

EFL Learners' Beliefs towards Native Language Use in ELT

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Abstract – During the last decades there has always been a debate on whether to use the mother tongue in foreign language learning process or not. In Iran like other EFL countries, the place of native language in English pedagogy has been controversial. The present study firstly aimed to investigate what Iranian English learners think of their first language use in foreign language classroom. Further, it was to specify how learners' English proficiency level and their use of mother tongue are related in EFL learning. To do this, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative phase, 170 EFL learners with the age range of 15-30 in Isfahan, Iran, were asked to answer the Translation and Learner' Belief questionnaire. For the qualitative phase, the students were asked to complete Quick Placement Test. 120 students of three main levels were selected to respond the learners' interview guide. The results of data analysis revealed that the students had a positive belief about using mother language. In addition, although almost all learners appreciated the role of first language in their language learning process, their beliefs and perceptions of mother language use were significantly different.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, learning English, students' beliefs, native language, English proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

With the growing importance of learner-centered language teaching, what helps learners in their own way 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 arrive at their objective in the most economical way. Among them, the use of native language and its place has been a debatable topic. This study tried to shed some light on the use of first language as an important factor involved in the process of second or foreign language learning.

In the past, by the use of Grammar Translation Method, students were unable to speak fluently after having studied the language for a long time. For this reason, learners' mother tongue has been defined as “uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult, and irrelevant” (Duff, 1994). No matter how good the students are at comprehending authentic reading or listening materials, most of the language learners keep the mental translating from second language into the first one and vice versa. This fact makes EFL teachers aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms (Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007).

As a result, however, the idea of abandoning the native tongue is too stressful to many learners, if considered tactfully. There are many ways and benefits to make use of learners' native language in EFL teaching and learning. This issue has been discussed in the application of language pedagogical methodologies. As the concept of mother tongue use has mostly been a sign of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), most educators have tried to omit it from their teaching methodology.

Nowadays, it is believed that teachers use L1 as a pedagogical instrument in their classrooms. Additionally, EFL learners to accelerate their language learning process (Cook, 2010; Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007; Liao, 2006) use first language; it is against what teachers believe, though. Learners often employ class mother language as a learning strategy to comprehend and remember as well as produce English whether or not they are discouraged to do so.

Where the nature of mother tongue use is often misunderstood, and its function in the learning process is not specified, this study intended to investigate how Iranian English learners believe in using L1 as a learning strategy to learn English. Further, the relationship between learner's English proficiency level and their use of native language in EFL is under the focus.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Based upon what mentioned in the past, in order to better deal with the issue, although GTM has been unsatisfactory for reasons as mentioned in the history of the translation, using translation activities doesn't have to mean using that kind of method. There is no reason why translation should not play a role in modern language pedagogy. It can be interesting to say that referring to the late 1980s Richards and Rodgers (1986) state, "in modified form it [GTM] resumes to be widely used in some parts of the world today and is still widely practiced". It reveals that translation as a language teaching technique has been making a comeback in Europe. In fact, Anderman (1998) noted in a survey of the teaching of translation at British universities, nineteen out of the twenty-one institutions which answered to the questionnaire revealed that translation was taught as a way of improving students' linguistic proficiency.

Likewise, the goal of Cook's (2001) paper 'using the first language in the classroom' suggests that it is time to open a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over 100 years, namely the systematic use of the first language (L1) in the classroom. He also describes that in all of the methods and approaches 'the only time that L1 is mentioned is when advice is given on how to minimize its use'.

Regarding the issue, Weschler (1997) showed that by combining the best of the "grammar-translation" method with the best of "communicative" methods, a new, more powerful hybrid can come in which the focus is more on the negotiated meaning of the message than its fruitless form. He called his new method "The Functional-Translation Method" (FTM). Its goal was to allow students to learn the useful English they want to learn more efficient and enjoyable. Translation in ELT was considered as a vital means, not as an end. According to Jumpelt (1984), the twentieth century is the age of translation. Crystal (1986) also described translation as "the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language, the source language (SL) is turned into the meaning of another, the target language (TL), whether the medium is spoken, written, or signed." Additionally, those who discussed translation in their studies found it as a legitimate pedagogical tool especially in an EFL environment, and claimed that it deserved to be rehabilitated (Widdowson, 1978; Ellis, 1993).

Regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students themselves feel about it. Different studies have been done on learners' beliefs about the use of translation in their foreign language learning, but it could be expected that students may have different views on this issue. For instance, Horwitz (1988) asserted that the majority of German and Spanish students (70% and 75%) supported the idea that learning a foreign language is mainly a matter of learning to translate from English, while 15% of the French students agreed or strongly agreed to the same statement. Likewise, Kern (1994) noted that even though foreign

language teachers and learners perceived the unavoidability of mental translation in reading L2 texts, both groups often view translation as an undesirable strategy. Moreover, in comparing the use of both translation and context in learning L2 vocabulary, Prince (1996) identified that learning vocabulary in context is highly perceived by teachers as a desirable strategy, but students often balk at it and believe that the translation learning, with the new word which are linked to its native language equivalent, is more beneficial in learning new vocabulary words.

As teachers usually assume that the most effective way to master English is to learn and think directly in English rather than to use translation, some students have believed that the mother tongue was an infection or virus introduced to the English classroom and depending upon it is fruitless for them while learning and using L2. Moreover, Hsieh (2000) realized that translation benefited Taiwanese students' English reading in terms of increasing their reading comprehension, reading strategies, vocabulary learning, and cultural background knowledge. He gave a questionnaire concerning attitudes and thoughts toward translation to Taiwanese college students at the end of one year of EFL instruction using a translation method. Most of the participants stated that translating could help them pay more attention to the coherence and contextualization of English reading text.

Liao (2006) performed both quantitative and qualitative surveys on 351 Taiwanese students on their belief about translation. He also noted, participants felt that translation helped them acquire English language skills like reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, idioms, phrases and expressions. The study aimed to investigate learners' belief about translation to see whether they had positive or negative attitudes toward using translation in their EFL learning. Two variables of individual differences were examined under the question of whether they had any effect on learners' belief about translation or not.

In this regard, Ashouri (2010) conducted a study of 120 Iranian learners of English on learners' translation belief. As the data show, about 56 percent of level responses were selected to agree which reveals that participants had a positive belief about translation. Learners mostly agreed that they had a positive belief about using translation in their learning activities. Also, the study reported that risk-taking affected learners' translation belief in the way risk-averse learners had a positive belief which is in contrast with risk-takers who had negative belief about translation. Analysis of the data on the effect of ambiguity tolerance on learners' translation belief appeared that ambiguity tolerance had no effect on learner's translation belief. Therefore, the study reported one variable to be significantly effective on translation belief and the other variable of individual differences not to be effective.

O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) framework explained that translation is the only strategy typical of language learning. The other empirical study reporting findings relevant to this topic is Friedlander (1990). Drawing on the findings of several investigations and his own experiments, he proved that planning on certain language topics seemed to be enhanced when writers used the language of topic-area knowledge. Translation from the native language into English appeared to help writers rather than hinder them. They were able to access more information when working in their first language.

In Iran, the mother tongue, Persian, is the formal language of education. All students do their primary education in their mother tongue. If these students could be given an early exposure to the English language, it would make a big difference to them. Therefore, disregarding of the students' mother tongue could in fact de-motivate the students. The present study tries to rid mother tongue use of a bad name of an association with GTM. Therefore, the

challenging problem is to consider the use of L1 in language learning and teaching as a facilitating or a debilitating matter.

With regard to what was said above, this study tried to seek an answer to the following questions:

1. How do Iranian EFL learners view the role of L1 in English language learning?
2. What is the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' English language proficiency level and their use of L1?

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

One hundred and seventy male and female students taking English courses in language schools with the age range of 15-30 participated in this study. Based on placement test, forty students of each English proficiency level (beginner, intermediate and advanced) were selected and the rest were omitted from the study. The participants' native language was Persian. All of the participants were learning English as a foreign language.

3.2. Instrumentation

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

Quick Placement Test

To differentiate participants' English proficiency and divide them into three levels of English language skills for the study, the researchers administered Quick Placement Test (Edwards, 2007). It was used to determine the learners' level of language proficiency and to ensure learner's homogeneity, Quick Placement Test is a standardized English language test and its reliability and validity are guaranteed.

It consists a 60 multiple-choice items, evaluating the language learners' level of L2 proficiency. It includes five meaning-based items, 25 items in the form of cloze passages, 20 items to assess learners' knowledge of structure, and finally 10 items evaluate to the students' vocabulary knowledge.

Native language Use and Learner' Belief Questionnaire

Since the study aimed to see what Iranian English learners thought of translation use in their learning process, the native language use and learner' belief questionnaire was used. It contains 23 items and was designed by Liao (2006). Since it has been used in some other studies, its validity and reliability is self-evident. It was with the five-point Likert scale ranging from competently disagree to completely agree. The questions were translated to Persian in order to help all the participants understand and answer the questions.

Interview Guide for students

Interviewing is mostly an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make use of that experience (Seidman, 1998). Moreover, the goal of interviewing is to find out what is in or on someone else's mind (Patton, 1990). Through interviewing, the researchers can have more access to the students' views in order to improve a better understanding toward the role of native language in their language learning.

Following the interview guide approach, the interview questions used in this study, focused on (1) learners' English learning experience, especially their beliefs about mother tongue use; and (2) their reflections and evaluations of their use of L1 as a learning strategy. The interview guide in this study was semi-structured and consisted of nine questions designed by Liao (2006). The questions were somehow modified regarding the new students' culture, and translated from English into Persian, for the students with different English proficiency levels (especially beginners) could understand them so that new information and insights could emerge

3.3. Procedures

The research was conducted at Sadr language school, and Isfahan technical and specific supporting center in Isfahan, Iran. In both institutes, one hundred and seventy English language learners were selected to take part into the study. This study employed a quantitative survey and a supplemental qualitative method. For the quantitative phase of the study, the questionnaire was distributed among the students to be answered in the classes. Completing the questionnaire took about 15 minutes in each of the classes. This step of the study lasted about 3 weeks. The second phase of the data collection was through interviews. First, the survey participants' English background and proficiency levels of each class were evaluated through QPT (Quick Placement Test). Then, forty English learners of each level of advanced, intermediate and beginner were selected to complete the interview guide, covering all the questions at home.

4. RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question of the study, the language learners were asked to rate Native language Use and Learner' Belief items on the five point Likert scale from completely disagree to completely agree. First, the percentage of each scale (on Native language Use and Learner' Belief items) was measured separately and then displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: *The percentage of learners' performance on Native language Use and Learner' Belief items*

	Number	Percent
completely disagree	322	8.23
Disagree	652	16.67
no idea	815	20.83
Agree	1116	28.53
completely agree	1006	25.72
Total	3911	100.0

It can be seen that in the table the highest level of percentage was given to agree (28%), and completely agree (26%) was rated as the second one.

Table 2: *The mean and standard deviation of the participants' responses*

Item Description	M.	SD
Translating helps me understand textbook readings.	4.26	.99
Translating helps me write English composition.	3.69	1.09
Translating helps me understand spoken English.	4.04	1.06
Translating helps me speak English.	3.59	1.15
Translating helps me memorize English vocabulary.	4.03	1.04
Translating helps me understand English grammar rules.	3.79	1.20
Translating helps me learn English idioms and phrases.	3.98	1.05
Translating does not help me make progress in learning English.	2.34	1.26
Translation helps me understand my teacher's English instructions.	3.58	1.11
Translation helps me interact with my classmates in English class to complete assignments.	3.61	1.04
The more difficult the English assignments are, the more I depend on Persian translation.	3.77	1.10
Using Persian translation helps me finish my English assignments more quickly and save time.	3.72	1.07
Using Persian translation while studying helps me better recall the content of a lesson later.	3.89	1.12
I like to use Persian translation to learn English.	3.49	1.28
The use of Persian translation may interfere with my ability to learn English well.	3.36	1.18
Persian translation diminishes the amount of English input I receive.	2.92	1.25
At this stage of learning, I cannot learn English without Persian translation.	3.08	1.16
I think everyone has to use Persian translation at this stage of learning.	2.93	1.19
I will produce Persian-style English if I translate from Persian to English.	3.39	1.07
I prefer my English teachers always use English to teach me.	3.53	1.42
I feel pressure when I am asked to think directly in English.	3.32	1.26
I tend to get frustrated when I try to think in English.	2.50	1.17
When using English, it is best to keep my Persian out of my mind.	3.85	1.16
*** The scores of the items 8, 15, 16, 20, and 23 were reversed. ***		

Moreover, means of Native language Use and Learner' Belief items was computed to help identify the patterns of students' beliefs about L1 use and find how the language learners reported using mother tongue as a helping way in their language learning process. It appeared that almost all items had the highest means. To the English learners view, first language is a good help most of the times in understanding textbook readings and writing English composition. They believe that using their mother tongue supports their understanding of spoken English better. Moreover, in memorizing English vocabulary and also perceiving English grammar rules, Iranian English language learners tend to make use of their first language. From their answers, the students mostly use Persian to help them learn English idioms and expressions. They also endorse that making use of translation is a helping way in conceiving their teacher's English instructions in learning process. Further, they make a benefit use of their mother tongue in interacting with their classmates, completing their

assignments, and also finishing their English assignments more quickly in English classes. Most students believe that a good way to save time and have a better recall of the lesson content is possible through their mother tongue.

In order to answer the second question of the study, correlation analysis was performed in order to detect the relationship between participants' English background or their level of proficiency and their beliefs and attitudes toward the use of their own language. The result is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: *Correlation between learners' proficiency level and native language use and learner' belief*

		Levels of Proficiency	IBT
Levels of Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.616**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	665	665
Translation and Learner' Belief	Pearson Correlation	-.616**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	665	665

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

One can see in Table 2, the correlation between participants' level of proficiency and their beliefs about native language is also minus ($r = -.61$) at the significant level of 0.000 ($p = .000 < .05$), which denotes a negative correlation between these two variables.

4.1. Qualitative Analysis

In the present study, in order to probe more deeply the role of mother tongue in language teaching and learning the students were asked to reply their own interview guide questions. It was to identify the relationship between students' English proficiency level and their use of first language in EFL classes. The results were classified as follow.

The data gathered from three levels of learners' answers to the question "what the effects are of using native language to learn English" indicated that all language learners endorsed that L1 had a vital role in language learning process, but students of three levels had different understanding of how and when learners' native language was beneficial in their EFL learning.

Based upon the learners' responses, it revealed that different proficiency level used different strategy involving the use of L1. Some of the students' remarks confirmed this matter such as:

In EFL classes students have to think only in English, and Persian should be the last means. For example, to mean an abstract word instead of using long confusing sentences in English the actual Persian meaning saves time in learning process.

When the lesson is about the special new idioms and proverbs in English, in order to better proceed the issue teachers should mean them in Persian. So, all the students understand the point and take part in the discussion from the first.

In comparison with:

While reading a text, since I am a beginner first of all I try to look up new words in my English- Persian dictionary, but this is not the only thing I should do. Although I know the Persian meaning of the words, most of the times I cannot understand the sentences. As a result I want my classmates to translate the whole sentence and help me connect the meaning of the words together.

The use of translation can increase our sense of security to learn what we do not know, and also help us to feel comfortable beside our teachers in the EFL classes.

In my English language classes, when the teacher explained all materials in English, it caused a threatening environment. As a result, my classmates and I could not ask our questions, and just looking each other.

I feel satisfied and secure when my teacher speaks Persian occasionally. It helps me conceive I know what I need about the lesson. If not so, I doubt what I have perceived is correct or not. Challenging this matter, it takes me so long and seems more difficult to learn what I really need.

In the study, almost all of the learners agreed to the use of translation as a compensation strategy in Iranian EFL classes. The following statements highlight the mentioned strategy.

While writing a composition, after gathering some information in Persian I translate it to English. During the writing, when I cannot find the English equivalence of the words, I have to look up the words in Persian – English dictionary.

Since most students do not familiarize with English language in EFL classes, when the teacher speaks just English they do not understand what he/she means. In these situations the learners get used to loathing the English language. As a result what is a help is nothing except learners' mother tongue.

While reading a text, I underline the difficult words. After that, I refer to English _ Persian dictionary.

Retrieval strategy (using the keyword mnemonic in order to retrieve the meaning of a given vocabulary word) and memory strategy are two other strategies noted in the following words.

Learning and memorizing some new English words requires a lot of practice and effort. Besides, just for a few days I can remember them. In order to solve this problem I try to connect the word to some event in Persian. This event can be matched to the pronunciation of the word, and requires me a little effort to memorize. So, as I hear or see the word the way it pronounced helps me remind its meaning after a few seconds.

When I memorize the Persian meaning of English new words or new idioms, if I forget the words, their Persian meanings are good help to remind those words.

Responding some other interview questions learners of beginner level mentioned that for writing some sentences in English they have to write those in Persian then translate into

English. For them, thinking in English is frustrating. They cannot match the words together in a correct structure. While advanced students try to write directly in English. Their use of native language is some often as their last resort.

Moreover, all the learners of three proficiency levels agree on the usefulness of the mother tongue in English learning process, but the use of it depends upon the learners' level. Class mother tongue is used mostly in the starting stages of learning, but in upper levels it is applied for about a few words or it can be dropped completely from the learning process.

5. DISCUSSION

Based upon the results described above, the interesting finding revealed that Iranian language learners had a positive belief about using native language in their EFL classes, and also they believed that strategies involving the use of L1 help them acquire English language better. These results are somehow consistent with Prince's (1996) point of view who stated that students believed that learners' mother tongue is more effective than context learning in learning new vocabulary words. Also, the findings support Hsieh's (2000) study which indicated that students thought native language to be helpful with their reading comprehension and vocabulary learning which can endorse the positive role of L1 in language pedagogy. Liao (2006), mentioned in the literature review section, stated that the participants believe that the use of L1 helps them acquire English language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, idioms, and phrases. Further, Ashouri (2010) found that most learners had a positive belief about strategies including the use of L1 in their EFL learning.

These results were further complemented and validated by interviewing the language learners. The participants expressed their ideas about mother tongue use which were similar to what Liao (2006) came up with: (1) learners' native language can help students comprehend English; (2) learners' native language can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct; (3) learners' native language eases memory constraints in memorizing more words, idioms, grammar, and sentence structures; (4) learners' native language can help students develop and express ideas in another language; and (5) learners' native language can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn English (p. 201).

Based on the data gathered from three different levels of English learners' answers above named the researchers came up with the next finding of the study. It revealed that learners' background knowledge affected not only their beliefs about using their own language but also their use of strategies involving mother language use. Nevertheless, in the quantitative analysis, this study did not find a statistically significant relationship. The notable result just was the existence of a negative relationship between learners' proficiency level and both their strategy use concerning mother tongue and their beliefs about L1.

The qualitative interview data gathered from three levels of English learners indicated that mother tongue had a vital role in the language learning process. Further, students of three levels had different understanding of how and when their mother language was beneficial in their EFL learning which supports O'Malley et al.'s (1985) finding. They stated beginning level students believed to use more L1 than intermediate level students did. Additionally, in Wen and Johnson's (1997) qualitative survey it was found that advanced English learners in China never use their own language as a learning strategy, while low levels used Chinese as a mediator in their English skills. Further the finding of the present study is consistent with Liao's (2006) result. He reported that students' academic background might affect their beliefs about

mother tongue use and their strategy of using of L1. Almost all of the students emphasized that the amount of L1 in EFL classes was dependent upon the level of the learners. For instance, for some beginners, using their native language meant to translate word for word, or to write Persian translations between the lines of English texts. In addition, for some more proficient learners, since they were more capable in English they had a better sense of translation. They tried to read or write directly in English, and relied less upon their own language, besides used translation only when necessary. The study also revealed that less proficient students need to depend upon L1, but advanced English learners put an extra effort to learn English through English. These findings are similar to some other studies results which less proficient English learners preferred to translate while reading English (Chia & Chia, 2001), relied more upon native language during English learning (O'Malley et al., 1985; Wen & Johnson, 1997), or benefited from L1 more than the high-level learners (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Husain, 1995).

6. CONCLUSION

In this study, one hundred and seventy students were asked to participate into the quantitative part. Native language Use and Learner' Belief questionnaires was given to be answered. Firstly, the data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed. Further, the correlation between the questionnaire and the students' English background knowledge was analyzed by the SPSS. Then, for the qualitative aspect, one hundred and twenty students, among those students, were selected through Quick Placement Test administration to supplement the previous part of the study. Taken together, the results reached the conclusions to different main issues of the study concerning the use of L1 in ELT.

The main finding of the study was achieved with respect to students' perspectives concerning the use of L1 in learning English. The students' responses to Native language Use and Learner' Belief Questionnaire materials showed that the highest level of percentage was given to agree item. The result indicated that English learners had a positive belief about the role of learners' native language in EFL learning, and also most of the language learners are quite positive about the use of first language in their English classes. In the eye of the most survey students, class mother tongue was considered as a positive resource in their learning activities to produce better English, to acquire English skills. It can be concluded that whenever the use of L1 is justified and helpful for the students, the mother tongue should be used. Further, for novice learners, the use of their native language is beneficial because as Atkinson (1993) states a careful, limited use of L1 in order to help students get the maximum benefit from activities, which will be done, in the target language, is not negative but positive. In other words, most students especially at beginner levels thought of L1 to be effective to ensure that some materials have been correctly understood. as a result, first language in ELT learning is a positive tool because it has a facilitating role and it is the only way in which the teacher can ensure the correct comprehension of the students.

The next finding of the present study included the relationship between language learners' English proficiency levels and their perspectives of using L1 as a strategy. From the gathered data from three different levels of EFL learners, it was revealed the vital role of learners' native language for English learning students, but they have different perceptions about L1 and strategy use involving L1. Different levels had different understanding of mother tongue use and how and when it should be used in language pedagogy. Almost all of the students emphasized that the amount of first language in EFL classes was dependent upon the level of

the learners. Although the use of native language is helpful even more for advanced learners, its use would be more during the beginners or elementary stage in teaching some difficult structures and vocabulary words. In comparison with less proficient learners, most advanced learners preferred to learn English directly in English, and also favored directly reading or writing in English and only using mother tongue judiciously as a last means. Furthermore, they tended to avoid word-for-word translation what the less proficient levels were highly interested in. It is not easy to predict how long it takes to work without the L1, but what is certain is the fact that using mother language is necessary for beginners of language learning process. In conclusion, as the language learners improve to the lower intermediate level the use of L1 should be reduced and dropped completely by the upper levels.

Teachers might suggest L1 more for some learners than others, and help students raise their awareness about the merits and demerits of using mother tongue. Besides, they could be more aware of the cases in which L1 could be beneficial to develop English language learning. Overall, 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 at universities and schools but also in language institutes.

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