



Mother Tongue Use in Young Iranian EFL Learners' Classroom: Helpful Scaffold or Debilitating Crutch?

Yasser Aminifard

Islamic Azad University, Dehdasht branch, Iran

Saeed Mehrpour

Department of English, Shiraz University, Iran

ABSTRACT

Despite vociferous calls for judicious use of learners' mother tongue over the past few decades, deciding on the right amount has still remained a challenge for many teachers. This article reports on the results of a survey drawing upon the views of 110 Iranian EFL teachers about eight perceived functions of L1 (Persian) in young English learners' classroom. In order to triangulate the survey results, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. The findings depicted that the teachers heavily relied on Persian in all situations except assessing the learners. Also, the main themes of the interviews suggest that teachers had better provide young learners with ample L2 input in order to help them construct desirable bilingual identities. Overall, the conclusion calls for prudent use of mother tongue with young English learners.

INTRODUCTION

Almost four years ago I enrolled my daughter in one of the well-known English institutes of our city. I remember once I was waiting for her behind the class door, I overheard the teacher having children repeat several sentences parrot-fashion unremittingly. It was just the tip of the iceberg: the teacher relied heavily on children's L1 as if it were a Persian class not an English! The exercise became so monotonous that almost all children stopped repeating after the teacher and began chatting with each other in Persian instead. Disenchanted with that excessive dose of Persian, I finally took her out of that institute and I myself have been teaching her since then (*first author*).

Such anecdotes of parents' dissatisfaction with undue use of L1 in their children's English class are not uncommon these days. With the value of bilingualism and the recent age drop in learning English across the world, parents spend considerable effort and money in ensuring that their children have ample opportunities to engage with the language (De Wolf, Smit & Lowie, 2017). Therefore, they are likely to complain if they notice lack of English input in their children's classes.

Banning students' mother tongue was once regarded as a guaranteed path to success in second language teaching and learning. With the advent of the direct method and subsequently audiolingual method, it became mandatory for teachers to avoid resorting to students' L1 at all cost, the assumption being that a new language is best taught and learned with the exclusive use of the L2 (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The so-called English Only policy, however, wore

thin in the second half of the twentieth century as even the most steadfast proponents of communicative language teaching approach agreed to some healthy doses of L1 in L2 classes (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Likewise, Hall and Cook (2013) tacitly disapproved of the strict prohibition of students' mother tongue in English classes, acknowledging that what has been fashionable in ELT theory and literature does not necessarily reflect what actually happens in classrooms around the world.

Although teachers have been sometimes reported to feel guilty about using L1, it would be naive to deny its potential use in contexts where the teacher and students share the same L1 (Harmer, 2007; Jenkins, 2010). As Lee (2013) nicely puts it, L1 is a valuable resource- a linguistic *Swiss pocketknife* that performs several useful purposes ranging from classroom management, giving instructions, to maintaining a good relationship with students. Similarly, Cook (2016) recommended that teachers use students' L1 to explain grammar, organize tasks, discipline students, and implement tests. Other commentators (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Meiring & Norman, 2002) also believe that using students' L1 could create a positive affective environment for learning and helps students feel safe in the English classroom.

The benefits of L1 use in L2 class have been well established in the literature (Atkinson, 1993; Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Macaro, 2009; Mahboob & Lin, 2018). For instance, Carless's (2007) interviews with high school English teachers in Hong Kong revealed that code-switching was mainly employed to express meaning, identity, and humor. Norman (2008), comparing Japanese EFL university students' attitudes toward L1 use, found that beginning-level students preferred more L1 than their advanced counterparts. He further evidenced that the majority of beginners favored a teacher who knows their L1, while many among the advanced students preferred a native English-speaking teacher. Exploring teachers and parents' views about using L1 (Persian) in English classes, Mohebbi and Alavi (2014) found that the majority of teachers expressed strong satisfaction with using Persian for teaching new vocabulary, explaining grammar, managing the class, saving time in lengthy tasks, and providing feedback.

On the other hand, too much reliance on students' mother tongue is believed to deprive them of the opportunity to improve their communication skills in English (Ellis and Shintani, 2013; Harmer, 2007). Jenkins (2010) reported infamous prohibition of students' L1 in Saudi Arabian EFL classes. He continues, "...from the initial day in English class, students learn that Arabic is not welcomed. In fact, learners are even rewarded or penalized based on their usage of the L1 as the use of L1 is associated with negative classroom behavior" (p. 459). In a similar vein, Yaqubi and Pouromid (2013) found that both teachers and parents showed their disapproval of too much L1 (Persian) use in English classes of the institutes. Even some parents emphasized that they would change their children's institute in case of the continuation of excessive L1 use.

To ameliorate these extreme viewpoints, there have been vociferous calls to strike a balance between L1 and L2 use in recent years. The need for the optimal use of L1 has been eloquently expressed by Butzkamm (2003). He believes that, "the L1 launches the pupils' canoes into the foreign-language current, which then grabs hold of them and carries them safely downstream" (p. 32). The aim, therefore, is not to open the floodgates of L1 use but to use it in a principled way by developing deliberate tactics chosen to maximize learning opportunities (Cameron, 2001). This concern has been expressed by Shin and Grandall (2014) as they remind teachers of young EFL learners that their goal is to create an English-speaking environment. They also highlighted that it

is wise to use students' native language only as a resource to make a very difficult expression understood quickly or to explain instructions for an activity. Elsewhere, Shin stated that, "every fairytale starts with *once upon a time*, which would be almost impossible to explain in English to beginner-level students. After the teacher quickly translates a difficult expression like that in L1, students will recognize the expression in English every time it comes up in a story" (Shin, 2006, p. 6).

Carless (2008) believes that "appraising what is a reasonable amount rather than too much mother tongue use represents a difficult teacher judgment" (p. 334). This decision is even more challenging with young English learners because the teacher has to rely on L1 now and then due to children's initially poor command of the target language. Therefore, he or she has to decide on the spur of the moment how much L1 benefits the young learners. Perhaps this is the main reason that the success of young English learners' classroom is, to a great extent, contingent on the teacher's expertise (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2013). Nearly all the available research on the role of L1 in L2 classes has targeted learners beyond an elementary level of language proficiency (e.g. Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Mahboob & Lin, 2018; Mahmoudi & Yazdi Amirkhiz, 2011; Schweers, 1999; Zacharias, 2004). The present study, therefore, aimed to address this gap by investigating Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of using L1 (Persian) in young English learners' classroom. With this in mind, the study aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. Which functions of L1 use are more frequently employed by Iranian EFL teachers?
2. What are the teachers' opinions about using L1 in young Iranian EFL learners' classroom?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study included 110 female EFL teachers of young learners in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, Iran. Only female teachers were selected for this study because they account for a large proportion of teachers of young English learners in Iran. Their age ranged from 22 to 40. The teachers had either BA or MA in TEFL. They all taught learners ranging in age from 5 to 11. The classes they were teaching were not large in size, each containing between 8 to 12 learners. Snowball sampling was used to choose the participants because they lived in different cities.

Instruments

Two sets of instruments were used in this study, namely a short survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey, which was mainly adapted from Hall and Cook (2013) consisted of eight perceived functions of L1 in English classes. The teachers were asked to give their opinions on the frequency with which they switched to Persian in those situations. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted in order to delve into the teachers' perspectives on using Persian in young learners' classes.

Procedure

A "principled eclectic" (Riazi & Candlin, 2014) research design was implemented in this study. Dornyei (2007) believes that the main attraction of mixed-methods design is that it has a unique potential to produce valid and reliable outcomes through the convergence and corroboration of the

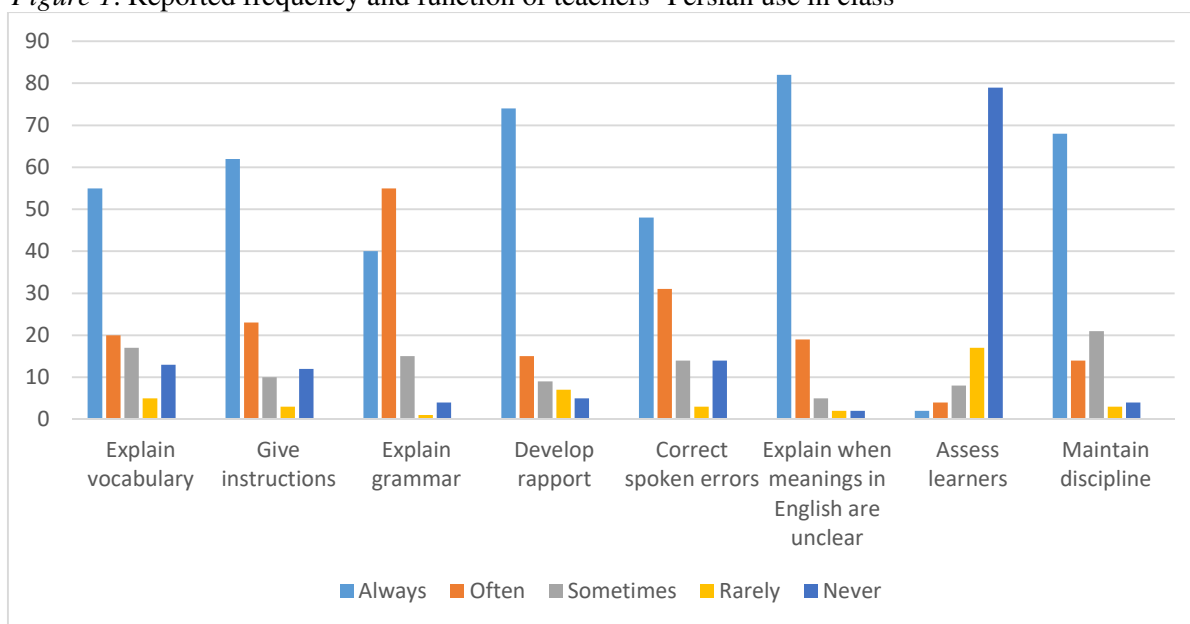
findings. He further argues that a mixed-methods design allows the researchers to add more depth to quantitative data, thereby “putting flesh on the bone” (p. 45).

First, 110 EFL teachers completed the survey on eight perceived functions of Persian in young learners’ classroom. Then, in order to shed more light on the results of the survey, some of the teachers, based on purposive sampling, were interviewed till data saturation was reached. Each interview took about half an hour and the teachers sometimes code-switched into Persian so that they could express their opinions easily. To further triangulate the data, one of the researchers observed some of the classes taught by the participants.

RESULTS

Teachers’ attitudes towards L1 use have been depicted in terms of frequency data. A cursory look at the data shows that teachers noticeably leaned towards young learners’ L1 (Persian) in almost all situations. The results, in general, resonate with Mohebbi and Alavi’s (2014) in which Persian was mainly used for teaching grammar, providing feedback, and managing the class. As can be seen below, the teachers mainly used Persian to explain concepts when the meaning in English was not clear. This substantiates Hall and Cook’s (2013) findings that the majority of NNESTs across the globe uniformly preferred to use students’ mother tongue mainly for clarification purposes. The teachers’ marked tendency to use Persian is also in line with the assertions made by the participants in Carless’s (2008), who noted that the main function of their code-switching was for expressing meaning. The results also parallel Cook’s (2002) explicit support for L1 use in that he believes language learners are aiming to become competent L2 users and not native speakers and that competent language users code-switch in their daily practice. He further maintained that teachers’ timely use of students’ mother tongue can help students learn efficiently and prepare them for the outside world. Similarly, Canagarajah (2013), advocating translanguaging in L2 classes, argues that separating languages is neither natural nor desirable as most people are bilingual in the outside world and draw on two or more languages in their daily interactions.

Figure 1. Reported frequency and function of teachers’ Persian use in class



The teachers also increasingly relied on young learners' L1 to explain vocabulary, give instructions, explain grammar, and correct spoken errors. One of the teachers noted that: "When I share the same language with my students, why shouldn't I use it? When I feel that my explanation in English simply obfuscates the issue, I immediately switch to Persian". She continued:

"One session the lesson was about fruits and vegetables. I tried hard to use only English to teach the word lettuce. But after ten minutes, they mentioned almost all vegetables except the one I described. Then I didn't hesitate to use Persian to tell them the meaning of lettuce."

Likewise, another teacher believed that using Persian saved their time. She said:

"... since young learners have poor command of English, I try to teach grammar with simple examples in Persian so that they could understand L2 structures more easily. I think when I use only English to teach grammar, they get tired and stop listening to me."

This mirrors Jenkins's (2010) opposition to the exclusive target language use in low-level EFL classes. He believed that the English-only policy in the class presents a significant obstacle. This also resembles Copland and Ni's (2019) opinion that insisting on using L2 with (very) young learners particularly when the children and the teacher all share another language is challenging. However, Bland (2015), a strong advocate of English-only policy, believes that exposing young learners to English poems on a regular basis and engaging them in cognitive plays with specific grammatical points included in them can lead to acquisition of grammatical categories as templates for future language use.

Interestingly, a high percentage of teachers (75%) contended that they used Persian to establish rapport with the young learners. Several teachers emphasized the need for using Persian in order to make children feel at ease and to motivate them to learn. This emotional advantage of L1 is in line with Dornyei's (2001), who believed that forcing low-level English learners to abandon their mother tongue from the very beginning when they need its supportive role runs the risk of causing students to lose interest and become demotivated. Macaro and Lee (2013) also found that young learners felt less comfortable in an only-English class. Interestingly, Copland and Yonetsugi (2016) acknowledged that newly arrived NESTs in an EFL context mostly fail to engage and motivate young learners because they are unlikely to know the children's L1.

When asked about the role of L1 in giving instructions to young learners, the majority of the teachers believed that using English to tell young learners about their homework was simply futile. One of the teachers highlighted this point by the following anecdote:

Once at the end of the class I told children in very simple English using pictures of the book about what they were supposed to do at home for the next week. They were nodding their heads while I was explaining, so I thought they had understood the instructions. However, a few days later they came to the class all painted the pictures in the workbook instead of writing a paragraph about themselves!

This aligns with Shin and Crandall's (2014) argument that, if instructions for an activity is beyond students' level of proficiency, the teacher should not hesitate to use L1.

Despite teachers' tendency to code-switch in almost all situations, the majority of them (78%) were of the opinion that using Persian to assess young learners is not a good idea at all. The teachers believed that learners have very little exposure to English outside the class, and if they indulge them in Persian in the classroom as well, there will literally be slim chance for them to learn English. Here, the teachers' concern was consistent with Littlewood and Yu's (2011) espousal of maximal use of the target language in EFL contexts, pointing out that for most students the classroom is the only opportunity for exposure to the language. Interestingly, in sharp contrast with the frequency data above, a number of teachers vehemently expressed the need for more English in their classes. One of them expressed her guilty feeling due to excessive use of Persian in her class as follows:

Every time I use Persian too much I feel like I have done something bad! They are here to learn how to communicate in English not just do some drills and leave. At the end of each session their parents come to me and enthusiastically ask about their kids' progress. So I feel very happy when I let them hear more English and prompt them to speak English in class. Some of them might want to become successful doctors abroad, continue their education overseas or travel the world and interact with foreigners, so if the class is run through Persian they can't be successful bilinguals.

The above quote evokes Hall and Cook's (2012) opinion that in using L1, teachers should consider young learners' imagined identities in a multilingual world.

Finally, not unlike other situations, many teachers reported that they use Persian to manage young learners' classroom mainly because of children's recurrent chatting and misbehavior. The teachers believed that using Persian at least in the first few months of the instruction could save them substantial time to be spent on the main lesson activities. However, Bland (2015) urged teachers to resist the temptation of L1 when organizing and managing young learners' classroom. She asserted that management situations simply require formulaic language which could be taught to children from the very beginning to avoid resorting to L1.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reaffirmed that it is no longer heresy to use EFL learners' L1. However, it was felt that the prospect of saving time with young learners tempted the majority of teachers to rely on children's L1 while teaching. This over-reliance on the part of the teachers could spoil the supportive role of L1 and render it detrimental to children's efforts of constructing desirable bilingual identities (Copland & Ni, 2019). Despite recurring recommendations about judicious use of L1, many teachers still do not know how much is enough. As research (Copland & Ni, 2019; Kumaravadivelu, 2012) has shown there is no definite answer to this question and it is the teacher who decides what works in his or her classroom. However, we can suggest that *judicious use* refers to relying on students' mother tongue to the extent that if someone overhears you behind your class door for some minutes, they feel that it is an English not a Persian class (in this case). Albeit sometimes unavoidable, using pictures and realia could help teachers minimize the unnecessary

use of L1. Importantly, administering placement tests brings about homogenous classes where teachers could easily and efficiently tailor their L1 use to students language proficiency level. Future research could investigate to what extent teachers' age and experience affect their reliance on students' mother tongue. Also, in order to get a better picture of the status quo, young English learners could be interviewed to delve into their preferences of using L1 in their classes.

References

- Atkinson, D. (1993). *Teaching monolingual classes*. London: Longman.
- Bland, J. (2015). *Teaching English to Young Learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3–12 year olds*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Butzkamm, W. (2003). We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms: death of a dogma. *Language Learning Journal*, 28, 29-39.
- Butzkamm, W. & Caldwell, J. (2009). *The bilingual reform: A paradigm shift in foreign language teaching*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Literacy as a translingual practice: Between communities and classrooms*. London: Routledge.
- Carless, D. (2008) 'Student use of the mother tongue in the task-based classroom'. *ELT Journal*, 62 (4) pp. 331-338.
- Carson, E., & Kashihara, H. (2012). Using L1 in the L2 classroom: The students speak. *The Language Teacher*, 36 (4), 41-48.
- Cook, V. (2002). Basing teaching on the L2 user. In V. Cook (Ed.), *Portraits of the L2 User* (pp. 47-61). Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Cook, V. (2016). *Second language learning and language teaching* (5th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2013). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: global perspectives and local realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48 (4), 738-762.
- Copland, F. & Neokleous, G. (2011). L1 to teach L2: Complexities and contradictions. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 270–280.
- Copland, F. & Ni, M. (2019). Languages in the young learners' classroom. In Garton, S. & Copland, F. Eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners* (pp. 138-153). New York: Routledge.
- Copland, F., and Yonetsugi, E. (2016). Teaching English to young learners: Supporting the case for the bilingual native English speaker teacher. *Classroom Discourse*, 7(3), 221–238.
- De Wolf, S., Smit, N., & Lowie, W. (2017). Influences of early English language teaching on oral fluency. *ELT journal*, 71 (3), 341- 353.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R., and Shintani, N. (2013). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, G. & Cook, G. (2013). Own-language use in ELT: Exploring global practices and attitudes. *ELT Research Papers*, 13 (1), 6-48.

- Hall, G. & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning: state of the art. *Language Teaching*, 45 (3), pp. 271-308.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching*. (4th Ed.). Essex: Longman.
- Jenkins, S. (2010). Monolingualism: an uncongenial policy for Saudi Arabia's low-level learners. *ELT Journal*, 64 (4), 459-461.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2012). *Language teacher education for a global society*. London: Routledge.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, P., (2013). 'English only' language instruction to Japanese university students in low-level speaking and listening classes: An action research project. *Keiwa Gakuen Daigaku Kenkyuu Kiyuu*, 22(1), 1-30.
- Littlewood, W. & Yu, B. (2011). First language and target language in the foreign language classroom. *Language Teaching*. 44 (1), 64-77.
- Macaro, E. (2009). Teachers' Use of codeswitching in the second language classroom: Exploring "optimal" use. In Turnbull, M. & Dailey-O'Cain, J. Eds., *First Language Use in Second and Foreign Language Learning* (pp. 35-49). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Macaro, E., and Lee, J. H. (2013). Teacher language background, codeswitching, and English-only instruction: Does age make a difference to learners' attitudes? *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 717-742.
- Mahboob, A., and Lin, A. M. Y. (2018). Local languages as a resource in (language) education. In Selvi, A. F., and Rudolph, N. (eds.) *Conceptual Shifts and Contextualized Practices in Education for Glocal Interaction*. Singapore: Springer, 197-217.
- Mahmoudi, L. & Yazdi Amirkhiz, Y. (2011). The use of Persian in the EFL Classroom: The case of English teaching and learning at pre-university level in Iran. *English Language Teaching*, 4(1), 135-140.
- Meiring, L. & Norman, N. (2002). Back on target: repositioning the status of target language in MFL teaching and learning, *The Language Learning Journal*, 26 (1), 27-35.
- Mohebbi, H. & Alavi, M. (2014). An investigation into teachers' first language use in a second language learning classroom context: A questionnaire-based study. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching and Learning Language and Literature*, 7 (4), 57-73.
- Norman, J. (2008). *Benefits and drawbacks to L1 use in the L2 classroom*. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 691-701). Tokyo: JALT.
- Riazi, A., & Candlin, C. (2014). Mixed-methods research in language teaching and learning: Opportunities, issues and challenges. *Language Teaching*, 47(2), 135-173.
- Richards, J. & Rodgers, T. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schweerz, W. (1999). Using L1 in the L2 classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, pp. 6-13.
- Shin, J. K. (2006). Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners. *English Teaching Forum*, 2-13.
- Shin, J. K. & Crandall, J. (2014). *Teaching young learners English*. Boston: National Geographic Learning.
- Yaqubi, B. & Poromid, S. (2013). First language use in English language institutes: Are teachers free to alternate between L1 and L2 as means of instruction? *The Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, 4(4), 127-152.

Zacharias, N. (2004). Teachers' beliefs about the use of the students' mother tongue: A survey of Tertiary English Teachers in Indonesia. *English Australia Journal*, 22 (1), 44-52.

Yasser Aminifard is a doctoral candidate of Applied Linguistics at Shiraz University, Iran. He is currently teaching English at Islamic Azad University of Dehdasht, Iran. His main areas of interest include sociolinguistics, language teacher identity, and teaching English to young learners.

Email: yasser.aminy@gmail.com

Saeed Mehrpour is an Associate Professor of TEFL at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of Shiraz University, Iran. He teaches B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. courses and is interested in conducting research in areas such as teacher education, teaching/learning language skills and first language acquisition.

Email: smehrpur@rose.shirazu.ac.ir