছে (defend).

In the case of other words – adjectives, adverbs, and numbers, the first group use one adverb: আশেপাশে (here and there), one adjective: সাদারঙ (white-colour), and seven numerical words: পাঁচটি (five), কয়েকটি (several), এগারটা (eleven), চারটা (four), আটটা (eight), অনেকগুলো (many), দুই (two). On the other hand, the second group uses only two numerical words: চারটা (four), দুই (two).

### **The Number of Vocabulary Spoken**



It is also important to detect the error use of words. Under the study of the vocabulary, almost all the errors are done by the second group; this is why, here, we are showing the errors of the second group: a word গোল পোস্ট করছে is used, but it should be either গোল করছে (score) or only গোলপোস্ট (goal-post); the word সুটমারছে (shoot) is wrongly used where সুট (shoot) is an English word written in Bengali, and মারছে is a Bengali word. So, the word সুটমারছে is a English-Bengali combination that is wrong in Bengali. The third wrong word is কিং (kick) which should be কিক (kick). The word কিক is still English word written in Benglai letter. The fourth word used wrongly is ক্লাম্প (clamp) which have no situation. There are two words which are non-standard অইলো (no meaning in Bengali but colloquial use) and বান্ধ (tied) used by the participants of the village children.

In the field of vocabulary usage, the participants of the middle-class families show more linguistic talent; in contrary, the village children fail to use a wide range of vocabulary.

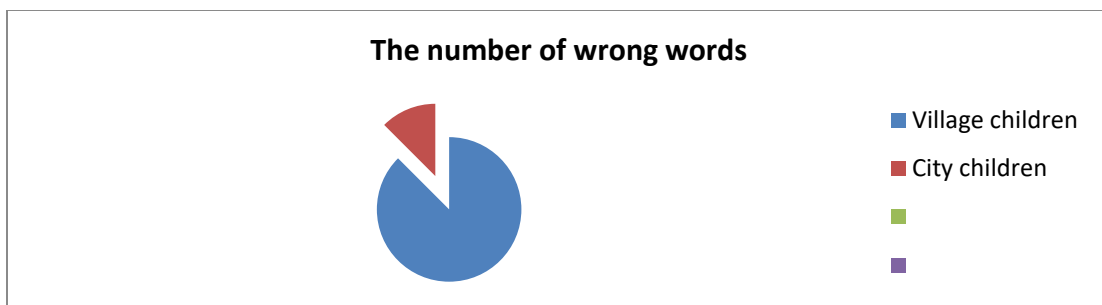
### Pronunciation

The elaborated codes always preserve the standard pronunciation of the words; whereas, the restricted codes do not follow it. As told above, in this last section of data analysis, we will focus on the pronunciation to show a comparative analysis between the village children and city children.

Almost all the South-Asia languages, Bengali language is one of them, preserve two forms for writing: one of the two is চলিতভাষা [Chôlitôbhasha] colloquial form of Bengali using simplified inflections, and the second one is সাধুভাষা [Sadhubhasha] sanskritised form of Bengal. In general, in spoken form, Bengali speakers speak in চলিত ভাষা not in সাধুভাষা.

However, we observe in the data of village children who use three words in [Sadhubhasha] form: খেলতাইলো/kʰel.ta.cʰɪ.lɔ/ (play), করতাইল/kɔr.te.cʰɪ.lɔ/ (do), and খেলতেছে/kʰel.te.cʰɪ.lɔ/ (play); whereas, city children use only one word in [Sadhubhasha] form: মারতেছে/mar.te.cʰe/ (kick). The correct pronunciation of the four words respectively are: /kʰel.cʰɪ.lɔ/, /kɔr.cʰɪ.lɔ/, /kʰel.cʰɪ.lɔ/, /mar.cʰe/. There are other three words which are also mispronounced by the village children. These words are: রইয়েছে not /rɔɪ.cʰɪ.le/ but /rɔɪ.cʰe/, লাফাচ্ছে not /la.pʰac.ce/ but /la.pʰac.cʰe/, বান্ধা not /ban.da/ but /ba.da/.





At last, we can come into conclusion that city children pronounce the word in a standard form but the village children mispronounce are frequent.

From the data analysis, the results from the four sections indicate that children of the city middle-class families are more successful than those of the village working-class children. This linguistic inability of the village children afterwards leads to the education failure and at last the children grow up with the restricted code drop out from the schooling.

### Conclusion

Finally, the deficit theory of Bernstein is proved in the case of comparison between the linguistic behaviours of village children and those of city children. In this research, the city children could use a wide range of vocabulary and sentence types, do the standard pronunciation, have the capacity to build up a single idea using connectors, but the village children could not be successful in all the cases. As this investigation has to choose a limited number of participants, we recommend further study on this issue.

### References

1. Bernstein, Basil. *Social Structure, Language and Learning*, Educational Research, 1961.
2. Bernstein, Basil. *Social Class, Language and Socialization*, In Giglioli, 1972b.
3. Bernstein, Basil. *Class, Codes and Control*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Routledge, 1990.
4. Holmes, Janet. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Routledge, 2013.
5. Llamas, Carmen; Mullany, Louise and Stockwell, Peter. *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*. Routledge, 2007.
6. Littlejohn, Stephen. *Theories of Human Communication*. Albuquerque, Wadsworth, 2002.
7. Mesthrie, Rajend, Swann, Joan, Deumert, Ana and Leap, William, *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
8. Morrison, George. *Early Childhood Education Today*. 14<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Publishing, 2018.
9. Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2006.