



## THE ROLE OF L1 IN L2 ACQUISITION: ATTITUDES OF IRANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

[\*]

Mustafa NAZARY

**Abstract:** Learning a second language in an EFL context requires both students and teachers to cooperate efficiently and resourcefully. By referring to the current theories of second language acquisition and reviewing the recent literature, it can be seen that the first language of learners (L1) has a necessary and facilitating role in all aspects of language instruction. This indicates that the ‘bilingual approach’ is gaining more support by incorporating the students’ L1 as a learning tool and also as a facilitator for an efficient communication. At the same time, advocacy for an English-only policy has been declining. Inspired by these views, this paper aims to explore the Iranian university students' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of L1. A well-known survey – Prodromou (2002) was employed and, surprisingly, the results were contradictory to the all previous similar studies. Iranian university students reported reluctance to use their L1. Finally, some pedagogical suggestions for a judicious use of L1 will be presented.

**Key words:** First language (L1), second language (L2), bilingual, monolingual, students' attitudes.

**Özet:** İkinci bir dil öğrenmek için öğrenciler ve öğretmenlerin etkili bir biçimde işbirliği içerisinde olmaları gerekmektedir. İkinci dil edinimi üzerine güncel çalışmalara bakıldığında, birinci dilin dil öğretiminde yardımcı bir rol üstlendiğini görürüz. Bu durum gösteriyor ki ‘İkيدillilik Yaklaşımı’ öğrencilerin anadilini öğrenme sürecinde bir yardımcı olarak kullanarak daha çok destek bulmaya başlamıştır. Aynı zamanda, ‘sadece İngilizce’ politikasına destek azalmaktadır. Bu görüşlerden yola çıkarak bu çalışmada İran’daki üniversite öğrencilerinin anadil kullanımına karşı tutumlarının araştırılması amaçlanmaktadır. Alanda tanınmış olan bir ölçek uygulanmıştır (Prodromou 2002) ve ilginç bir şekilde daha öncekiler ile zıt sonuçlara ulaşılmıştır. İranlı üniversite öğrencileri anadil kullanımında isteksizlik göstermişlerdir. Son olarak makul ölçüde anadil kullanımı için öneriler sunulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anadil (L1), ikinci dil (L2), ikidilli, tek dilli, öğrencilerin tutumları.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it is common for EFL teachers to use the students' mother tongue as a tool for conveying meaning as a means of interaction both in English language institutes and in the classroom. Research shows that complete deletion of L1 in L2 situation is not appropriate (Schweers, 1999; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nation, 2003; Butzkamm, 2003). When used appropriately, the use of L1 can be very beneficial. Brown (2000, p. 68) claims that “first language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering factor”, and Schweers (1999) encourages teachers to incorporate the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, and suggests that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express and themselves” (p.7).

In Iran, most EFL teachers insist on running their classes on the bases of a ‘monolingual approach’ where only L2 is used within the framework of their classrooms. One main problem is the idea that exposure to language leads to learning. Excluding the students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to the L2 is not necessarily productive (Dujmovic, 2007), on the other hand, some lenient EFL teachers ask this question: “Is it acceptable or helpful to use the L1 (Farsi) in our English classes or not?” To provide an answer to this question, it is necessary to seek clarifications from literature. For instance, various factors have to be taken into consideration. Connick-Hirtz (2001) proposes some factors that teachers need to consider when they decide to use L1 for L2 instruction:

- i. What is the learner's first language?
- ii. What is the learner's age?
- iii. Are we teaching beginners or advanced levels?
- iv. What is the ratio of students/teaching time per one class?
- v. How long is the learner going to study the second language?
- vi. What are his/her learning purposes?
- vii. Is it a one nationality or mixed nationality group?
- viii. What is the institution's pedagogical policy?
- ix. What kind of educational background does the learner have?
- x. In what kind of social context is the teaching of L2 taking place?

Mattioli (2004) believes that "most teachers tend to have opinions about native language use, depending largely on the way in which they have been trained and, in some cases, on their own language education" (p.21).

A number of studies have considered the attitudes and perceptions toward the L1 use in the classroom. They can be classified into two categories: Those which only investigate the attitudes of language learners, and those which explore the attitudes of both language learners and teachers.

In the first study, Prodromou (2002) divided the number of his 300 Greek participants into three groups: Elementary, Intermediate, and finally Advanced level students. He tried to investigate the reaction and attitude of students with different levels of proficiency. The findings showed that students at higher levels of study have a negative attitude toward the use of L1 in their classroom. But lower students showed more tendencies to accept the use of their mother tongue. Another recent Croatian study, Duimovic (2007) examined the attitudes of his 100 EFL students. He concludes that his students responded positively to the use of L1 in L2 context and showed their interests as well.

Schweers (1999) conducted a study with EFL students and their 19 teachers in a Spanish context to investigate their attitudes toward using L1 in the L2 classroom. He found that 88.7% of Spanish students studying English wanted L1 used in the class because they believe it facilitates learning. Students also desired up to 39% of class time to be spent in L1 (Schweers, 1999, p. 7). Burden (2001) investigated the attitudes of 290 students and 73 teachers at five universities. The results showed that both students and teachers believe the importance of L1 in explaining new vocabulary, giving instruction, talking about tests, grammar instruction, checking for understanding and relaxing the students. Another similar research conducted by Tang (2002) in a Chinese context with 100 students and 20 teachers depicts similar results. The research shows that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom does not reduce students' exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning processes. In addition, to all the previous studies that were conducted in EFL context, a large scale study by Levine (2003) in an ESL context revealed the same result. Levine concludes that "despite the prevailing 'monolingual principle' in U.S FL classes, both the target language and the L1 appear to serve important functions" (p. 356).

By looking back to the discussion of L1 use, some concepts such as: approaches to the use of L1, L1 and teaching methodology, L1 and language skills and activities, will be crucially important to consider. In this section each of these concepts will be defined briefly.

## 2. APPROACHES TO THE USE OF L1 IN L2 CONTEXT

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some EFL teachers strongly believe that they should never use even a single word from the mother tongue in the classroom. These teachers are followers of the so-called 'Monolingual Approach', and others who are somehow skeptical about the use of L1 or use it wisely in their classes are the proponents of 'Bilingual approach'. In addition to these two approaches, Nation (2003) introduces another approach called a 'Balanced Approach'. He believes teachers need to show respect for learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make the L1 seem inferior to English, at the same time, it is the English teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in English, here is that a balanced approach is needed which sees a role for the L1 but also recognizes the importance of maximizing L2 use in the classroom. Support for the Monolingual approach to teaching can be summarized as follows:

1. The learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximizing the exposure to the L2).
2. Successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and L2.
3. Students should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use.

However, the monolingual approach is not without its criticisms. One of them is that exposure to language leads to learning, excluding the students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to the L2 is not necessarily productive Dujmovic (2007, p. 93). In addition, Auerbach (1993) criticizes these tough exposures to the target language by calling them "all-or-nothing views", and adds: "acquiring a second language is to some extent contingent on the societally determined value attributed to the L1, which can be either reinforced or challenged inside the classroom" (p.16).

During its history, bilingual approach gained support and validation from many scholars and research findings. Auerbach (1993, p.18) believes that "when the native language is used, practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results". In fact there has been a gradual move over the years away from the "English only" dogma that has long been a part of the British and American ELT movement Baker (2003). Miles (2004) advocates the use of Bilingual approach and discredits the monolingual approach in three ways: 1: it is impractical, 2: native teachers are not necessarily the best teachers and 3: exposure alone is not sufficient for learning. In support of the bilingual approach Atkinson proposes his theory called "Judicious use theory" (p. 21), in which he espouses that L1 works as a vital source and also a communicative tool both for students and teachers (as cited in Mattioli, 2004).

## 3. ROLE OF L1 IN TEACHING METHODOLOGY

By exploring the role of students' L1 in English language classrooms, one of the fundamental principles is the method by which EFL teachers manage the process of language instruction in their classrooms. Here, the aim is to first categorize different language teaching methods and then discuss the role and use of L1 in each of them briefly. A common classification of methods is: Traditional, Alternatives and Current Communicative Methods.

In the field of English language teaching (ELT) traditional methods of teaching a language are as: Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and Audiolingual method. Examples for alternative methods are Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, and Community Language Learning. Furthermore, communicative approaches are Communicative Language Teaching, and Natural Approach. Grammar translation method known as "GTM" is the method in which nearly all phases of the lesson employ the use of students' L1 and translation techniques. As Celce-Murcia (1991) believes, in GTM there is little use of the target language and instruction is given in the native language of the students (p. 6). In addition, the process of evaluation occurred when students could

translate the readings to the first language and if they knew enough to translate especially selected and prepared exercises from the first to the second language Chastain (1988, p. 87). Applying translation was excessive when GTM was a common method in teaching English. A sudden and immediate removal of L1 from the classroom happened at the time of 'Reform Movement', when reformers believed that translation should be avoided, although the native language could be used in order to explain new words or to check comprehension (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Later Weschler (1997) proposed a modified version of GTM called 'Functional–Translation' method. He believes it is a functional method, because the emphasis is first on helping the students to understand and convey the meaning of ideas most useful to them and it is translation method because it makes unashamed use of student's first language in accomplishing that goal.

The emphasis while using L1 is a systematic, selective and judicious use. A haphazard use of the mother tongue may be an unwanted side-effect of monolingualism, often employed today by disaffected teachers (Butzcamm, 2003). A very concise description of L1 role in EFL context is presented by Larsen–Freeman (2000). She supports the role of the mother tongue in the classroom procedures and summarizes the role of L1 in various ELT methods:

- **Grammar Translation Method:** The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. The language that is used in the class is mostly the students' native language (p.18).
- **Direct Method and Audiolingual Method:** The students' native language should not be used in the classroom because it is thought that it will interfere with the students' attempts to master the target language (pp.30 and 47).
- **Silent way:** The students' native language can, however, be used to give instructions when necessary, and to help a student improve his or her pronunciation. The native language is also used (at least at beginning levels of proficiency) during feed back sessions (p.67).
- **Suggestopedia:** Native-language translation is used to make the meaning of the dialogue clear. The teacher also uses the native language in class when necessary. As the course proceeds, the teacher uses the native language less and less (p.83).
- **Community Language Learning:** Students' security is initially enhanced by using their native language. The purpose of L1 is to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Also, directions in class and sessions during which students express their feelings and are understood are conducted in their L1 (pp.101-102).
- **Total Physical Response:** this method is usually introduced initially in the students' native language. After the lesson introduction, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements (p.115).
- **Communicative Language Teaching:** Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in communicative language teaching (p.132).

As exemplified, the students' native language has had a variety of functions nearly in all teaching methods except in Direct Method and Audiolingualism. Those methods had their theoretical underpinnings in 'structuralism' and assumed language learning to be a process of habit formation, without considering the students' affect, background knowledge and their linguistic abilities in their L1. In addition, no attention was given to humanistic views of teaching.

#### 4. L1 APPLICATION IN LANGUAGE SUB-SKILLS AND ACTIVITIES

Students' native language plays an important role in teaching language skills and sub-skills and in

classroom activities as well. In fact, L1 has a wide range of deliberate functions. Butzcamm (2003) believes “successful learners capitalize on the vast amount of linguistic skills and world knowledge they have accumulated via the mother tongue” (p. 31). Mattioli (2004) refers to five functions of L1 in an EFL classroom. They are: explaining vocabulary, giving instructions, explaining language rules, reprimanding students, and talking to individual students. Here, the importance of L1 for instructing language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking), sub-skills (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and culture) will be highlighted, and the role of mother tongue in conducting classroom activities will be discussed.

In a language learning situation, a competent learner is assumed to be the one who is proficient in all four language skills and also sub-skills. As research findings reveal, L1 use is decisive in both teaching and learning aspects of these skills. For instance, Nuttall (1996), by addressing the reading skill, appreciates the importance of L1 in training reading-based library skills, for the discussion of students' worksheets and in reading summary test. In relation to the concept of language response, he adds: “Inability to express themselves (students) in the target language necessarily limits both the kind and the quality of the responses students give. It is quite possible that students who are permitted to use their L1 in responding will explore the text more accurately and thoroughly than those who are restricted to target language responses” (p.187). Koren (1997) observed students listening to lectures in a foreign language while taking notes in L1. She concludes that the use of translation while taking notes is not a bad strategy if the aim is to understand and keep the material for future reading before a test. Hamin and Majid (2006), in an experimental research, investigated the effectiveness of the use of L1 to generate ideas for second language writing. They found a remarkable improvement in the writing performance of students who used their first language to generate ideas, for it could trigger their background knowledge. Elementary learners who are not proficient enough to express themselves in L2, must constantly think before they speak and this inner speech happens in L1 (Auerbach, 1993).

In discussing English language sub-skills, vocabulary and pronunciation are often emphasized. For example, in learning new vocabulary, making word cards with the definition of L1 is effective, because this strategy will speed up their vocabulary progress. A model of vocabulary cards is designed by the author (Table.1). In this sample 7 steps need to be developed in both sides (back/front page). The arrangement of the steps is plausible especially for the sake of reviewing. At the first glance it may seem time consuming, but my students consistently believe that the learnt words and their functions will last for a long time. This strategy is very practical for those who prepare themselves for international exams such as TOEFL and GRE. Nation (2003) emphasizes and encourages the use of bilingual cards, L1-L2 word pairs and L1 translation as the best ways for increasing vocabulary size. He contends “forget all the criticism you have heard about rote learning and translation; research has repeatedly shown that such learning is very effective” (Laufer, Meara, & Nation, 2005, p. 6). In relation to the role of L1 in pronunciation, Celce-Murcia (1991) calls the learner's native language as one of the six variables for the acquisition of L2 pronunciation. In her idea mother-tongue transfer is really widespread in the area of pronunciation than in grammar and lexicon. She believes “this makes it important for teachers to know something about the sound system of the language(s) that their learners speak in order to anticipate problems and understand the source of errors” (p. 137). Scott and de la Fuente (2008) invited students in form-focused grammar tasks; they divided the learners into two groups. Students in group 1 were allowed to use L1 whereas group 2 only used L2. Using conversation analysis of audiotaped interactions, they found that learners of group 1 (used L1) worked collaboratively in a balanced and coherent manner, while on the other hand group 2 (only L2) exhibited fragmental interaction and little evidence of collaboration.

Finally, as it is believed the bilingual/bicultural teachers are in a position to enrich the process of learning by using the mother tongue as a resource, and then, by using the L1 culture, they can facilitate the progress of their students toward the mother tongue, the other culture Dujmovic (2007). Gill (2005) mentions the role of mother tongue for discussing the cross-cultural issues. He believes it can be possible through comparison and contrast and judicious use of the L1 (e.g. connotation,

collocation, idiomatic usages, culture-specific lexis, politeness formulae, sociocultural norms, the use of intonation, gestures etc.)

**Table.1**

Front-page

Back-page

|                            |     |  |
|----------------------------|-----|--|
| <b><i>Assist (v)</i></b>   | [1] |  |
| • <i>(ə sɪst)</i>          | [2] | • <i>To help / helper / Supporter</i> [4]  |
| • <i>Assistance (n)</i>    | [3] | • <i>We will assist you in finding somewhere to live / can I be of any assistance?</i> [5] |
| • <i>Assistant (n/adj)</i> |     | • <i>When I do my homework, my dad is always ready to assist me</i> [6]                    |
|                            |     | • <i>باری کردن - دستیار</i> [7]  |

Seven-step vocab cards: [1: Word entity, 2: Word pronunciation, 3: Different parts of speech, 4: Synonyms & Antonyms, 5: dictionary example (Oxford Dic), 6: Learner's example, 7: L1 definition]

After considering the effect of L1 in classroom language skills and sub-skills, now we refer to classroom activities which favor from the use of L1. The role of L1 in group work in EFL situations is highlighted by Brown (2001), as he confirms that “this is when students feel that the task is too hard, or that the directions are not clear, or that the task is not interesting, or that they are not sure of the purpose of the task, then teachers may invite students to take shortcuts via their native language” (p.180). When running classes with beginning groups for approaching vocabulary, Hitotuzi (2006) believes “one can use props such as flashcards, cutout figures and realia for words representing concrete items; as for the representation of abstract items, drawing on L1 equivalents might solve the problem whenever contextualization, mimicry, and other techniques fail to gloss them convincingly” (p. 169). Other functions of L1 in classroom activities are as follow: conversation activities, discussion of intensive reading, preparation for writing, and some fluency tasks, awareness-raising activities, contrasting L1 and L2, research in L1, presentation in L2 (Nation, 2003; Prodromou, 2002). A very systematic and practical approach for maximizing the L2 use in classroom and placing a deliberate use for the learners' L1 was proposed by Nation (1997). He considers the cause of L1 use under the major categories of learner proficiency and task difficulty, circumstances of the task, and learner attitude. This approach automatically reduces the uncontrolled use of L1 in classroom activities. For further reading on practical bilingual activities refer to (Weschler, 1997).

Furthermore, according to the term ‘L1 problem clinic’ proposed by Atkinson (as cited in Mattioli, 2004, p. 24) that is a weekly or monthly meeting set up to discuss a classroom problem as a group in L1, the author proposes another solution for the deliberate use of L1 which is assigning a ‘5-minute-break’ per session (preferably) in which our students are permitted to ask their questions and share their ideas in L1.

Finally the role of L1 is not limited to the above dimensions of language learning. Both cognitive and affective aspects of L1 use play a vital role in classroom procedure. For instance, Auerbach (1993) emphasizes the role of L1 in developing ‘metacognitive awareness’ of learners while writing a text. Others believe that L1 is used to process L2. Cognitive perspective of language learning called ‘mainstream’ has been predominantly concerned with the role of the L1, acquisition orders, development sequences, input/output relationship, and the role of biologically-specified universal grammar (UG) (Bernat, 2008). The use of L1 also reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning (Auerbach, 1993). It is regarded as a factor for lowering affective barriers in the language classroom as it assists comprehension for all language learners. In particular, it can help those with language disorders such as stuttering, because stuttering EFL students will perform

more efficiently when they find their teachers and classmates intimate and their classroom less intimidating (Nazary, 2008). In addition, when empathy and delicacy are required, L1 is ready. This calls upon an "affective side" in classroom, in which every learner wants to be liked and appreciated (Bawcom, 2002).

## 5. AIMS AND RATIONALE

This study was designed in order to gather Iranian tertiary students' views on the use of L1. It also tries to examine the relationship between the learners' language proficiency level and their attitudes and degree of awareness of the benefits of L1 use. Since there has been little research so far in this area, the primary goal of this study is to find evidence to support the theory that L1 can facilitate L2 acquisition and to reject the existing notion that L1 acts as a hindrance.

This study assumes that L2 use in the classroom should be maximized, however, there should also be a place for judicious use of L1. The importance of the role of L1 in the classroom seems worthy of consideration, as, to date, very few studies in Iran have been conducted to address the topic. Therefore the hope is that the elicited findings and the offered guidelines will shed more light on the importance of L1 in L2 acquisition particularly in Iranian EFL context.

For the purposes of this study, the following research questions were identified:

- 1) Do Iranian EFL university students have a positive or negative attitude toward the L1 use in their classroom?
- 2) Do students with different levels of proficiency have different views and attitudes toward the importance of L1?

## 6. METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The total number of EFL students both males and females who participated in this study was eighty-five (85). The L1 of these students is Farsi and they are studying English at Tehran University, extra curriculum programs to enhance their General English (GE courses), thus English is not their field of study at the university. The participants are from different fields of study and this variety of majors provides a more comprehensive perspective of their attitudes. They were selected according to their English proficiency level as Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced. The variety of proficiency levels also will help to examine the relationship between students' proficiency levels and their attitudes toward the use of L1.

### Instrument

A questionnaire taken from a related previous study (Prodromou, 2002) was used for the exploration of the Iranian university students' attitudes. This questionnaire has two parts. Part I includes demographic information such as name, family name, age and proficiency levels of students. Part II includes 16 items on a Likert scale to define student's attitudes. Items included in this 16-item questionnaire underline the main points discussed in previous sections, the concepts such as the role of L1 in language learning skills and sub-skills, L1 in classroom activities among others.

### Procedure

This 16-item-questionnaire administered to university students from different levels of English language proficiency studying at Tehran University. All participants from various levels of language (elementary, intermediate and advanced) were selected randomly from classes. After giving a short

introduction to the project and identifying its advantages both for classroom teachers and students, students were asked to read the items and then decide to state whether they agree or disagree with the mentioned statements. In addition, students were encouraged to add any comments and share their suggestions.

**Table 2**

**Total N: 85**

| Items | Questionnaire Items                          | Elementary<br>N 22 |     | Intermediate<br>N 30 |     | Advanced<br>N 33 |     |
|-------|--|--------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|------------------|-----|
|       |  | f                  | p   | f                    | p   | f                | p   |
| 1     | Should the teacher know the L1?              | 15                 | 68% | 21                   | 69% | 27               | 81% |
| 2     | Should the teacher use the L1?               | 5                  | 22% | 5                    | 16% | 7                | 21% |
| 3     | Should the students use their L1?            | 7                  | 31% | 7                    | 23% | 6                | 18% |
| 4     | Explaining new words in L1                   | 4                  | 18% | 1                    | 3%  | 7                | 21% |
| 5     | Explaining grammar in L1                     | 9                  | 40% | 8                    | 26% | 13               | 39% |
| 6     | Explaining differences between L1 & L2       | 16                 | 72% | 13                   | 43% | 20               | 60% |
| 7     | Explaining differences in the use of L1 & L2 | 13                 | 59% | 11                   | 36% | 20               | 60% |
| 8     | Giving instructions in L1                    | 7                  | 31% | 4                    | 13% | 9                | 27% |
| 9     | Talking in pairs and groups in L1            | 3                  | 13% | 4                    | 13% | 5                | 15% |
| 10    | Asking in L1 how do we say '...' in English? | 6                  | 27% | 23                   | 76% | 28               | 84% |
| 11    | Translating an L2 word into L1               | 15                 | 68% | 16                   | 53% | 14               | 42% |
| 12    | Translating a text from L2 to L1             | 12                 | 54% | 11                   | 36% | 10               | 30% |
| 13    | Using translation tasks in a test            | 6                  | 27% | 7                    | 23% | 14               | 42% |
| 14    | Using L1 to check listening comprehension    | 10                 | 45% | 4                    | 13% | 8                | 24% |
| 15    | Using L1 to check reading comprehension      | 8                  | 36% | 4                    | 13% |                  |     |