

RESEARCH ARTICLE



COMPARISON BETWEEN IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS OF DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY LEVEL REGARDING THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD USING PERSIAN IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

With consideration of the widespread use of teaching English as a second language around the world, the idea of use of the first language for teaching has attracted lots of attention and there has been many debates regarding it between different researchers. This article aims to compare the attitudes of Iranian EFL Learners of different proficiency levels about the use of the Persian in the class. The participants of this study were 60 female Iranian EFL learners who were learning English at Safir English academy (private institute) in Hamadan. They were chosen and divided into three proficiency levels of elementary, intermediate and advanced based on the placement test of this institute. For data collection, a questionnaire of the attitudes of EFL learners by Bryman, (2004) which composed of single answer and multiple choice questions was used. The findings of study indicated differences in the attitudes of participants of different levels. While a majority of elementary level students preferred to use Persian in class, the ideas of some of intermediate and advanced students were completely against them and they preferred to study in completely authentic and communicative situations in order to have more native like proficiency.

Keywords: Attitudes toward using Persian. Proficiency levels.

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INTRODUCTION

There exist two main types of policy in language teaching methodology. The first one that has traditional root and relates to the ideas of the grammar-translation method is a bilingual policy, which emphasized on the positive role of using student's first language in the classroom. With the emergence of methods like army method or direct

method, the validity of this method was under question (Sampson, 2011). Another one focused on mono-lingual policy which completely ignores or even bans the use of student's first language. The more modern methods like communicative language teaching or task based language teaching, while are not as hostile to use of the first language like direct

method, but try to decrease the use of it as much as possible (Cook, 2001)

The followers of monolingual policy mention some reasons for their claims, like the idea that there must be complete similarity in the way of learning first and a second language, and also that learners must be faced with great amount of exposure to a second language, without the interference of the first language (Weschler, 1997). Krashen (1981), for example, pointed out that providing comprehensible input in the first language leads to higher competence of learners. By considering his idea, the superiority of a second language may indicate the prohibition of the first language in the classroom (Macaro, 1997).

Halliwell and Jones (1991), mention that, an advantage of using a second language in the class is the fact that it's a realistic and normal way of communication and even if some parts of the structure or vocabulary wouldn't be familiar to students, just because, they get used to that situation of ambiguity, they won't have any problem in this regard. One of the best ways for communicating unfamiliar messages to students by teachers is miming or using of gestures that could engage students very well in the process of learning and at the same time cause the activation of their unconscious knowledge; Macdonald 1993.

Dujmović (2007), mentions that the reason of some disagreement about the use of the first language lies in the fact that students will become dependent on it, because it's easier and quicker for students to learn and they won't try to improve their own knowledge to be prepared for communication in different situations.

Although many of teaching methodologies emphasize on the monolingual policy, but, recently, there are some advocates of using the first language in the classroom, that pointed out about, even the necessity of the use of L1 in the classroom (Schweers, 1999, p6) that are known as supporters of bilingual policy.

As it was mentioned above, one of the reasons that followers of monolingual policy support it, is their idea about the similarity of the learning process of first and a second language. But, one of the main arguments that are posed against them is by (Cook, 2001), that, there exist differences in the learning process of first and a second language. According to Bley-Vroman (1990), there are five distinctions between learning first and a second language.

1. Children will lose their innate ability for learning language, when they grow up as adults

2. Children don't have any previous knowledge, when they are learning their first language, while adults take advantage of their first language
3. There is a lack of exposure to authentic language because lots of learners learn their a second language at school.
4. Children benefit from social factors like motivation, but adults won't
5. The meta cognitive abilities of children and adults are different.

Cameron (2001), also refers to the critical period hypothesis and mentions that children could learn better than adults before the age of puberty. The idea of the application of different mental activities in adults and children and also use of different parts of the

brain for learning a language was also mentioned by Kim et al.'s (1997).

Regarding the benefits of using the first language in a second language classroom, Atkinson ;1987, pointed out to three reasons:

1. Most of learners prefer to have translation in their second language classroom
2. Using of the first language helps them show their feelings and ideas
3. It's a great technique for exploiting class time

With consideration of several ideas that are mentioned for and against using the first language in the classroom, the present study aims at comparing the attitudes of EFL learners with different proficiency level, regarding the use of the first language in the classroom.

Review of Literature

Regarding the case of EFL learners' attitudes toward using the first language in the classroom, several researchers have done some works in this area like the one by Schweers (1999), who did a case study at the University of Puerto Rico on EFL Spanish learners. He wanted to investigate the validity of using L1 in EFL classrooms at a university level. The results have shown that 100 % of the teachers and 88.7 % of the students agree that their first language should be used in English classes. The reasons of students for using the first language in the class were different. High percent of them believe that the first language is necessary for explaining difficult concepts and lesser percent said that the first language helped them to feel "less lost".

In a study by Kim Anh (2010), about the attitudes of Vietnamese university teachers about using the first language in the classroom, by using of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, the results suggested the logical use of the first language

at some situations in classroom is necessary and has a positive role. The same results were found in the study of Atkinson (1987), he mentions that the use of the first language in the classroom, not only is not an obstacle in the process of learning and teaching, but also is useful and acts as a classroom resource.

About the use of the Persian in the classroom, Nazary (2008), did a study with the name of "The role of L1 in L2 acquisition: Attitudes of Iranian university students" on students of Tehran University as EFL learners. After explaining, several theories of learning a second language and supporting the ideas of bilingual policy, reached to a surprising conclusion that the participants of this study were completely against the idea of using the first language in the class.

Mahmoudi (2011), also did a study about the frequency of using Persian in English classes. The results of the study have indicated that excessive use of the Persian has bad effect on the motivation of students.

In a study by Tang (2002) on Chinese EFL learners, the results of using interviews and classroom observations have shown that nearly all the students and teachers who participated in the study had positive ideas regarding the use of their first language in the EFL classroom.

Mauro Dujmović (2007), study with the name of "The use of Croatian in the classroom" after explaining some humanistic and supportive ideas for using the first language in the classroom, finally reach to the point that English-only policy is no longer successful, and using the first language will act as a beneficial learning tool.

Al-Nofaie (2010) in a study entitled "The attitudes of teachers and students toward using Arabics in EFL classroom in Saudi public schools" analyzed the attitudes of teachers and students about the use of student's first language in EFL classe. He used a questionnaires, interviews and the classroom observations as his research tool and reach to this result that participants were interested to have their first language in the classroom for the sake of teaching grammar and new vocabularies and explaining about the process of taking exams.

Marzook M. Alshammari (2011) did a study with the name of "The use of mother tongue in Saudi EFL Classrooms". After explaining about the controversies about using or not using the first language in an EFL classe, he pointed out that the balanced and the logical use of the first language could improve the situation in the classroom and somehow it is completely vital, because it's going to help students be more successful in their comprehension.

Another study that was done at Chaoyang University in Taiwan by Huang (2006) investigated students' attitudes towards using first language in a writing class. The majority of students had positive ideas regarding the use of their first language in the classroom, but, they mention that the maximum amount of time that teachers and students should use the first language in the classroom must be twenty five percent. They added that the first language is necessary for explaining difficult concepts and for engaging students and make them familiar with the new topic under the study.

Sharma (2006), did a study that was done on the Nepali language in Nepal's secondary schools about the amount of use of the first language and attitudes of teachers and students toward it. The results of the study indicated that the main reasons for using the first language in the classroom, are explaining new item and words, guiding students through fulfilling different activities and teaching grammatical points.

In a study that was done in Japan, Saito and Ebsworth (2004) analyzed the Japanese student's attitudes toward the first language use in EFL classe. The participants of this study had positive ideas toward using the first language in the classroom. When they were asked about their ideas that whether they prefer to have native or non-native teachers, most of them mention that because, they need somebody to explain abstract and difficult grammatical parts to them, they prefer to have Japanese teachers.

To the best of my knowledge regarding the comparison between Iranian EFL Learners of different proficiency level on their attitudes toward using Persian in the classroom no work has been done yet in Iran and other countries.

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of the Iranian EFL learners with an elementary proficiency level toward using Persian in the EFL classroom?
2. What are the attitudes of the Iranian EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level toward using Persian in the EFL classroom?
3. What are the attitudes of the Iranian EFL learners with advanced proficiency level toward using Persian in the EFL classroom?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants selected for this study were 3 groups of 60 female Iranian EFL learners aged between 14- 30, who were learning English at Safir English academy (the private institute) in Hamadan. They were chosen and divided into three proficiency

levels of elementary, intermediate and advanced based on the placement test of this institute.

Instrumentation

1. Safir English academy placement test

The participants of this study had the standard placement test in the form of an interview that was done with the presence of two trained experts and an interviewer. The interview as a placement test has certain questions and criteria for assessing learners’ levels of vocabulary, grammar, and communicative abilities. In each level of proficiency, the researcher selects two classes of 10 learners and administered the questionnaire of the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward using their first language in the classroom.

2. The Questionnaire of the attitudes of EFL learners by Bryman, (2004)

A questionnaire taken from a related previous study (Bryman, 2004) was used for analyzing Iranian EFL learners’ attitudes toward using the first language in the classroom. This questionnaire composed of single answer and multiple choice questions. These questionnaires were administered by the researcher herself, that if any question come up, especially about understanding the concept by elementary students, she would be available to answer.

Procedures

After receiving the results of the placement test by the institute, the students were divided into three proficiency levels and each level was composed of two 10 member classes. After administering the questionnaire, The data were collected and the percent of each level’s response was calculated. Regarding the third and fourth questions students were allowed to tick more than one answer. The results of different levels will be shown in the following tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

Regarding the first group who were elementary learners, it should be said that even during administration of a questionnaire, they were interested to speak Persian and regularly expected to receive some feed backs from their teacher and researcher about their answers and whether the results of this questionnaire would have any effect on the process of their classes. As, it could be expected beforehand, because of their low level and their limited knowledge in English for comprehension and communicating messages, this group, were inclined too much to use Persian in their EFL classe. The following table included the percentages of elementary learners’ response to the questions of this questionnaire.

Table1. Elementary EFL learners’ attitudes toward using Persian in the classroom

1. Should Persian be used in the classroom?	Yes (100%) No (0%)
2. Do you like your teacher to use Persian in the class?	a. Not at all (0%) b. A little (15%) c. Sometimes (25%) d. A lot (60%)
3. When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom	a. To help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words) (80%) b. To practice the use of some phrases and expressions (50%) c. To explain complex grammar points (90%) d. To explain difficult concepts or ideas (70%) e. To give instructions (35%) f. To give suggestions on how to learn more effectively (20 %)
4. If you think the use of the Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?	a. It helps me to understand difficult concepts better. (75%) b. It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better. (80%) c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed. (30%) d. I feel less lost. (25%)
5. Do you think the use of the Persian in the classroom helps you learn this language?	a. No (0%) b. A little (15%) c. Fairly much (25%) d. A lot (60%)
6. How often do you think Persian should be used in the classroom?	a. Never (0%) b. Very rarely (10%) c. Sometimes (55%) d. Fairly frequently (35%)
7. What percentage of the time do you think Persian should be used in the class? Choose one.	
Time	Answer
10%	3%
20%	5%
30%	10%
40%	18%
50%	21%
60%	16%
70%	10%
80%	10%
90%	7%

As it is completely obvious from the above table, the results have shown that all of the students in elementary level are agree to use English in the classroom. The percentages of their preference for using Persian in the classroom have a range of 15 to 60 percent. When students were asked about the reasons for necessity of using Persian in the classroom, because, they were allowed to choose more than one answer most of them choose several options. Among the options, the highest percent belongs to explaining complex grammatical points in Persian. Some of the grammatical points like use of articles especially at elementary levels or some aspects of passive tense are absent in Persian. So, understanding them may be very difficult for students and they felt the necessity of extra explanation in their own language. The same is true about defining vocabularies, but because the students may experience the use of audiovisual aids for teaching the vocabulary the percent is a little less than explaining complex grammatical points in Persian. The percent of 70 is for explaining difficult concepts or ideas. May be, the reason that some of students didn't choose this option is that, with consideration of the nature of their lessons, that most of them are about familiar and everyday subjects, they didn't feel the necessity for it. These students have encountered with some new phrases and expressions that they may not know the Persian equivalents for them and 50% of them mentioned this reason for the necessity of using Persian in the classroom. Receiving instructions and learning effectively are the other options that receive student's attention.

About student's personal reasons for the necessity of using the first language, the highest percentages are for understanding vocabularies and concepts and surprisingly, and contrary to the normal expectations, the lowest percentages are for feeling more comfortable and less stressed.

The point that is interesting to mention about this table is that, the highest percentage of learners were interested to use the first language in the class, sometimes, and just.35% of learners prefer to have the first language in the classroom fairly frequently.

Second Research Question

Second research question deals with the attitudes of intermediate learners toward using Persian in the classroom. A necessary point to be mentioned about this group is the fact that usually at this level students experience some stages of inertia. They feel, their progress is intact and they won't develop any more. So usually member of this group is full of stress and tries hard to change his/her level and be

more advanced. Table 2, has shown the results of intermediate learners' attitudes toward using Persian in the classroom.

Table 2. Intermediate EFL learners' attitudes toward using Persian in the classroom

1. Should Persian be used in the classroom?	Yes (30%) No (70%)
2. Do you like your teacher to use Persian in the class?	a. Not at all (30%) b. A little (50%) c. Sometimes (20%) d. A lot (0%)
3. When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom	a. To help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words) (25%) b. To practice the use of some phrases and expressions (15%) c. To explain complex grammar points (20%) d. To explain difficult concepts or ideas (25%) e. To give instructions (0%) f. To give suggestions on how to learn more effectively (10 %)
4. If you think the use of the Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?	a. It helps me to understand difficult concepts better. (15%) b. It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better. (10%) c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed. (5%) d. I feel less lost. (15%)
5. Do you think the use of the Persian in the classroom helps you learn this language?	a. No (60%) b. A little (30%) c. Fairly much (10%) d. A lot (0%)
6. How often do you think Persian should be used in the classroom?	a. Never (30%) b. Very rarely (45%) c. Sometimes (25%) d. Fairly frequently (0%)
7. What percentage of the time do you think Persian should be used in the class? Choose one.	
Time	Answer
10%	60%
20%	20%
30%	15%
40%	5%
50%	0%
60%	0%
70%	0%
80%	0%
90%	0%

The results on table 2, show considerable differences in comparison with the table 1 that were

about elementary learners. As it was expected before hand, intermediate students have more similarity to advanced students than elementary one. They are at intermediary stage and it is possible that some of them be a false intermediate and are somehow similar to pre-intermediate level and so feel the necessity to take help from scaffolding, somehow, by means of the first language. For this reason, only 70 percent of students were completely against using of the first language in their EFL class and the other 30 percent somehow have tendency toward use of the first language but that this amount is not at all similar to elementary level. This 70 percent is divided between two options of "a little"(50 percent) and "sometimes" (20percent). Regarding the third question that asks students about the necessity of using the first language in the classroom, explaining difficult concepts or ideas and helping to define some new vocabulary items have the highest percentage of 25, which has this implication that the reason of their preference for using the first language is for the situation that they really need it and have no other way forward to tackle their misunderstandings. Explaining complex grammar points is the next option that attracts the attention of intermediate students, especially those ones that are among the false intermediate learners and feel the most necessity for using their first language. Giving suggestions on how to learn more effectively has 10 percent, which is more related to high achievers, who are interested to improve the level of their English and feel the need to receive clear suggestions about the best way to learn English. Regarding their personal idea about the necessity of using English in the classroom, understanding difficult concepts and feeling less lost had the highest percentages. A point that is interesting is related to the fact that only 5 percent of learners mentioned that, they feel the necessity of using the first language for the reason of being more comfortable.

About the effect of the Persian for learning the second language, 60 percent of learners believe that, it doesn't have any special role, but the rest of them who are 40 percent, think that it is a little beneficial (30%) or fairly much beneficial (10%).

Seventy five percent of participants, believe that the first language should never or rarely be used in the classroom. But an interesting point here is that a quarter of participants believed that sometimes the first language should be used in the class.

With consideration of the answers given to sixth question that was a little bit worrying, the results of last question is hopeful, because none of the participants were agree to use even 50 percent of

class time in using Persian and only 20 percent of students were interested to use the first language 30 or 40 percent of class time.

Third Research Question

The analysis of the last question is related to advanced group of EFL learners. It could be easily predicted that because, these students were severe and hardworking and although their major was not English, but, they have chosen to continue their learning up to high level, they should be completely against the use of the first language in the classroom. In their ideas, class should be just like a real communicative place and there shouldn't be any factor that interferes with the normal process of learning a language in an authentic situation. The following table included the percentages of advanced learners' response to the questions of this questionnaire.

Table 3.Advanced EFL learners' attitudes toward using Persian in the classroom

1. Should Persian be used in the classroom?	Yes (10%)	No (90%)
2. Do you like your teacher to use Persian in the class?	a. Not at all (90%)	b. A little (5%)
	c. Sometimes (5%)	d. A lot (0%)
3. When do you think it is necessary to use Persian in the English classroom	a. To help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words) (15%)	
	b. To practice the use of some phrases and expressions (15%)	
	c. To explain complex grammar points (10%)	
	d. To explain difficult concepts or ideas (20%)	
	e. To give instructions (0%)	
	f. To give suggestions on how to learn more effectively (0 %)	
4. If you think the use of the Persian is necessary in the classroom, why?	a. It helps me to understand difficult concepts better. (15%)	
	b. It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better. (5%)	
	c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed. (0%)	
	d. I feel less lost. (0%)	
5. Do you think the use of the Persian in the classroom helps you learn this language?	a. No (85%)	b. A little (15%)
	c. Fairly much (0%)	d. A lot (0%)
6. How often do you think Persian should be used in the classroom?	a. Never (80%)	b. Very rarely (20%)
	c. Sometimes (0%)	d. Fairly frequently (0%)

7. What percentage of the time do you think Persian should be used in the class? Choose one.

Time	Answer
10%	90%
20%	10%
30%	0%
40%	0%
50%	0%
60%	0%
70%	0%
80%	0%
90%	0%

As it is completely obvious, these results have shown the negative attitudes or even the rejection of advanced students toward the use of the Persian in a second language learning. As it was mentioned before, some of the intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced level students are so much interested to achieve native like proficiency and for this reason, they think that every kind of using the first language in the classroom could have debilitating effects and interfere the process of their mastery of a second language. They believe that the classroom situation should replicate as much as possible the authentic situation of communication in the second language. About the first question, the majority of students that is equal to 90% pointed out that they disagree with the use of the first language in the classroom. Among the remaining ten percent of participants who were agree with the use of the Persian in the classroom, 5% of them mentioned "a little" and another 5% mentioned only "sometimes", they are interested to use their first language in the classroom. May be, these small number of participants are those ones who are fussy and emphasize on understanding every details of teacher's teaching.

Explaining difficult concepts or ideas has the highest percentage of learners' agreement regarding the use of the first language in the classroom. Because of the hard nature of their lessons and most of the time, because of advanced learners' lack of knowledge regarding different varieties of topics that are posed in advanced level, these students sometimes may need some tips or guidance by the use of the first language. Defining some new vocabulary items especially regarding some abstract words, plus, practicing the use of some phrases and expressions has the second highest degree of 15%. Regarding explaining complex grammatical points, that finding their equivalent in learners' native language is very difficult and complex, attracted the attention of 10% of students. But, the other two

options were not at all interesting for learners to choose them as reasons for using the first language in the classroom, because, they were self-confident enough that they didn't feel the need for use of the first language. About, question number 3, the special point is that again, because students have high level of proficiency in advanced level, none of them mentioned the need for using the first language as a way to reduce their stress and to feel more comfortable.

Something common about the last questions of this questionnaire is the fact that as it was expected before, there is unwillingness or rejection among the advanced level students about using the first language in the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that regarding the case of using the first language in the classroom, there is no agreed upon opinion among language theorist or researchers and even the attitudes of learners of the same or different proficiency level were completely different. While there is emphasize on the monolingual policy by communicative approaches, but, of course, there can't be complete denial of the effect of the first language on facilitating learning at certain situations.

The present study was an attempt to compare the attitudes of Iranian EFL Learners of different proficiency levels about the use of the Persian in the classroom.

The findings of study indicated that, depending on their proficiency level the attitudes of different learners toward using the first language in the classroom is different. While a majority of elementary level students preferred to use Persian in the classroom, the ideas of some of intermediate and advanced students were completely against them and they preferred to study in completely authentic and communicative situations in order to have more native like proficiency. For further studies, there must be some research on the judicious use of the first language for learning a second language. Also, it would be good idea that other studies try to recognize the differences between different genders or different age range and even the family levels in their study.

Finally, it is a necessity for almost all research projects to be replicated, so that their findings are cross examined and double checked to see whether in similar situations, the same results are obtained or not (Haghighi, 2006).

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