

Using of the First Language in English classroom as a way of scaffolding for both the students and teachers to learn and teach English

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ABSTRACT: This paper starts with the assumption that using the mother tongue when applied adequately and effectively, can be used as a means of language learning and language teaching. Despite the controversy of the adequacy or inadequacy of using the mother tongue in the teaching of a foreign language, this paper argues that analytical and descriptive studies along with teachers' observations have revealed valuable additional information about the validity of using the mother tongue as a tool for language learning and/or language teaching. So the use of L1, if used properly and judiciously, is a needful, and worthy, pedagogical ally in the teaching and learning of English as language. Therefore, those who believe that L1 has a minimal role to play in the teaching of a foreign language are invited to think again of its role and contributions it makes to the fields of language learning and teaching.

Keywords: language learning, First Language, English Classroom, Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

There have always been contradicting views about whether to use the mother tongue of the students in the foreign language classroom. The monolingual approach suggests that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication, implying the prohibition of the native language would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language.

In most of the roles of the L1 that we have looked at, there is the common theme that the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2. It is foolish to arbitrarily exclude this proven and efficient means of communicating meaning. To do so would be directly parallel to saying that pictures or real objects should not be used in the L2 class (Nation 1978). All the arguments against L1 use similarly apply to the use of pictures, real objects, and demonstration. The L1 needs to be seen as a useful tool that like other tools should be used where needed but should not be over-used.

Encouraging L2 use

In classes where learners all share the same first language or national language, teachers need to use a range of options to encourage learners to use the L2 as much as possible (Nation 2001). The following range of options is based on the idea that there are several reasons why learners use the L1 when they should be using the L2. These reasons include low proficiency in the L2, the naturalness of using the L2 to do certain jobs, shyness in using the L2, or simply a lack of interest in learning the L2. Here are some of the ways of dealing with these obstacles to L2 use.

1. Choose manageable tasks that are within the learners' proficiency.
2. Prepare learners for tasks by preteaching the language items and skills needed.
3. Use staged and graded tasks that bring learners up to the level required.
4. Get learners to pretend to be English speakers.
5. Make the L2 an unavoidable part of the task. Retelling activities, strip stories, completion activities, and role plays all require the use of the L2.
6. Repeat tasks to make them easier.
7. Inform learners of the learning goals of each task so that they can see how using the L2 will help them achieve a clear short term learning goal.

8. Discuss with the learners the value of using the L2 in class.
9. Get learners to discuss the reasons why they avoid using the L2 and get them to suggest solutions to encourage L2 use.
10. Set up a monitoring system to remind learners to use the L2. In group work speaking tasks this can involve giving one learner in each group the role of reminding others to use the L2.
11. Use non-threatening tasks. Learners can choose their own groups, the teacher can stay out of the groups, allow learners to prepare well for the tasks, don't use tasks that put learners in embarrassing situations, and choose interesting, non-threatening topics. If encouraging L2 use is a problem, several of these different solutions may need to be used. These solutions cover a range of affective, cognitive, and resource approaches and thus can be seen as complementary rather than as alternatives.

In some countries, English and the L1 are in competition with each other and the use of English increases at the expense of the L1. Teachers need to show respect for the learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make the L1 seem inferior to English. At the same time, it is the English teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in English. Thus, a balanced approach is needed which sees a role for the L1 but also recognises the importance of maximising L2 use in the classroom.

Translation is more and more frequently evaluated as a positive form of interference aimed at enriching rather than harming learners' competence and performance skills. The use of translation in language classes might, of course, have some limitations but also benefits should be explored and taken into consideration. Translation should not be seen, and consequently treated, as a completely different language skill as compared to reading, writing, speaking and listening because it is an activity which includes them and is, to a certain degree, dependent on them (Leonardi, 2007).

My personal experience as a learner and teacher of English as a foreign language has shown me that moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue can aid and facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language, a view shared by many colleagues of mine. However, the value of using the mother tongue is a neglected topic in the TEFL methodology literature. This omission, together with the widely advocated principle that the native language should not be used in the foreign language classroom, makes most teachers, experienced or not, feel uneasy about using L1 or permitting its use in the classroom, even when there is a need to do so.

Should the students' L1 be used in the EFL classroom? Though its use has been defended by some language teaching specialists, little empirical research has been done to find out if it is an effective teaching and learning tool.

How do students and teachers look at this issue? Schweers (1999) conducted a study with EFL students and their teachers in a Spanish context to investigate their attitudes toward using L1 in the L2 classroom. His results indicate that the majority of students and teachers agreed that Spanish should be used in the EFL classroom (Schweers 1999). Inspired by his research and driven by my own interest, I decided to carry out a similar study on the use of the native language in the Persian context. However, differences exist between Schweer's study and mine. Firstly, in Schweer's study English was the official second language of his participants, while in mine English was a foreign language to the participants. Secondly, the participants in my research were all at intermediate level. Thirdly, I used a variety of research methods, including classroom observations, interviews, and a questionnaire.

The Use of Students' First Language (L1) in the Second Language (L2) Classroom

According to Morahan (2007) the issue of the use of students' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom has been debated for many years. In recent years focus has been shifting towards inclusion of L1 in the language classroom. Research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002).

L1 use by Teacher

Teachers often use L1 in beginning and intermediate classes to:

- give instructions
- explain meanings of words
- explain complex ideas
- explain complex grammar points (Tang, 2002)

Many teachers find that the use of some L1 provides more time to practice L2, because understanding is achieved much more rapidly. The key with teacher use of L1 is that it be used for clarification purposes, after an attempt has been made to communicate ideas in L2 and students still appear to be confused. The idea is that L1 serves a "supportive and facilitating role in the classroom" (Tang, 2002), and not that it is the primary language of communication. L1 use also allows students to become more aware of the similarities and differences between cultures and linguistic structures, and thus may improve the accuracy of translations.

Finding cognates and similarities between languages builds up "interlinked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students' minds" (Cook, 2001).

L1 use by Student

Students often use L1 when doing pair work to construct solutions to linguistic tasks and evaluate written language. The use of L1 allows them to work within their Zone of Proximal Development, as proposed by Vygotsky and cited in (Wells, 1999). By working in pairs and using L1 intermittently with L2, students may be cognitively processing at a higher level with regard to linguistic tasks than if they were limited only to communicating in the language they are trying to learn. L1 vocabulary allows learners to use language which they may not yet possess in L2 in order to process ideas and reach higher levels of understanding. This applies both to social talk between partners and private talk intended for the learner alone. Social talk, as the name implies, is talk between peers for the purpose of conversing. Private talk is when learners talk themselves through a learning process. For example, in private talk, they might utter a non-standard L2 phrase and then self-correct: "No, wait, ... (L2 phrase corrected)". Private talk can also be used to deconstruct grammar in real-time as the speaker is using it, such as: "I like the milk...the milk? No, I like milk." However, it is important to point out that students who use L1 for communicative purposes in the classroom must also be expected to use L2 in the classroom to practice its use. Students use L1 while speaking in order to:

- ask each other clarifying questions
- express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding
- clarify meaning of words in L2
- find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1
- use language to process complex concepts
- build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion

L1 use in written tasks is especially valuable because it helps to clarify and build meaning. It allows learners to repeatedly evaluate and clarify communication with regard to choice of content and register appropriate to the task (Wells, 1999). This re-evaluation is often done orally, in conversation with a peer or teacher or in private talk.

Collaborative dialogue allows learners to build linguistic understanding concerning a number of language tasks. As Cook stated in her article "Using the First Language in the Classroom" (2001), "L1 provides scaffolding for the students to help each other

The Place of Translation in English Language Teaching

According to Štulajterova (2007), today there is a great deal of emphasis on the study of foreign languages. The ability to speak a foreign language is no longer merely an advantage – it is becoming a necessity. As a result, linguists and methodologists are looking for more effective approaches to language teaching. One of the suggested methods is translation. Until recently, translation was out of favor with the language teaching community. It was labelled "boring", "uncommunicative", "difficult", "pointless" and the like, and suffered from too close an association with grammar (Duff, 1994). Today, thanks to the new communicative approach to language teaching, translation is gradually becoming recognized as a valid activity for language practice and improvement.

The reason why translation is, even today, ignored by many teachers as an effective language learning activity is mainly because teachers often feel that translation involves no oral interaction and therefore is not a communicative activity, and that it is not suited to the general needs of the language learner. Moreover, many of them consider use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching undesirable, or feel that translation is time-consuming, boring and irrelevant. This does not have to be the case.

Štulajterova (2007) aimed to find out about the place of translation in the current curriculum of English language as a school subject.

His findings suggest that translation, particularly of texts, is used neither sufficiently nor effectively enough. If translation as a classroom technique is to help student achieve competence in the foreign language, it must be used sensibly, systematically and on a regular basis. We consider this purposeful approach very important. There is no point in merely handing out texts to the learners with the instruction "Translate". Students should not be required to translate without having been given practice in the skill. Furthermore, as Štulajterova (2007) suggested it is essential that the teacher always explains what the purpose of each activity is – the students need to know why the activity is being done.

Research design

Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) Is Persian as the L1 used in English classrooms in Iran at intermediate level? If so, how frequently is it used and for what purposes?
- (2) What are the attitudes of the students and teachers toward using Persian in the EFL classroom?

Participants

Participants of the current study were 100 students who were studying at the intermediate level. They were from one of the language institutes of Shiraz. The 10 teacher participants were all teach at the same institute, with their teaching experience ranging from one year to 10 years.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used, including classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires.

Classroom Observations

Three randomly-selected first-year reading classes (of about 50 minutes in length) conducted by three teachers were observed and recorded to find out how frequently and on what occasions Persian was used. To obtain more authentic classroom data, the teachers and students were not informed of the observation purpose beforehand.

Interviews

The three teachers whose classes were observed and recorded were interviewed and asked why they sometimes preferred using Persian to English in their classes. The interviews were recorded and summarized.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was distributed to 100 students, and another questionnaire (see Appendix 2) to 10 teachers to discover their attitudes toward using Persian in the English classroom. The questionnaire items focused on the subjects' opinions toward the use of L1, the various occasions when they think L1 can be used, and the perceived effectiveness of L1 in their EFL classroom.

RESULTS

Classroom observations

Table 1 shows the number of times and occasions that Persian was used in the three 50-minute reading classes.

The table shows that Persian was used by the three teachers in the English reading classes to give instructions and to explain the meaning of words, complex ideas, and complex grammar points. The greatest use of Persian, 14 times, was to explain the meaning of words. Teacher 2 used Persian to explain and to practice the use of some phrases and expressions. She came up with an appropriate and culturally specific Persian translation, and the students seemed to understand it quickly. One could conclude that the teachers use Persian only when they explain abstract or culturally-specific words. Teacher 3 used Persian most frequently to give instructions. The teacher used Persian only after first giving instructions in English, apparently to ensure that every student was clear about what was said. Because it was quite noisy outside the classroom at the time, the teacher used Persian instructions to hold the students' attention and make them follow him.

All three teachers first attempted to explain the words, grammar points, and meanings of complex ideas in English, but resorted to Persian when they thought the students did not or could not understand their English explanations.

These three class observations indicate that Persian is used on occasions when English explanations fail to work, hence the L1 plays a supportive and facilitating role in the classroom.

Table 1. Classroom observation results

Occasion	Occasions on which Persian was used				Total
	Giving instructions	Explaining meanings of words	Explaining complex ideas	Explaining complex grammar rules	
Teacher 1	2	8	3	2	15
Teacher 2	0	4	5	3	12
Teacher 3	3	2	1	2	8
Total	5	14	9	7	35

Interviews

After the classroom observations, the three teachers whose classes had been observed were interviewed about their occasional use of Persian in the classroom and how they viewed the common criticism that using Persian reduces the students' exposure to English. Their answers are summarized as follows:

Teacher 1: Firstly, I think using some Persian is more effective and less time-consuming. Occasionally, when you spend quite some time or use several English sentences to explain one word or idea, and the students still look confused, using one simple Persian word or idiom might solve the problem. Class time is limited; if using Persian is helpful, why not do it? Secondly, criticizing the use of Persian on the grounds that the students' exposure to English will be reduced does not reflect the fact that students read the English text and still communicate in English with the teacher and other students in the classroom. The use of some Persian in the class actually provides more time for students to practice their English and get exposure to English. Lastly, the amount of English used depends on the students' language proficiency level. If their English is at an advanced level, I feel no need to use Persian. All in all, I think that using some Persian in the classroom is necessary and the advantages of doing so outweigh any disadvantages.

Teacher 2: The main reason I use Persian in the classroom is that sometimes students —because of their low proficiency level in English—fail to follow me when I only use English to explain the meaning of the text or to give instructions. Also, when I happen to know a very vivid and appropriate Persian translation of an English sentence, I will give it to students so they can immediately comprehend the meaning of the English sentence. This also helps them compare the word choices in the two languages.

Teacher 3: I use Persian to discuss the meaning of some difficult, abstract words and to explain the grammar and ideas expressed in long and complicated sentences. Sometimes when students look puzzled after my English explanation of certain points, I will use Persian to reinterpret them. Furthermore, when the classroom is noisy, using Persian to keep order is more effective than using English.

Questionnaires

As noted earlier, questionnaires were distributed to students and teachers. Of the 100 given to students, 96 were returned. Of the 10 given to teachers, 8 were returned. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that a high percentage of the students (75 percent) and the teachers (68 percent) who participated in the study think that Persian should be used in the classroom. According to students, Persian was most necessary to explain complex grammar points (76 percent) and to help define some new vocabulary items (66percent). For teachers, Persian was most necessary to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (60 percent) and to explain difficult concepts or ideas (40 percent). Only one teacher indicated that Persian could be used to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively. In choosing the open-ended "Other" option about when it is necessary to use Persian in the EFL classroom, a few students indicated that the L1 could be used to translate well-written paragraphs and to compare the two languages.

In explaining why they think the use of Persian is necessary in EFL classes, the majority of student participants (73 percent) indicate that it helps them to understand difficult concepts better. More than half of the students (55 percent) answered that Persian was necessary to understand new vocabulary items better. Only 9 percent of the students responded that they felt less lost. This figure is significantly smaller than the corresponding student responses in Schweer's study, in which 68.3 percent of the students preferred the use of the L1 in order to feel less lost (1999:8). A possible explanation for this difference is that the students' English language proficiency level in my study was higher than in Schweer's. The few students who chose the open-ended "Other" option for why it is necessary to use the L1 indicated that Persian could be used to understand jargon and to improve their translation ability.

Concerning why the use of Persian was necessary, teachers answered because “it is more effective” (46 percent) and “it aids comprehension greatly” (50 percent). Two teachers suggested that the use of L1 helps students become more aware of the differences and similarities between different cultures. More than half of the students think Persian should be used in the classroom “sometimes.” Concerning how much time Persian should be used in the English class, 71 percent of the students answered the amount of Persian used should range from 5 to 10 percent of class time, and 29 percent of the students answered it should be from 20 to 30 percent of class time.

The questionnaire results show that in the reading classes, the use of Persian is justified. It is especially useful for language tasks such as defining vocabulary items, practicing the use of phrases and expressions, and explaining grammar rules and some important ideas. This is in agreement with the classroom observation results (see Table 1). Students prefer the use of Persian because it enhances their comprehension of new concepts and new vocabulary items; teachers think using Persian is more effective and can aid comprehension.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study on the use of the mother tongue in a EFL context bear many similarities to Schweer’s study in a Spanish context. Both studies indicate that the mother tongue was used by the majority of teachers investigated, and both students and teachers responded positively toward its use. Minor discrepancies exist concerning the occasions when the L1 should be used. Some of these differences can be accounted for by the participants’ different levels of L2 language proficiency.

The teachers participating in this study indicated that the translation of some words, complex ideas, or even whole passages is a good way to learn a foreign language. My observation of the three classes suggests that without translation, learners would be likely to make unguided and often incorrect translations.

This study also reveals that in the EFL classes observed Persian plays only a supportive and facilitating role. The chief medium of communication in the class is still English. As with any other classroom technique, the use of the mother tongue is only a means to the end of improving foreign language proficiency. I agree with the majority of student participants that no more than 10 percent of class time should be spent using Persian. In my experience, this percentage decreases as the students’ English proficiency increases. Of course, a translation course would be an exception.

Unlike Schweer’s student participants, the students in the present study are highly motivated to learn English. Few of them feel that English is imposed on them or regard the use of English as a threat to their identity. Instead, they generally prefer greater or exclusive use of English in the classroom. In their view, Persian should be used only when necessary to help them learn English better.

CONCLUSION

The research seems to show that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom does not reduce students’ exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning processes. This is not to overstate the role of the L1 or advocate greater use of L1 in the EFL classroom, but rather to clarify some misconceptions that have troubled foreign language teachers for years, such as whether they should use the mother tongue when there is a need for it and whether the often-mentioned principle of no native language in the classroom is justifiable. It is hoped that these findings will help make more people acknowledge the role of the native language in the foreign language classroom and stimulate further study in this area.

Appendix 1. Student Questionnaire on the Use of Persian in the English Classroom

This questionnaire aims to find out your attitude toward using Persian in the English classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation!

Should Persian be used in the classroom?

Yes No

Do you like your teacher to use Persian in the class?

not at all a little sometimes a lot

When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom?

to help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words)

to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (e.g., doing translation exercises)

to explain complex grammar points

to explain difficult concepts or ideas

to give instructions

to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively
other, please specify
If you think the use of Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?
It helps me to understand difficult concepts better.
It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better.
It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.
I feel less lost.
other, please specify

Do you think the use of Persian in the classroom helps you learn this language?
no a little fairly much a lot
How often do you think Persian should be used in the classroom?
never very rarely sometimes fairly frequently
What percentage of the time do you think Persian should be used in the class? Choose one.
5% 10% 20% 30% 40%
50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

Appendix 2. Teacher Questionnaire on the Use of Persian in the English Classroom
This questionnaire aims to find out your attitude toward using Persian in the classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation!
Should Persian be used in the classroom?
Yes No
When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom?
to help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words)
to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (e.g., doing translation exercises)
to explain complex grammar points
to explain difficult concepts or ideas
to give instructions
to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively
other, please specify
If you think the use of Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?
It aids comprehension greatly.

It is more effective.

It is less time-consuming.

Table 2. Results of the questionnaires on the use of Persian in the English classroom.

Note: Where participants could choose more than one answer to a question (items 3 and 4), totals add up to more than 100 percent.

Should Persian be used in the classroom?

Students: yes 75% no 25%

Teachers: yes 68% no 32%

Do you like your teacher to use Persian in the class? (students only)

not at all 4% a little 36%

sometimes 59% a lot 1%

When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom?

	Students	Teachers
a. to explain complex grammar points	76%	29%
b. to help define some new vocabulary items	66%	37%
c. to explain difficult concepts or ideas	51%	40%
d. to practice the use of some phrases and expressions	53%	60%
e. to give instructions	18%	10%
f. to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively	2%	10%

If you think the use of Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?

Students

a. It helps me to understand the difficult concepts better.	73%
b. It helps me to understand the new vocabulary items better.	55%
c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.	13%
d. I feel less lost.	9%

Teachers

a. It aids comprehension greatly.	50%
b. It is more effective.	46%
c. It is less time-consuming.	20%

Do you think the use of Persian in the classroom helps you learn this language? (students only)

not at all 11% a little 59%

fairly much 26% a lot 4%

How often do you think Persian should be used in the classroom? (students only)

never 0% very rarely 39%

sometimes 57% fairly frequently 4%

What percentage of time do you think Persian should be used in the class? (students only)

Time Response

5% 27%

10% 25%

20% 31%

30% 15%

40% 3%

(No students answered higher than 40%.)

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