

## IRANIAN EFL HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF L1 IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION TEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

*The support for monolingual approach has been declining recently and some researchers and teachers have suggested that the "bilingual approach" may be more appropriate, especially when the teachers and the students share the same first language (L1). This paper examined the attitudes of Iranian high school English teachers toward employing L1 (Persian) in teaching reading comprehension texts. The main objectives were to explore the teachers' general attitudes and also their reasons for using L1 in teaching L2 reading texts. The participants of the study were 30 Iranian high school teachers and the data were collected through questionnaires. The results revealed that, on the whole, the teachers had a positive view toward the use of Persian in teaching L2 reading texts. They agreed in the belief that L1 can be used in teaching reading texts for several reasons, including the effects of L1 on enhancing learners' English skills and classroom interaction and also its effects on learners' affective and metacognitive aspects which consequently increases the learner's comprehension in L2 reading texts.*

**KEYWORDS:** teachers' attitudes, L1 (Persian), L2 (English), use of L1 in teaching L2 reading comprehension

### INTRODUCTION

The debate over whether English language classrooms should include or exclude students' native language has been a controversial issue for a long time. (Brown, 2000). Foreign language educators advocating monolingual approach believe that students must be exposed to a significant amount of input, so using L1 in L2 classes deprives students of that valuable input (Turnbull, 2001). They argue that by thinking in the target language, students increase their chances of becoming fluent and accurate in that language and avoiding interference from their L1 (Liao, 2006). However the opponents of this approach argue that L1 can serve as a very useful cognitive tool, providing

scaffolding for students in their effort to achieve learning tasks (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998). Moreover, the teacher's use of L1 provides an enhanced form of input that is more salient for the learners, more easily processed, and consequently promotes their learning (Van Lier, 1995). Liao (2006) also pointed out that using L1 can help students comprehend L2 and it can help them to check whether their comprehension is correct and also, it can help reduce learning anxiety and enhances their motivation to learn L2.

### ***The role of L1 in L2 reading comprehension***

Reading has been the most emphasized skill throughout the last three decades of second/foreign language teaching research (Susser, Robb, 1990). One of the clear advantages of using translation as a technique in EFL classes can be the improvement of the students' perception of reading comprehension passages. Reading is a dynamic, cognitive and interactive process. It is not merely a process of decoding of codes in printed form, but a process of creating meaning as a result of the transaction between the reader and the text (Kabilan et.al, 2010:128). As Upton (1997) asserts, reading in a second language is not a monolingual event and L2 readers have access to their first language as they read and many use it as a strategy to help comprehend an L2 text (cited in Hosseini-Maasoum & Mahdiyan, 2012). In addition, the learners' background knowledge or schema is considered as an important factor in understanding a reading passage. Since the learners use their prior system of their native language in comprehending the texts in a foreign language, using L1 in teaching reading passage facilitates the process of comprehension.

Numerous studies have investigated the teachers' views and attitudes toward using L1 in L2 classes. As for Iranian contexts, the attitudes of university teachers and learners have been investigated, but little attention has been paid to the issue of using L1 in teaching reading texts in the context of the Iranian EFL classes especially at high school level. This motivated me to conduct further investigation to find out the views of Iranian high school teachers toward the use of L1 (Persian) in teaching reading comprehension texts. Although reading is not the only skill to be taught in language classes, students need to improve their reading skill in order to be able to comprehend the texts in L2 for future academic and employment opportunities.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Several studies have demonstrated the teacher's attitudes toward the use of L1 in L2 classes in different contexts. Alshammari (2011) conducted a research on the use of Arabic in Saudi EFL classes at two Saudi technical colleges to examine the attitudes of teachers and their purposes for using Arabic in EFL classrooms. The study showed that the mother tongue was used by majority of teachers and both students and teachers had positive views toward L1 use in English classes. In addition, the researcher added that a balanced and careful use of Arabic in L2 classes seems not to affect the students' exposure to the target language, and it can even be useful in the learning process and may be needed for increasing the learner's comprehension.

Dujimoric (2014) carried out a similar research in the Croatian context. The data were collected through questionnaires. The findings showed the students emphasized that the translation of some words, complex ideas, or even the whole passage is a good way to learn a foreign language. The

teachers believed that Croatian can be used to make the comprehension check and to make sure students have understood the text. He asserted that in the EFL classes Croatian plays a supportive and facilitating role.

Another similar study was carried out on teachers' code switching to the L1 in EFL classes in three Chinese universities by Jingxia (2010). The data collection was based on qualitative and quantitative research method consisting of two questionnaires and classroom recordings. The result showed that code switching to Chinese does exist in the EFL classes of Chinese universities. Moreover, most teachers (80%) hold a positive view on teachers' code switching to the L1.

Naci Kayaoğlu (2012) studied the English teachers' practice and perspective in the use of first language at Karadeniz technical university in Turkey. The findings revealed that teachers agreed on the necessity of L1 use in foreign language use in general. Furthermore, more than half of the teachers (59%) thought the use of Turkish was a motivating factor in students' language learning and a substantial number of teachers were observed to use L1 in order to decrease students' anxiety level.

As far as the use of L1 in Iranian context is concerned, Afzal (2013) conducted a research on using of L1 in EFL as a way of scaffolding for both students and teachers to learn and teach English. Based on the findings of this study the majority of teachers used L1 in L2 classes. The main reasons for the use of L1 were the translation of some words, complex ideas or even whole passage. Although the study revealed that in the EFL classes Persian plays a supportive and facilitating role.

Another research was carried out by Mahmoudi and Amirkhiz (2011) on the use of Persian in pre university level in Iran. The results showed the positive tendency of students toward L2 dominance in L2 classes. However, this study is opposed to that of Nazary's (2008) study of a group of Tehran university students. His study found that Iranian university students are reluctant to use L1 in L2 classes on the grounds that any minute of using L1 will diminish a minute of their exposure to L2. Similarly, the participants of this study highlighted that in the context of English learning in Iran, where students are solely exposed to L2 in English classes, L1 should be used as little as possible. Boshrabadi (2014) did another research on Pedagogical utility of Translation in teaching Reading comprehension to Iranian learners and concluded that translation from L1 to L2 played a major role in improving learners' reading comprehension proficiency.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What are Iranian EFL high school teachers' general attitudes and beliefs toward using Persian in teaching reading comprehension texts?
2. What are the teachers' reasons for employing Persian in English reading texts?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

The study involved a survey of 30 male and female high school English teachers in three provinces of Iran, including Sistan and Balochistan, Fars and Mazandaran. Teachers' qualification ranged between Bachelor and Master in different fields of English, and their teaching experiences ranged between 5-25 years.

### *Instrument*

The research was quantitative in design, using a questionnaire (see Appendix A) to survey English teachers' general beliefs and their reasons for the use of Persian in teaching reading texts. The questionnaire had three parts: Personal background, guidance and questions. To ensure the reliability and validity of the survey, the questionnaires were piloted on a sample group of 5 teachers. According to the feedback, the questionnaires were revised in some aspects, including the addition or deletion of some items. The data obtained from the questionnaire which had 15 items in it was analyzed by assigning the values 1 to 5 to the choices they made. It was done based on the choices, which respectively mean strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The teachers were asked to show their attitudes towards each of the following categories:

1. **General attitude** – teachers' general attitudes toward using Persian in teaching reading texts
2. **Teacher's reasons** – teachers' reasons for using L1 in teaching reading texts including:

- A) Affective and metacognitive aspects - Beliefs about the positive effects of using L1 on learners' affective and metacognitive aspects
- B) Beliefs about the effects of L1 on enhancing learners' English skills and classroom interaction.

### *Data collection procedure*

After getting the permission from the relevant authorities in ministry of Education, the data collection instrument was given to the teachers. For teachers in Fars and Mazandaran provinces the questionnaires sent and collected through Email. In general the data collection took place in the course of two months. Having scored the administered questionnaires, the researcher analyzed the data through statistical procedures being elaborated in the subsequent section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaires were distributed to 30 teachers. Tables 1 and 2 and 3 below summarize the frequencies and percentages of participants' responses according to the questionnaires statements.

### *Teacher's general attitudes toward the use of Persian (L1) in teaching L2 reading texts*

For teachers' general attitudes on using L1, the frequency and percentage were measured and displayed in Table 1. In general, the data collected revealed that the majority of the teacher's (53% strongly agree and agree) had strong feeling about the idea that using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts is inevitable. Only one of the teachers was observed to strongly disagree on

the necessity of using Persian in teaching reading texts in EFL classrooms. It is remarkable to note that 70% of teachers had a positive feeling on the use of translation as a teaching/learning strategy where only 10% opposed to this idea. The results of the present study on the use of the mother tongue in Iranian EFL context, bear many similarities to Dujmović (2014), Al-Nofaie (2010), Tang (2002) and Schweer (1999) which showed that teachers responded positively towards the use of L1 in L2 classes. Similarly, only 36.6% of the teachers shared the view that using L1 in teaching reading texts may interfere with learner's ability to learn English well, while 63.3% of them were against this view. This finding, revealed the fact that most of the teachers supported the use of Persian in teaching reading comprehension texts in EFL classes. The findings of the study are in line what Kern (1994) pointed out on the effect of translation as a technique on learners' reading comprehension proficiency and understanding the target language text.

Table 1: Teacher's general attitudes toward the use of Persian (L1) in teaching L2 reading texts

Items	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p
1. Using L1 is inevitable in teaching reading texts.	4	13	14	53	5	16	6	20	1	3.3
2. Translation can be used as a teaching/learning strategy in teaching reading texts.	5	16	16	53.3	6	20	3	10	0	0
3. The use of Persian in teaching reading texts may interfere with learner's ability to learn English well.	5	16	6	20	5	16	10	3.3	4	13

Key: f = frequency; p = percentage

### Teachers' reasons for using L1 in teaching reading texts

#### A) Beliefs about the effects of using L1 on enhancing learners' English skills and classroom interaction

Regarding the teachers' reasons for the effect of using Persian on students' language skills, (Table 2), 66% of teachers believed that using L1 has a facilitating role on learners' reading comprehension skill. In addition, more than half of the teachers (56 %) thought that the use of Persian increases learner's achievement in reading comprehension texts. Furthermore majority of teachers (70%) agreed on positive effect of translating the gist of the reading text into Persian after reading the passage. Moreover, 63% of the teachers highlighted the effect of using L1 in enhancing the learners' involvement in the learning process. In addition, a great number of teachers (86%) were in favor of using the mother tongue for conveying meaning of new words, idioms and expressions and sentences in reading texts. The results of this study are in line with earlier studies (e.g. Al- Abdan, 1993; Alnoafi, 2010) which have pointed to using L1 for translating new words as a common practice amongst teachers. Only a few of the teachers (36%) supported the idea that using Persian in teaching reading can save the class time. 70% of teachers agreed on the idea that using L1 can help students to check the correctness of their comprehension. This finding is supported by Liao (2006) who asserted that using translation can

help students comprehend L2, and it can also help students to check whether their comprehension is correct. Moreover, although only a few of teachers (10%) did not share the idea that the use of Persian has no effect on increasing the interaction between the teacher and learners, many of them (56%) opposed this belief.

Table 2: Teachers' reasons for using L1 in teaching reading texts  
A) Beliefs about effects of L1 on enhancing learners' English skills and classroom interaction.

Items	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p
4. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts facilitates learner's comprehension.	7	3.3	13	43	3	10	5	16	0	0
5. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts increases learner's achievement in reading comprehension tests.	6	20	11	36	1	3.3	10	33.3	2	6
6. If students receive translation of the gist in Persian after reading the Passage, it has a positive effect on their comprehension.	4	13	17	56	5	16	4	13	0	0
7. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts enhances learner's involvement in learning process.	2	6	17	56	6	20	5	16	0	0
8. Translation of the text can be used for conveying meaning .i.e. checking the meaning of new words, idioms and expressions and sentences in a text.	9	30	17	56	2	6	2	6	0	0
9. L1 can be used in teaching reading comprehension texts to save class time.	5	16	8	26.6	6	20	8	26.6	0	0
10. L1 can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct or not.	7	3.3	15	50	2	6	6	20	0	0
11. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts changes the environment of the classes from teacher dominant to student centered.	5	16	4	13	8	26.6	11	36	0	0
12. Translating reading comprehension texts increases interaction between teacher and learners.	5	16	13	43	2	6	9	30	0	0

**Key:** f = frequency; p = percentage

*B) Affective and metacognitive aspects - Beliefs about the effects of L1 on learners' affective and metacognitive aspects*

The last section of the questionnaire sought to identify the teachers' beliefs in using Persian regarding the affective and metacognitive aspects of the learners. To this end, the Following items (in Table 3) were asked to accomplish the objective. It was observed that while most of the

teachers (56%) agreed on the idea that using L1 can create a non-threatening environment in teaching reading texts, only one of them opposed this belief. This finding is consistent with that of Polio and Duff (1990). They concluded that many of the teachers resorted to the L1 for rapport building with the students and “to temporarily background their role as a teacher, to perhaps foreground their role as an empathetic peer, and to digress from instructional sequences”. Additionally, the study revealed that the majority of the teachers’ (76%) pointed out that using Persian in teaching reading increases the learner’s self confidence in answering the comprehension questions. Furthermore, a great number of teachers (76%) stated that using Persian in teaching reading texts enhances the learner’s motivation and interest in learning. The finding is consistent with Carreres (2006), and Liao (2006) which support the idea that translation is a motivating activity, and it can help reduce learning anxiety and enhance motivation to learn L2.

Table 3: Affective and metacognitive aspects - Beliefs about positive effects of L1 on learners’ affective and metacognitive aspects

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	f p	f p	f p	f p	f p
13. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts creates a non-threatening environment in the classroom.	1 3.3	16 53.3	1 33.3	2 6	1 3.3
14. Using L1 increases students’ self confidence in answering the comprehension questions.	8 26.6	15 50	2 6	4 13	1 3.3
15. Using L1 in teaching reading texts enhances student’s motivation and interest for learning.	5 16	18 60	2 6	5 16	0 0

**Key:** f = frequency; p = percentage

## CONCLUSION

The study indicated that teachers mostly had positive views on using L1 in teaching L2 reading texts. The study provided a detailed description and analysis of teacher’s general attitudes and their reasons for using L1 in EFL classrooms. The beneficial role of L1 in creating a non-threatening environment in the classrooms, enhancing the learners’ motivation and interest in learning language, increasing their involvement and achievement in learning process and conveying the meaning of new words and idioms were the teachers’ main reasons for using Persian in teaching L2 reading texts. Although no generalizations could be made from this single study, it does reveal the variety of teachers’ beliefs about the use of L1 in teaching L2 reading comprehension texts. The complexity of the L1 issue has illustrated the value and importance of investigating the issues, and more qualitative and quantitative studies need to be undertaken to deepen our understanding of teacher beliefs about the use of L1 in teaching L2 reading texts.

## Limitation of the study

This research suffers from certain limitations which have to be taken into consideration. First, the number of teachers we used in the study was small, and this small study could not fully represent

the whole population of EFL teachers. To portray a full picture of EFL teaching in Iran, more teachers from other regions of the country needed to be involved. Second, the Current study dealt with the use of L1 in teaching reading texts from teachers' perspective. Another research could investigate learners' beliefs about the use of L1 in L2 reading classes.

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*Appendix A*  
*Teachers' Questionnaire*

**I. Personal background**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Age:</b>	<b>Gender: M ( ) F ( )</b>
<b>Years of Language Teaching:</b>	<b>Field of study:</b>	
<b>Academic Degree:</b>		

**II. Guidance**

Dear colleague

I am doing a research on **"Iranian high school EFL teacher's attitudes and beliefs about using L1 in teaching reading texts."** The study aims at examining EFL high school teachers' attitudes and reasons towards the use of translating the text into Persian in teaching reading comprehension texts. I would like to ask for your assistance in my study by completing the following questionnaire. I appreciate you taking some of your valuable time to fill out the questionnaire. **Your responses will not be traced to you and will remain completely confidential.** Please read each statement carefully and then, decide your answer, based on your own point of view, by checking the appropriate box.

Thank you for your cooperation.

### III. QUESTIONS

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Using L1 is inevitable in teaching reading texts.					
2. Translation can be used as a teaching/learning strategy in teaching reading texts.					
3. The use of Persian in teaching reading texts may interfere with learner's ability to learn English well.					
4. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts facilitates learner's comprehension.					
5. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts increases learner's achievement in reading comprehension tests.					
6. If students receive translation of the gist in Persian after reading the passage, it has positive effect on their comprehension.					
7. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts enhances learner's involvement in learning process.					
8. Translation of the text can be used for conveying meaning i.e. checking the meaning of new words, idioms and expressions and sentences in a text.					
9. L1 can be used in teaching reading comprehension texts to save class time.					
10. L1 can help students to check whether their comprehension is correct or not.					
11. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts changes the environment of the classes from teacher dominant to student centered.					
12. Translating reading comprehension texts increases interaction between teacher and learners.					
13. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts creates non-threatening environment in the classroom.					
14. Using L1 increases students' self confidence in answering the comprehension questions.					
15. Using L1 in teaching reading comprehension texts enhances student's motivation and interest for learning.					