

## Teacher's Use of First Language in EFL Classrooms

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### **Abstract**

There has been always a debate on the role of first language in language pedagogy. The present study aimed to find out how teachers view first language use in language classrooms. To do this, forty teachers, half of them from Iran and the other twenty from other countries, were asked to fulfill an interview guide to analyze their experiences of using the first language in EFL classrooms. Regarding teachers' perception of using mother tongue, it turned out that instead of being ignored, teachers believe that first language should carefully be used to get more benefits in EFL teaching.

**Keywords:** foreign language learning, learning English, first language, teachers' perception

### **INTRODUCTION**

As both language teachers and learners have not been certain about the role of first language on language learning and teaching process, most language educators are completely against the use of native language in language classrooms. However, the other teachers and mostly students hold a different opinion on this issue. Moreover, they considered it a supportive way and got benefits from it in their language learning and teaching classrooms. On the basis of this matter, the role of source language on the target language has been discussed in functions of language learning methodologies. Furthermore, a number of recent studies have set a trend in using mother tongue in language pedagogy.

By making use of Grammar Translation Method in language pedagogy, after having studied a language for a long time, language learners were unable to speak fluently. As a result, the concept of mother language use in language process was dismissed as communicative and practical. It was also seen as a fruitless, difficult, and irrelevant matter (Duff, 1994). It has become a popular belief among teachers that the use of mother tongue prevents the acquisition of a new language (Malmkjar, 1998). But, with the changing of importance and also the quality of language classes being learner-centered language teaching, what supports the learners in their own method of learning has been an asset. Based on this fact, researchers have attempted to lighten the load of language

learning, and have investigated what is helpful for learners to reach their learning goals in the most economical way. Among them, the use of class first language as well as its place in language pedagogy has been a debatable topic.

Although, most language educators and teachers are completely against the use of source language in language classrooms, nowadays, this perspective is changing and more and more professionals have started to believe in the facilitating role of the first language (L1) in the second and foreign language classroom (Liao, 2006; Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007; Cook, 2010). Further, teachers and, in a broad way, students have considered mother language a supportive strategy and got benefits from it. It was also emphasized to have a view of seeing learners' mother tongue as a valuable resource to make up for their limitations in the process of L2 learning (Corder, 1981). So, the learners have often set a trend in using first language as a learning means to reach their goals in comprehending, remembering as well as producing their foreign or second language whether their teachers discourage them or not.

No matter how good the students are at comprehending authentic reading or listening materials, in language learning process, mostly learners translate from one language into another mentally and vice versa. This fact makes EFL teachers give attention to the importance of translation or to the use of first language in language classrooms (Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007).

The present study investigated English language teachers with practical experience in EFL teaching. The goal was mostly to detect teachers' points of view of first language use in language classes. Another main matter was to assist the teachers to give attention to the way they use native language and to get the possible benefits of using its strategies in English teaching process. With regard to these goals, the study tried to seek an answer to the following question: What are the teachers' perspectives on the use of first language in their language teaching classes?

### **The History of First Language in ELT Methodologies**

If we consider the history of teaching and learning a language as a second and a foreign language, it may be quite beneficial to make a mention of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), for there can be no doubt that the first step to activate mother tongue in ELT classes is to consider the role of GTM in pedagogical methodologies. In fact, GTM was first known in the United States as the Prussian Method, derived from the classical method of teaching Greek and Latin. The goal of GTM was to help students read literature and translate sentences and texts word for word with the help of their native tongue. In addition, words were taught through bilingual word lists, and grammar items were:

“graded for difficulty and presented a few at a time, starting with the easiest and most important.....each unit or lesson involves a few new rules, which are first explained to the students in their own language, learned and committed to memory” (Cook, 2010, p. 10).

While being able to read literature was the main focus of a traditional language learning classroom in which GTM was used, comprehension of the text was quite important. Moreover, in that class, the focus was on accuracy in language use rather than fluency or spoken communication in language.

“What the critics of GTM have pointed to is not difficult to guess. In their view it is exclusively focused upon grammatical accuracy with no attention to fluency, moreover exclusively on writing with no practice of speech. It uses isolated invented sentences rather than authentic connected texts. It teaches knowledge about a language rather than an ability to use it, and generally it has been claimed unnatural, authoritarian and dull. It is easy to imagine the frustration of students faced with an explanation, particularly if they are eager to use the language in real spoken communication, perhaps on a visit to a country where the language is spoken”. (Cook, 2010, p. 14)

Thanks to this, immediately after World War I, a group of phoneticians and linguists with experience of teaching called Reform Movement formulated their own aim to abandon the use of mother tongue in language teaching process. Their main focus was the on spoken language, language oral skills and the importance of spoken language (Cook, 2010). Although, the Reform Movement was to oppose native language use in language pedagogy, in their language classroom, the teachers were allowed to make use of mother tongue in new words explanations and also new grammar points descriptions (Howatt, 1984).

Then, in 1899, Henry Sweet published a book called Practical Study of Languages. A chapter of this book was concerning first language use. In that book, he was in favor of using mother tongue as he says that “we translate the foreign words and phrases into our language because this is the most convenient at the same time the most efficient guide to their meaning” (Sweet, 1964, p. 201). After that, the Reform Movement formulated another idea for adult language learners, such as those adults who immigrated to the USA, and those who traded and toured in Europe. Both of these groups needed their own fast new language learning to meet their basic needs in a new country or to do their own business (Cook, 2010).

Regarding this issue, private language schools were founded. The Berlitz Schools were prominent among this new form of language schools, and their way of teaching was called Berlitz Method in use of learners’ mother tongue was prohibited. They just advocated the speaking skill and all teachers were the native speakers of the target language. In addition, their classrooms were army-like ones, in which the teachers’ performance was monitored through using microphones to repress any use of learners’ own language. Finally the purpose of these classes led to a strong and coherent new program in language teaching named the Direct Method which was an obvious response to Grammar Translation Method.

The coming of Direct or Natural Method was regarded as a revolution in language teaching. The only language used in those classes was the target language and all teachers and learners avoided using the learners' native language. In such a kind of managing classroom, although, classroom realia and objects were used to accelerate the speed of language learning, mostly, the explanation of abstract terms and complicated grammatical words remained as a difficult job (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

At the end of World War II, the American Army Method was expanded to train the military personnel, in which attempts were made to teach the new language directly, without any use of mother tongue in language pedagogy. After that, another method called suggestopedia (Lozano, 1978) appeared with the aim of reducing the students' stress during the language learning. The next technique was Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977) in which learning was through taking action without speaking. In this form of language teaching, it was seen a strong opposition to using first language in ELT.

Then, community language learning (Curran, 1976) was notable. For Curran, whole person learning process and trusting relationship were important. Regarding the language learning activities, the use of learners' mother tongue was allowed in CLL classroom (Cook, 2010, p. 24). The main following approach was Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in which the main focus was on communicative activities, and the role of learners' native language was restricted. For them, English learning was just through English, and thinking in English rather than translating it into their mother tongue (Willis, 1981).

### **Teachers' perceptions of using first language in second language pedagogy**

In language pedagogy, teachers' views of using learners' mother tongue in teaching foreign language have been another interaction. Teachers, instructors, educators and university professors know, whether they like it or not, language learners indirectly and unconsciously make use of their own language while learning a language. It was stated that a child is cognizant of his bilinguality (Fisiak, 1981). He also mentioned, while learning a language, language learners freely switches from one language into another freely, which was named "natural translation", i.e., translation which is mostly done by people without working on translation. Based upon what the other studies have worked on mother language use, it was clear that from the earliest stages of bilingualism, the two languages are combined, in which the two languages supplement each other. Hence, ignoring mother tongue interferences in EFL process is almost impossible (Marton, 1977).

Teachers were inspired to use learners' mother tongue in their language classrooms to make it more dynamic, help learners feel a sense of security and also confirm their experiences (Schweers, 1999). While some ELT educators may confirm the role of first language as an essential manner to check if the students comprehend materials, some other teachers may totally ignore the use of learners' own language in their language classes. Making use of learners' mother tongue in language pedagogy is an issue most

language teachers have a view, but some often, these viewpoints are not in a line of getting benefit of first language (Malmkjar, 1998).

### **First language and Teaching**

Based upon the shortcomings of grammar translation method, it has been seen as an unsatisfactory method in the history of the pedagogical methodologies. As a result, this negative attitude towards GTM has made many teachers feel ill at ease with mother language use, and the word translation has been considered a pointless matter in this history. Moreover, many language teachers often ignore the use of first language in their language learning classrooms. As a result “the issue of the use of learners’ mother tongue in language teaching is one on which most language teachers have a view” (Malmkjær, 1998).

But, using translation activities doesn’t have to mean using that kind of method. Furthermore, one cannot find a reason why first language should not play a role in modern language pedagogy. It can be interesting to say that during late 1980s, it was mentioned that “in modified form it (GTM) resumes to be widely used in some parts of the world today and is still widely practiced” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

In recent years, since, there is no valid database to prove the monolingual way as the best in teaching and learning a new language, it is believed that the use of learners’ mother tongue can be considered a pedagogical instrument by teachers. Further, first language has been used by EFL learners to facilitate and accelerate language learning for centuries (Liao, 2006; Cook, 2010). Nevertheless, language learners’ use of their own language seems inconsistent with their teachers’ beliefs.

### **THIS STUDY**

The nature of first language as an important factor as well as its function in the process of second or foreign language pedagogy was often misunderstood. The present study intended to investigate and analyze the language teachers’ perceptions of using mother tongue in their language teaching classes. The most important matter in investigation of the study was to make a shift in attitudes towards first language and a bad name of its association with a traditional language pedagogy method which is GTM. It hopefully makes them aware of various learning strategies involving learners’ mother tongue and to get the possible benefits of using L1 strategies in English teaching. As a result, the challenging problem was to consider if the use of learners’ mother tongue in language teaching as a facilitating or a debilitating matter.

### **METHOD**

#### **Participants**

The participants for the study were two groups of teachers: twenty at two language schools in Iran and twenty cooperating via the internet. These teachers were mostly those

of the advanced level classes and they had experienced all different levels of language learning.

## **Instruments**

This study made use of the following materials for data collection.

### ***Interview Guide for teachers***

Since the study aimed to see how first language is beneficial in the process of new language learning, the researcher prepared an interview guide for the teachers in order to find out the teachers' perceptions of learners' mother tongue in their language learning classes (see the appendix). The interview guide material was firstly borrowed from the internet and modified by the researcher. It dealt with teachers' experiences in different levels of English classes.

## **Procedures**

Twenty teachers were asked to fill out an interview guide at two institutes. It took about 7 weeks. In addition, meanwhile, the researcher gathered 20 teachers' replies to the interview guide questions on the internet. Then, the analysis of the interview data involved organizing a narrative description of the phenomenon, and classifying the data.

## **RESULTS**

### **Analysis of the teachers' interview guide**

Dealing with mother tongue is an issue most teachers have to face around the world in EFL and ESL classes. No matter what nationality they are, mother tongue is always there interfering in their lessons. The study aimed to find out the teachers' perceptions of L1 in their language teaching experiences. The following results are what the researcher came up with, after collecting data from two groups of teachers. Each is explained separately.

#### ***Selected teachers***

The data gathered from the teachers show that the use of class mother tongue is somehow a tool in language learning process. Considering the answers to the questions such as "should English teachers use L1 in the L2 classrooms?", or "how much of our students' mother tongue should be used when teaching them a second language?" it was revealed that all teachers thought of first language as the end solution to the language learning process. But the issue all the teachers of the study agreed on was condition and situation in which mother tongue can play its best role. In other words, what seemed to be a serious and important matter to all teachers was the amount and the occasions of using learners' mother tongue. What follows is to highlight this subject.

- The students think that it is very difficult for them to learn. So I think we should use English in class as much as possible. It is not only practices for the

students listening, but also improves their oral English. As an English teacher, we could try to use English. Of course when you deal with some difficult Grammar, You can use L1 to explain it.

- In some situations, there are some points that cannot be clear through English words or explanations. So, the teacher resorts to the students' mother tongue to facilitate learning process. This also can help save time during the lesson and work better on more beneficial matters of the lesson.
- Sometimes, we have to use the mother language inside the classroom, for example, when you try to teach different types of trees or flowers. But teachers should try to get their students' agreement that overuse of their own language deprives them from the chance to learn English. So the best answer is to speak in English as much as you can.
- I'm not against using mother tongue but it must be used judiciously.
- From my experiences I can tell that it is sometimes necessary for low levels but there is a danger that students get used to it and they expect you to use it whenever they have a difficulty. I can say that in a way using mother tongue may make our students stop challenging themselves. On the other hand, most of the time, I use their mother tongue to do some translation with them. I give them Persian sentences and they translate them into English to practice new vocabulary or grammar. Sometimes I do this as a competition between two groups which makes it more enjoyable.

On the basis of their statements, some teachers recommend using synonyms or antonyms in English to avoid using mother tongue which is also a very useful method, but they concluded that there comes time when teachers are at their wits' end and whatever they explain the learner doesn't get the meaning. For there are no real synonyms in English language and synonyms have near but not exact meaning of the same word. Here the teacher's role, his vast knowledge and experience in teaching English and finally suitable materials chosen for the learner can be very useful. Some English teachers allow their students to use a bilingual dictionary when they can't convey the meaning in English but it should be the last choice, only for jargons and expressions not used or found in mother tongue.

### ***Teachers on the Internet***

Most teachers agreed on the matter for using first language by asking them "How to deal with the mother tongue in an English Class?" the following statements can confirm the claimed sentence.

- I am sure that the students' mother tongue is a supporting factor in EFL whether in language practice classes or in teaching a particular subject. I do resort to it occasionally and I know that this helps my students in following my instruction and in learning.

- I work at a university where using the mother tongue is forbidden but most of us use our mother tongue time to time as we feel the necessity of it.
- The mother tongue can never be ignored in EFL, in which a single extra term in the students' mother tongue may throw a lot of light on any question and accelerate learning.
- I agree with our colleagues on this matter for using mother tongue which is sometimes really necessary, especially when we do not have the suitable equivalent of the English words.

Furthermore, all teachers asserted that the use of learners' mother tongue in their classes should be done cautiously. Additionally, they mentioned that teachers should be trying to make use of other better facilitators for their lessons. For they know there will be always a solution at the end. They said that:

- It's not prohibited to use mother tongue language in class while dealing with English teaching but it should be the last means. Because it's better to use visual aids, flash cards or anything else that reduces the difficulties, and as teachers we can accept learners' mother tongue use.
- I firmly believe that you should use L1 as little as possible. Once students know that you speak their mother tongue they expect to speak to you in L1 when with a little effort they can use English. With very young students it is still possible to use very little L1. They learn much quicker.

## **DISCUSSION**

The finding of the study included the teachers' views regarding the topic of the study. According to the teachers' responses, in fact, using mother tongue in the ELT class is not a sin; if it helps the teachers make their students understand better.

The finding of the present study is consistent with Liao' (2006) result. He stated some foreign language educators may consider translation as an important way to ensure students' comprehension and important writing exercises. The result also supports Schweers' (1999) words that encouraged teachers to use L1 in their classes to influence classroom dynamic, offer a sense of security and confirm the learners' experiences.

The findings of the present study are consistent with Prodromou (2002) point of view who found that translation use was a helping way in learning the new language. In addition, mother tongue in the classroom was to enhance the quality of interaction and it would not be restricted or banned in the classroom language process.

The result also supports the finding of Mugla and Seedhouse (2005). They came up with the fact that teachers made use of first language when the students were not able to answer a question, when they wanted to explain the grammatical points, or when they wanted to translate an item in one language into another.



The results revealed that all teachers thought of mother language as the end solution to the language learning process. It meant that the amount and the occasions to use looked important. In the eye of the teachers, using native class at the starting levels saved the time, and also removed unnecessary worries about language learning in Iranian EFL classes.

Conducting all the classroom activities in mother tongue all the time doesn't seem justifiable to the students who are learning English. The teachers thought the use of Mother tongue should be only when it is a dire necessity, and it should be the last means. The mother tongue should be used more often during the beginner or elementary stage. However as the student progresses on to the lower intermediate level the use of the mother tongue should be reduced and dropped completely by the intermediate and upper intermediate level.

## **CONCLUSION**

One of the most notable issues in language pedagogy is how educators deal with the use of mother tongue in language learning classrooms. The issue of whether or not to use L1 in L2 classroom is very complex and teachers have different attitudes towards this issue. In general, while dealing with English teaching, some language teachers consider first language a beneficial means in language learning process; it's prohibited to use L1 or discourage the use of learners' mother tongue in the classroom by other educators.

From the turn of the twentieth century, many views on language teaching have been not to use the native language in language learning process. While this belief has made many teachers feel ill at ease with L1 use, in recent studies teachers have believed in the helping role of the L1 in language learning process. Considering the teachers' perceptions on this matter in the present study, it was revealed that almost all the teachers agreed on using the first language, but it depended upon the occasions the use of class mother tongue could take place.

Besides, the amount of the native language that students need in each class seemed important, and depends on their proficiency and linguistic situations. They thought of mother tongue not as a sin but as a medicine which, in the right dose, the class can get the maximum benefit. Further, it can also be harmful in an injudicious way of use. In other words, it can help the teachers remove the students unnecessary worries, build their confidence, and also provide a quick and accurate translation of an English word that might take several minutes for the teacher to explain and even then there would be no guarantee that the explanation had been understood correctly mostly at the beginning levels.

In sum, instead of being ignored, first language should consciously be used when it is a dire necessity. From the teachers' point of views, the mother tongue should be used more during the beginner or elementary stage, as the end solution in learning process, and

should be reduced and dropped completely as the learners' proficiency improves to a higher level.

The findings of the study can inform the pedagogy of foreign language education. Moreover, the findings can be applied to construct a better learning condition in language learning classes, not only in universities and schools but also in language schools. Teachers might suggest translation more for some learners than others, and also help students raise their awareness about the merits and demerits of using translation. Furthermore, educators might encourage the learners' perspectives of translation as an effective and efficient strategy but to use it with caution. On the basis of the role of translation, it can be suggested that Teachers might not need to ban students' use of their native language. Besides, they could be more aware of the cases in which translation could be beneficial to develop English language learning.

All in all, the number of teachers participated in this study was a small sample. If the study was done on different individuals in the other parts of country with different language pedagogical methods and syllabuses, and also in large area of the world with different native languages, it would help to have a better deduction in order to get the findings into practice. It was revealed that the use of L1 in EFL pedagogy is beneficial, but there was another limitation on. Although it was realized that translation would encourage the students and make learning easier, the exact amount of the students' mother tongue to be used while teaching a new language is not really clarified in the study.

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## APPENDIX

**Do teachers use students' mother tongue in their EFL classes in Iran? If so, how and when? To clear the subject, please answer the following questions.**

1. As an English teacher do you use your students' first language (L1) in the classroom? (Should English teachers use L1 in the L2 classrooms?)
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in the L2 (target language) classroom?
3. "A non-threatening environment is essential for L2 learners to learn the target language effectively and so L1 can be used by the teacher to some extent."
4. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
5. How do you yourself integrate translation in existing courses? ( if you use)
6. Do your students (Iranian EFL learners) have positive or negative beliefs about using translation in learning English?
7. How much of our students' mother tongue should be used when teaching them a second language?
8. Using translation in EFL classes can motivate students to preceed those classes. What is your opinion?
9. Using translation in EFL classes can help students come over their anxious of learning a second language. What is your opinion?
10. What proficiency level and age can benefit most from using translation? Why?
11. What language skills do you feel can be strengthened the most from using translation? Why? (Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing)