

The Use of Persian in the EFL Classroom—The Case of English Teaching and Learning at Pre-university Level in Iran

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Abstract

Inspired by the rise of Communicative Language Teaching, some scholars have vehemently rejected any use of L1 in L2 learning classes (e.g., Atkinson, 1987) while others have advocated the use of L1 as an efficient tool to facilitate communication (e.g., Nation, 2003). However, caution has been raised against the excessive use of L1 (Nation, 2001). This study was conducted to observe classroom dynamics in terms of the quantity of use of L1 in two randomly-selected pre-university English classes in Ahvaz, Iran. The objective was to seek both students and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of L1 in L2 classes. The classes were observed and video-taped for 6 sessions and the teachers and four high-achieving/low-achieving students were interviewed. The findings showed that an excessive use of Persian could have a de-motivating effect on students. Hence, the interviewed students voiced dissatisfaction with the untimely use and domination of L1 in L2 classes.

Keywords: L1 (Persian), L2 (English), Attitudes, Students, Teachers

1. Introduction

The use of L1 in L2 classes has always been a matter of “to be or not to be.” It is controversial because different theories of L2 acquisition afford different hypotheses about the value of L1 use in L2 classes. Some theorists have advocated a monolingual approach, believing in the identity of the process of L2 and L1 learning, and arguing that maximum exposure to L2 and least exposure to L1 are very essential because interference from L1 knowledge obstructs L2 learning process (Cook, 2001; Krashen, 1981). However, some language educationists have argued against the complete elimination of L1 from L2 classes (e.g., Nation, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2000) and have reiterated that a judicious and well-planned use of L1 can yield positive results (Cook, 2001). However, the point which requires special attention is the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and students as the key players of L2 classes towards using L1.

Teachers' and learners' attitudes on use of L1 in L2 classes have been sought in different countries and contexts (as explained in detail in literature review section below). As for Iranian context, the attitudes of university students have already been investigated (Nazary, 2008); however, the attitudes of pre-university students and teachers have yet to be investigated. This paper is a small attempt in this direction: to reflect the perceptions and attitudes of both teachers and high-achieving/low-achieving students at pre-university level with regard to using L1 in English classes. The rationale behind selecting pre-university level for the purpose of this study was the crucial place of pre-university level in Iran's educational system. The pre-university program is a gap year between secondary and tertiary education, and prepares students to enter universities and higher education institutions. Therefore, the most experienced teachers usually teach at this level. Hence, students at this level could be assumed to be in a better position to provide a bird's eye view of English classrooms as they have learnt English for more than six years and under different teaching methodologies (at both junior and senior high schools).

2. Review of Relevant Literature

There are considerable studies which have been carried out to investigate students and teachers' attitudes toward the use of L1 in L2 teaching in different contexts. Schweers (1999) conducted a research on the use of Spanish (L1) in English (L2) classes at the University of Puerto Rico in order to see how frequently the teachers used L1 in their English classes. He reported that almost all of the students supported the use of L1 in English classes. The students

believed that using L1 in English classes could lead to better understanding of texts and this made students feel more comfortable, less tense and less lost. The researcher added that using L1 led to positive attitudes toward learning English and also it encouraged students to learn more English.

Tang (2002) carried out a similar study in the Chinese context. The data was collected through interviews and classroom observations. The results were to a large extent similar to those of Schweers' (1999) research in the context of Puerto Rico, but Tang's research added two more reasons for using L1 in L2 classrooms: effectiveness and being less time-consuming. The research revealed that the use of L1 in L2 classes not only doesn't hinder L2 learning but also it helps teaching and learning.

Another similar study was carried out on students and teachers' attitudes towards using Arabic (L1) in Saudi Arabia by Al-Nofaie (2010). The study showed that the students and teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in L2 classroom were positive and the students preferred L1 to be used in certain situations. Teachers emphasized the importance of L1 in their classes. However, they claimed that the untimely and excessive use of L1 should be avoided because it may hinder learning English.

Kim Anh (2010) studied the attitudes of Vietnamese university teachers towards using Vietnamese (L1) in teaching English. The data were collected through questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that judicious use of L1 is necessary in some situations in teaching English. In this research, all the participants supported the use of L1 in the classes. They stated that L1 was a part of their teaching method and could play a positive role in their classroom. Such a view of L1 is very similar to that of Atkinson seeing L1 "as a classroom resource" (Atkinson, 1987, p. 241).

As far as the use of L1 in teaching L2 in Iranian context is concerned, Nazary (2008) elicited the attitudes of students at Tehran University towards use of L1 in L2 classes. Based on the findings of this study, the author concluded that Iranian university students in an unmistakable divergence from the previous studies were reluctant to use their L1 in L2 (English) classes. This divergence prompted the researchers of the present paper to embark on a study on pre-university students. Hence, the attitudes of the teachers would be elicited as well.

This research is crystallized around the two questions below:

- 1). How is L1 treated in a typical pre-university English classroom in Iran?
- 2). What are pre-university English teachers and students' attitudes towards the use of L1 in L2 classrooms?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were randomly selected from two state pre-university schools (A&B) located in Ahvaz, Iran. Both schools were located at affluent and privileged parts of the city. Normally the most well-known teachers are selected to teach at the schools of these parts of the city. In school A, three English classrooms and in school B four English classrooms were randomly selected. Observing the classes led the researchers to conclude that six of the just-mentioned seven classes were almost the same in terms of teaching methods, however, one was different. Due to the magnitude of the size of data, the researchers randomly selected one of the six classes (Class A) to be compared with the "odd one out" (Class B). The teaching methodology employed in the two classes will be described in detail in Observations section below. Not to mention that class A had 30 and class B had 34 female students whose ages ranged from 17 to 19. The classes were taught by two teachers, holding BA degree in English teaching.

3.2 Instruments

A descriptive research methodology was employed. The two instruments used to collect data were classroom observations and interviews. Classroom observations were intended to reflect the quantity of L1 and L2 use in the classes, and the interviews were opted for as they provide the researchers with an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' perceptions, attitudes and feelings. The interviews with both teachers and students were carried out in L1 (Persian) and each interview lasted around 15 minutes. In order to ascertain the reliability of translation of interviews from Persian into English, three PhD students in TESL did and reviewed the translation and back-translation of the interviews.

3.3 Procedures

Having gone through the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, the researcher could finally get the permit from the relevant authorities in the provincial branch of ministry of Education to collect data from the designated schools. Data collection took place in the course of two months. The two classes were observed and video-taped for six sessions. Notes were taken to provide additional information on the classroom context.

For interviewing students, four students from two classes (A&B) were selected based on their mid-term scores. For each class, one high-achieving and one low-achieving student in terms of scores were chosen. The rationale for selecting students from the extreme points was to see whether they held different or similar attitudes towards using L1 in L2 classes.

In order to have the attitudes of the two teachers, an interview was conducted. All the data were recorded and transcribed verbatim for emerging themes.

4. Findings

Before going into details of the findings of the study, it is necessary to say that the researchers came across a very “surprising initiative” in English teaching in the two schools. All the teachers were following the similar procedure of ‘teaching grammar’ in one session and ‘teaching reading’ in another session of the week. A brief description of classes in either of the schools and the interviews are presented below.

4.1 Observations

4.1.1 Observation of Classroom A

Observing the class A revealed that the teacher had a lot of emphasis on reading, grammar exercises, and translation. For reading comprehension session the teacher put the self-selected new vocabulary items of each paragraph on the board along with their L1 equivalents, and the students were busy jotting them down at full speed. There was no pre-reading or group discussion. Word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence translation into L1 was the dominant practice of the class. Besides, didactic grammatical explanations on certain sentences in each paragraph were not ignored by the teacher. And, very often the translation gave way to a collective discussion on syntactic functions of the words of certain sentences.

In grammar sessions which could be hardly recognized from a Persian course, the teacher was obsessed with the translation of the words and sentences into L1. For example, the teacher wrote a sentence on the board and encouraged a collective translation of each sentence into L1. As a rule of thumb, the teacher instructed the students in Persian to deal with all the sentences by firstly translating it into L1 followed by determining the type of the sentence (e.g. active/ passive).

Of approximately 400 minutes of class time during the 6 sessions in class A, around 60% was purely Persian and the remaining 40% was allocated to reading aloud the text, reading out grammar exercises by the students and teacher as well as sporadic attention to pronunciation. The class was so monotonous; there was no fun and variety in the language activities. The teacher was the only voice; however, she had no authority during the class time. Some students were busy doing assignments for other subjects, some were chatting together. Not to mention that yawning and regular time-checks by the bored students were the most repeated segments on our videos.

4.1.2 Observation of Classroom B

This class was different from class A in terms of method of teaching. For reading comprehension session, the teacher set the scene by putting relevant questions on the topic to the students in simple English. After that, she gave the students a few minutes to do silent reading. Silent reading was followed by clarifying the meaning of difficult words asked by the students. The teacher preferred simple definition of the words in English, English synonyms, and switching to L1, in order of priority. Also, the audio-visual aids (PowerPoint slides with soft music) were extensively utilized to encourage more use of L2 and less resorting to L1. Unlike the classroom A, the teacher in this class paid a systematic attention to pronunciation of the students.

As for grammar session, the teacher put the grammatical topic of the textbook’s lesson on the board and tried to elaborate on it in L2 and sometimes in L1 by giving a few examples. She then asked the students to read out their completed exercises to the class.

Of approximately 400 minutes of class time during the 6 sessions in class B, around 25% was Persian and the remaining 75% was allocated to silent reading, definition of the words, making sentences by the students, groupwork, discussion as a class, as well as pronunciation activities.

4.2 Interviews

As for attitudes and perceptions of teachers and students, one-to-one interviews were conducted with the two teachers and four students based on the questions below.

1) How often do you use L1 in your English classes and why should teachers use Persian in these situations?

Teacher A:

I have to use L1 most of the time because students do not have enough proficiency in English and I am afraid they

cannot understand me.... The precedence of L1 over L2 has been a norm in our English classes, and learners are well accustomed to this trend.... Running classes in L2 prompts the parents and students to complain because they feel using L2 will lower the students' comprehension of the lessons' concepts which in turn adversely affects their final exam scores.... This is the situation of English teaching in our schools. It is not a utopia for English teaching and learning.

Teacher B:

I use L1 only when it is necessary because I believe in certain cases using L1 provides a non-threatening environment which is essential for L2 learners. I only use L1 in case my students are confused with my English explanations in order to help them understand more clearly. However, it is quite hard to get a correct feedback from your students, because sometimes some students do not understand you, but they pretend otherwise.... I believe the current trend of English teaching in Iranian schools will lead us nowhere, in that translation into L1 has been a ubiquitous element in our classrooms.... I am not rejecting the idea of using L1 in L2 classes; I am against the improper overuse of L1. It should be used in its right time and right place....

2) How often should teachers use Persian in English classes?

Teacher A:

I think it is more beneficial to explain or give examples in the students' L1, and it helps them understand better.... The use of L2 depends on the level and background of the learners. Once you segregate the group you can easily work out your training methodology and teach each group based on their needs, level and satisfaction. In English classes there are no criteria for screening those who are stronger in English from those who are not. Therefore, strict use of L2 is very disadvantageous to L2 learning in this case. Also, it discourages learner participation.... Under the current circumstances of English teaching in Iran I believe using L1 is an effective way of teaching L2, because the students and the families themselves are content with this trend, and you know the satisfaction of students and families is an important factor for promotion and other fringe benefits for the teachers.

Teacher B:

L1 is an undeniable part of English teaching; however, overusing it should not by any means alter the L2 nature of the classes. L1 should be used as a last-ditch effort ONLY when communication in L2 fails to happen. Some students and families sometimes pressurize me into resorting to L1 as a handy layout, however as a conscientious teacher I feel I am duty-bound to "stand and fight" for the correct principles, because professional issues should be dealt with accordingly, and emotional likes and dislikes of the families should be the last of our concerns.

Interviewing with students revealed that the all of the students were supportive of using L2 rather than L1 in their EFL classes. Should teachers use L1 in English classes? If not, why should teachers not use L1 in English classes? If yes, in what situations should teachers use L1?

The high-achieving student (Class A):

I think our teacher should speak English in the classroom because this is the only place in which we can learn and practice English.... I feel our English class is the same as our Persian literature class because teachers always speak Persian.... I personally have no interest to come to our English class in school; I feel de-motivated because our English class is very boring.... We all like to be able to speak in a foreign language such as English because it is an international language and we all need to learn it for our future.

The low-achieving student (Class A)

Our teacher prefers more to speak in Persian. She thinks we cannot understand English.... I think we know enough words and grammar, but we do not know how to use them for speaking in English.... Definitely, we are deprived of the chance of using English even in our English class because of overusing Persian. In our English classes we do not have to think or discuss in English because our teachers don't want us to do so....

The high-achieving student (Class B):

Our previous teachers were the only voices in the classroom because they always made everything for us and our only task was to swallow that ready-made mouthful.... I believe that speaking and discussing in English is very important in English classes.... Fortunately, our English class now is very active and interesting. Our teacher always encourages us to participate in class activities and express ourselves in English.... She uses different audio and visual aids in the class to add more fun to classroom activities. The moments in our current English class are so pleasurable that I wish the class would never end.

The low-achieving student (Class B):

Using Persian in English class is very helpful when we cannot understand difficult words and grammar. For instance, for grammar explanation Persian should be used more than English to compare and contrast the grammatical points in both languages....Our ex-teachers used to say everything in Persian even if they wanted to say very simple things...Sometimes I feel our teachers are right, because in Iran the English levels of the students in the same class are not the same; some of students, for instance, have private teachers or they go to English institutes. These students usually have no problem in English classes.... Using Persian is helpful for weaker students who have not had the chance of attending private institutes....Despite the fact that my English is not good, I feel our new teacher has managed to make us feel more motivated and interested to learn English.

5. Discussion

This part is supposed to provide discussion and explanation for the questions in the light of the findings presented above. The main purposes of this study were to observe the two classrooms in terms of the quantity of use of L1 as well as to reflect the attitudes and perceptions of the students and teachers towards using L1 in L2 classes. As stated before, observing the seven English classrooms led the researchers to conclude that six of the classes were following from more or less the same teaching procedures (e.g., grammar-translation domination), however one of the classes was completely different (e.g., groupwork and using audio-visual aids). Therefore, one of the six classes (Class A) was randomly picked to be compared against class B.

As for the teaching method and quantity of use of L1 in the two classes (A & B), a considerable discrepancy was observed. Our observation of class A (representing the six classes) reconfirmed the findings of the previous studies (e.g., Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004) that reading and translation which constitute the foundations of grammar translation method (GTM) are the most emphasized skills in English teaching of Iranian schools.

The variety of activities was another point of difference in the two classes. In class A language activities were following from a fixed, routine and monotonous patterns. Most of language activities were in the fixed framework of L2-L1 translation, grammar explanations in L1, providing answers to post-reading questions and the like. Teacher was the most active and the students were the most passive contributors to class activities. The passivity of the students in class A, as Dornyei (2001) asserts, could be attributed “first and foremost” to the monotony of “language tasks” (p.74). He warns that “... both teachers and students can easily turn into familiar routines. The routines, then, can easily turn into a monotonous ‘daily grind’, with the class losing its ‘edge. Monotony is intensively related to variety” (73).

However, in class B a variety of language tasks and activities were used. Audio-visual aids along with pleasant pieces of music, group/pair work, combining reading with a speaking activity in L2 and the like added a zest of variety, fun and enjoyment to classroom activities. For example, new vocabulary items were introduced to students with PowerPoint slides as well as context-supported samples. Then students were encouraged to make and provide further sentences. Maneuvering around such a diversity of language tasks and activities, as Dornyei (2001) reiterates, could guarantee the breaking of learning monotony and making teaching-learning an enjoyable experience to both teachers and students.

Interviewing with teachers and students as another source of data provided the researchers with a good opportunity to delve into their realm of attitudes and perceptions. The teacher in classroom A supported an extensive use of L1 in the context of Iranian schools, claiming that the syllabic design and content of the textbook, non-homogeneity of classes in terms of learners’ English proficiency, lack of sufficient time, satisfaction or dissatisfaction of parents with the methods that teachers apply in their classes and so and so forth have been among the factors pushing the teacher A towards the easy choice of overusing L1. However, such a stance on the use of L1 has been rejected by Ellis (1984) who argued that L1 should be used as little as possible.

Another important finding which is worth attention is the similarity of high-achieving and low-achieving students’ attitudes towards using L1 in English classes. The high-achieving and low-achieving students in both classes supported the idea that L2 should be highly prioritized in L2 classes. This comes in sharp contrast with Butzcamm’ (2003) view who says “with growing proficiency in the foreign language, the use of the mother tongue becomes largely redundant and the FL will stand on its own two feet” (p. 36). Furthermore, the findings of this study stands in contrast with some findings by other researchers in the context of other countries that L2 learners are in support of using L1 in L2 contexts (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Brooks-lewis, 2009).

On the other hand, the positive tendency of the pre-university students in this study towards L2 domination in L2 classes is further supported by Nazary’s (2008) study on a group of Tehran University’s students. His study found that Iranian university students are reluctant to use L1 in L2 classes on the grounds that any minute of using L1 will diminish a minute of their exposure to L2. Similarly, the participants of this study highlighted that in the context of English learning in Iran where students are solely exposed to L2 in English classes, L1 should be used as little as

possible.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that the pre-university students of different proficiency levels (high-achieving & low-achieving) were supportive of L2 domination in their English classes and were critical of an excessive use of L1 in the context of Iranian schools. The attitudinal tendency of the participants in this study proved different from the perceptions of participants in other studies carried out in other contexts. However, the results of this study should not be construed as prescriptive, because as Ellis (2008) pointed out use of L1 in L2 classes is dependent on the “instructional context” (p.801). For example, Auerbach (1993) made a compelling case for the use of the learners’ L1 in ESL classrooms in majority-language contexts (such as the USA), but Ellis (2008) contends that the situation is very different in foreign language contexts where learners’ only source exposure to the L2 may be classroom.

The relationship between the teachers’ attitudes and their classroom practice is another point for conclusion. The traces of teachers’ attitudinal tendency was clearly discernible in their teaching in practice, and this goes along with Richards’ (1982) viewpoint that teachers’ classroom practices could be viewed as reflections of their beliefs and perceptions about the nature of language and how language is learnt.

Last but not least, the study could be another reconfirmation for the determining role of a teacher in a classroom. As far as the present study is concerned, despite teacher A’s blaming ‘other’ factors diminishing her effectiveness, the performance of teacher B who was teaching under more or less the same conditions indicated that how a teacher could effectively utilize the least to the best of the advantage.

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