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## Iranian ELT Teachers' Use of First Language in *Prospect Series* Course Books

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**Ebrahim Davoudi Sharifabad**

(Corresponding Author)

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Intercultural Studies  
Baqir al-Olum University  
Qom, Iran

**Mohammad Ali Kowsary**

Department of English, Torbat-e Heydarieh Branch, Islamic Azad University  
Torbat-e Heydarieh, Iran

### ABSTRACT

Nowadays, one of the most serious issues in teaching a second language is whether using first language is allowed or not during the teaching process. However, this critical issue is also important for Iranian teachers in teaching *Prospect 1*, a new course book for Iranian junior high school students. The study tries to consider the use of the first language (Persian) by both Iranian EFL teachers and learners in teaching *Prospect 1*. Moreover, teachers and students' attitudes toward using Persian in English classrooms are scrutinized in this paper. To conduct this research, 248 Iranian EFL junior high school teachers, teaching *Prospect 1* in Sabzevar, Khorasan-e Razavi Province, and sixty Iranian junior high school students participated in the study. The data were collected through two sets of questionnaires, for both the teachers and students. As the results of the study revealed, the tendency is toward using both L1 and L2 where *Prospect 1 Course book* is taught.

**Keywords:** *Prospect 1, Junior High School, First Language, CLT, Iran*

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### 1. Introduction

There have always been contradicting views about whether to use the mother tongue of the students in the foreign language classroom. The monolingual approach suggests that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication, implying the prohibition of the native language would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language. There is a common theme that the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2 (Afzal, 2013). Communicative language teaching is one of the most popular approaches in teaching English. This approach emphasizes on communication in real world and meaningful purposes. (Brown, 2007, P.378). There is a misconception about using the first language in the foreign language classroom, especially in CLT classes. "Using the students' L1 to raise students' awareness about the similarities and differences between the two languages and helping them to discover different ways to express

themselves in the TL can be a powerful technique in the learning process; a technique that should not be discarded so quickly" (Wharton, 2007). The most common misconception about CLT is that the mother tongue has no place in the classroom. Wu (2008) believed that one of the most important misunderstandings of communicative language teaching is the avoidance of the students' first language (pp.50-53). Atkinson (1987) as cited in Tan, M. (2005) believes that mother tongue in the classroom can be usefully applied as a bridge to learn the target language. Atkinson (as cited in Tan, (2005), p.234) listed some techniques in using the mother tongue in the classroom. He believed that the teachers use mother tongue in order to elicit language or to check comprehension. Sometimes, the teachers use first language to give instructions, to promote cooperation among learners and to develop tests.

#### 1.1 Statement of the problem

The new CLT-based English course books for junior high school students in Iran were published under the title of *Prospect Series* in 2013. One of the most important



issues these days is that using first language is allowed or not in teaching *Prospect Series* in junior high school, grades 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> in high school. It is true that teachers and students' belief cause misinterpretation of CLT. So far, there has been little discussion about the use of Persian in teaching English in high schools.

### 1.2 Objective and Significance of the study

As using 1<sup>st</sup> language in teaching *Prospect Series* is one of the most critical issues, this study tries to examine the use of Persian by both Iranian EFL teachers and learners in the classrooms. Moreover, this study pays particular attention to teachers and students' attitudes about using Persian in English classrooms. Also, the researchers try to explore the teachers and students' reasons for using Persian in English classrooms. The results of the study provide interesting insights on teaching English in junior high school and some practical suggestions are given to the teachers, students and other researchers.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to ask these following research questions:

Are the English teachers allowed to use first language in EFL classrooms?

What is the role of first language in CLT in Iran?

What are the attitudes of the junior secondary high school English teachers toward using Persian in the classroom?

### 1.4 Definition of the Key Terms

**CLT:** "An approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task-based activities, and communication for real-world, meaningful purposes" (Brown, 2007, p.378)

**Prospect:** *Prospect* is a textbook from the series English for schools which designed to help the students learn English for communicative purposes in Iran and this series is designed and prepared based on CLT Method.

**First Language:** in the present study, the first language meant teachers' use of Farsi in order to teach English language.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

Whereas various research has been done about using mother tongue in English classes, there is little research that addresses the using of Persian in CLT. Spahiu (2013) showed that "the most of the teachers and students believe that it was necessary and acceptable to use native language in teaching. "Larrea (2002) believes that "a controlled and judicious use of L1 can have

both pedagogical and effective positive in the communicative language classes."

The number of studies conducted in the field of the learners' and teachers' attitudes towards the use of Persian in the English classroom is not much. Mahmoudi and Yazdi Amirkhiz (2011) worked on the use of Persian in the EFL classroom at pre-university level. She showed that "an excessive use of Persian could have a demotivating effect on students." Afzal (2013) carried out a research about using of the first language in English classroom. She showed that the use L1 is helpful for learners. She also presented that learners prefer to use first language in order to enhance their comprehension, and teachers believe that using first language is more effective and it can help comprehension.

Hashemi, and Khalili Sabet, (2013) worked on a case study in order to find the teachers' and learners' perception toward effective use of mother tongue in English classroom at university level. The findings of their study shows that English teachers use Persian in order to relieve anxious, frightened, and nervous. In addition, they believe the use of mother tongue is good for learners with low self-esteem.

Some researchers have investigated the use of the L1 in the FL classrooms thoroughly. According to one view, the use of L1 may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allows them to analyse language and work at a higher level than the situations where they are restricted to sole use of their FL (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Wood et al. suggest that the L1 assists learners in the process and completion of the tasks. In their study, Brooks and Donato (1994) showed that the L1 was used for three functions: to comment on their FL use; to establish a joint understanding of the task and to formulate the learners' goals.

Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue that the L1 may facilitate L2 classroom activities, particularly for low proficiency students and on complex tasks. In addition, some researchers think that prohibition of mother tongue use with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency is practically impossible (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). According to Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) the L1 is used by L2 learners as a communication strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the target language. Auerbach (1993) confirms the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom; she

also identifies the following uses for it: classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that govern grammar, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension.

There is substantial research that addresses the role of the first language in second language learning and instruction. Some studies point to the positive effect of the first language on the learning environment. Schweers (1999) found that first language use in the classroom creates a comfortable environment, and therefore an environment that enhances learning. In fact, in a study where teachers and students were interviewed about the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, most of the teachers reported the use of Spanish (mother tongue) in the classroom to build relationships with students. Students reported that they would like Spanish to be used to explain difficult concepts, which would help them feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. Furthermore, Burchinal, Fiel, López, Howees & Pianta (2012) demonstrated the importance of the use of the first language in the second language classroom. The study indicates that teachers who speak Spanish in the classroom may create a more culturally sensitive environment that enhances learning and communication for children.

Using the L1 was found to have profound effects on some language skills. In a study, Knight (1996) reported that the learners who did the preparatory L1 discussion in groups did much better on the L2 written task than other learners who did preparatory L2 discussion even though that discussion was in the same language as the subsequent written task. Similarly, Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) determined the positive attitudes towards the use of the L1 in completing tasks in L2 settings. Thus, it is possible to say that L1 has a useful role in helping learners gain the knowledge needed to reach a higher level of L2 performance.

Another important effect of the L1 use has been reported on vocabulary learning. There are numerous ways of conveying the meaning of an unknown word. Studies comparing the effectiveness of various methods for learning always come up with the result that an L1 translation is the most effective (Laufer & Shmueli 1997). This is probably because L1 translations are usually clear, short and familiar – qualities which are very important in effective definitions (McKeown, 1993). When the L1 translation

is combined with the word cards, learners have a very effective strategy to speed up their vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001). This finding also receives some support from studies of dictionary use. To effectively use a monolingual dictionary, learners need to have a large enough vocabulary storage (at least 2000 words) and need to be able to interpret definitions, which are much more difficult than L1 synonyms. That is why surveys of dictionary preference (Laufer & Kimmel, 1997; Atkins & Varantola, 1997) and learner use (Baxter, 1980) show that learners strongly prefer bilingual or bilingualized dictionaries.

Consequently, the use of the first language is more useful at certain stages of development. The mother tongue is most useful at beginning and low levels, where L1 can be used to introduce the major differences between L1 and L2. As students acquire more English, the use of the first language may be reduced, and the use of visual aids and body language as well. It is important that beginning learners of English are exposed to situations that require the use of the second language to develop their acquisition. However, some argue that teachers should avoid situations where students are forced to operate entirely in English (Friedlander, 1997). In fact, Vygotsky's theory stipulates that the development and learning of a child depends on the presence of mediating agents in the child's interaction with the environment. This interaction develops the zone of proximal development, which is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. In the language learning context, Vygotsky suggests that interaction with pairs in the first language increases the zone of proximal development (Kozulin, 2003). Studies have demonstrated that the use of the first language is seen as a natural psychological process in language development (Stern, as cited in Ghorbani, 2011). In fact, Ghorbani's (2011) findings are related to Vygotsky's theory because he suggested that during group activities, the first language is used to extend learners' zone of proximal development.

Çelik (2006) indicates that especially the English teachers who work for the state high schools of the Ministry of National Education are not expected to use the foreign language efficiently enough; therefore, their use of the L1 in their courses is inevitable. The teachers' inefficiency in the FL results from the ineffective use of the



FL during their education processes in the Teacher Training Institutions. Candidate teachers may prefer not to speak or to speak in Turkish during their education (Bekleyen, 2004). Gad (2009) reported that there are four reasons for the candidate teachers not to use FL in their lessons. These are: (1) course content or the practice of teaching; (2) not having a collaborative or an encouraging classroom atmosphere (anxiety level of the teachers increased in such atmospheres); (3) not being proficient enough in vocabulary and pronunciation, and (4) not having some standard norms on the use of the FL in the lessons. According to a recent research by Gevik (2007), most of the teachers and students are not against mother tongue, and mother tongue contributes to language learning towards various aims and at different levels.

### 3. Methodology and Design

In this section, the subjects as well as the procedures are briefly discussed. This study recruited a quantitative methodology to obtain information concerning the use of first language in teaching *Prospect 1*.

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were both the teachers and the students at the junior secondary high schools in Sabzevar, Khorasan-e Razavi Province. Thirty-five high school teachers of English (10 males and 25 female) who were busy with teaching *Prospect 1* in the last educational year were the first group of participants. Considering the number of students these teachers had in their classes, as the second group of participants, there were 700 students in grade 7 in junior high school in Sabzevar (200 males and 500 female). The participants of the study were randomly selected based on Krejcie-Morgan (1970) determining sample size. The researcher selected 248 students to answer the attitude questionnaire. The native language of all participants (teachers and learners) was Farsi. The teachers' age range was between 22 to 45 years. Almost all of the participants' age was 13 years. All the participants were in public schools.

#### 3.2 Instruments

To conduct this study two sets of questionnaires, for the teachers and students, were used. These questionnaires were originated from Islam and Ahsan (2011). The researcher revised and translate them into Persian. The first questionnaire aimed to explore teachers' attitudes about using Persian in CLT classes. In the second questionnaire, the students were asked to

answer the questions about using Persian in the classroom.

#### 3.3 Procedure

Students were asked to fill out the questionnaire. From among 700 students from different junior high schools of Sabzevar whose teachers participated in the present study, 248 learners were randomly selected to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires which should be completed by teachers were sent to their email address. They answered the questions and sent back the files to the researchers.

### 4. Data Analysis & Findings

The instrument in this study was a 23 item questionnaire. A questionnaire (see appendix 1) was distributed to 248 students, and another questionnaire (see appendix 2) to 35 teachers to discover their attitudes toward the use of Persian in the classroom and various occasions where they think L1 can be used.

After the researchers collected the data, the next step was analyzing it. The researchers used quantitative method to analyze the data. The responses to the questionnaires for both students and teachers were sorted and counted manually. The questions of the questionnaire were analyzed too.

The findings of the study include the responses of the students and teachers who were given the questionnaires designed for each group.

#### 4.1 Results of Teachers' data

*Table 1: The teachers' responses based on too little to too much scales.*

Questions	Too Little	Little	Moderately	Much	Too much
Q 1 Should Persian be used in the English classroom?	12%	10%	43%	25%	10%
Q 2 Do you need to use Persian in the English classes?	8%	11%	48%	22%	11%
Q 3 Do you like your students to use English in the English classes?	2%	5%	32%	29%	32%
Q 4 How much do you need to use Persian in the English classes?!	5%	22%	57%	13%	3%
Q 5 How much should your students use Persian in the English classes?	0%	0%	52%	38%	10%
Q 6 How much does the use of the Persian in the English classroom help you transfer information?	5%	2%	51%	37%	5%
Q 7 Do you think it would be helpful for the students to attend a class fully in Persian?	55%	20%	20%	5%	0%

Based on the results of the respondents, the first, second, fourth, fifth and sixth questions were answered moderately by the teacher, thus Iranian junior high school teachers prefer to have a moderate use of Farsi in their classes. Regarding the third research questions, teachers' tendency toward learners' use of the second language in the class, two options

(moderately and too much) had the same index, which meant that one third of teachers' population believed that learners should use too much English in the class which keeps the hope among English teachers. The last question also revealed that using too much Farsi in the class was not accepted by the majority of the teachers.

*Table 2: The Teachers' Responses Based on Various Scales.*

Q8	When do you think it is necessary for you to use Persian in the English classes?			
	To define new and difficult words, phrases and expressions		50%	
	To explain complex grammar rules		23%	
	To explain difficult concepts		61%	
	To give instructions about homework		29%	
	To check understanding		11%	
	During examination		25%	
	To explain and introduce cultural differences		25%	
	Other, please specify		-----	
Q9	Why do the students need to use Persian in the English classes?			
	To feel comfortable		50%	
	To understand new words, phrases and expressions better		23%	
	To comprehend difficult ideas better		61%	
	To know complex grammar rules better		29%	
	Other, please specify		-----	
Q10	What could be an ideal ratio of the use of English and Persian inside and outside English	English = ..... %	Persian = ..... %	Percentage
	Respondent 1	90%	10%	3%
	Respondent 2	80%	20%	12%
	Respondent 3	70%	30%	50%
	Respondent 4	60%	40%	17.5%
	Respondent 5	50%	50%	17.5%

#### 4.2 Results of Learners' data

*Table 3: The learner's responses based on too little to too much scales*

Q	Too Little	Little	Moderately	Much	Too much
Q1	Should Persian be used in the English classroom?	1%	6%	14%	10%
Q2	Do you need to use Persian in the English classes?	0%	4%	11%	42.5%
Q3	How much do you need to use Persian in the English classes?	14%	43%	29%	8%
Q4	How much does your teacher use Persian in the English classes?	10%	41%	37%	6%
Q5	How much does the use of the Persian in the English classroom help you learn English?	0%	2%	4%	38%
Q6	Does a class fully in English create any problem in understanding the lessons?	10%	17%	33%	16%
Q7	Do you get nervous when you are asked to speak English inside the class?	4%	22%	2%	10%
Q8	Do you feel that the other students will laugh to hear your English in the class?	56%	12%	19%	4%
Q9	Do you feel other students in your class know better English than you?	14%	31%	45%	10%

Questions 1-9 were responded by the learners according to the above table in a five scale format from too little to too much. As the results of the first item revealed, more than two third of the students participated in the present study had more inclination for Farsi to be used in the class. Regarding the second item, 85 percent believed that using Farsi in the class is helpful. Although many students responded that they need Farsi in the class, more than half of the learners believed that this need is not very crucial. More than three fourth of the learners answered that their teacher used

Farsi in their classes which needs serious attention. A considerable number of learners (94%) confirmed that teachers' use of Farsi helped them to learn English. While as the scales for other remaining questions are various and explanatory, these questions are discussed in the following tables.

*Table 5: The learner's responses based on various scales.*

Q10	When do you think it is necessary for your teacher to use Persian in the English classes?	Percentage
	To do group work	14%
	To ask the questions	19%
	To translate new words	44%
	To talk with the teacher	17%
	To review exercises	6%

As table 5 shows about half of the learners (44%) thought that teachers were better to speak Farsi while translating new words. Regarding the other options, learners gave higher scores based on understanding a question posed by the teacher (19%), talking to him/her (17%), doing group work (14%) the learners and reviewing the exercises (4%).

Q11	Why do you need to use Persian in the English classes?	Percentage
	To feel comfortable	3%
	To understand new words, phrases and expressions better	64%
	To comprehend difficult ideas better	22%
	To know complex grammar rules better	11%
	Others, please specify .....	-----

The major learners' reasons for using Farsi in the English classroom (64%) was to understand new words, phrases and expressions better. The second reason for Farsi to be used in the class was comprehending difficult ideas (22%). In case of understand grammar, 11% preferred it to be explained in Farsi. The rest of learners (3%) had a more comfortable feeling with using Farsi in the classroom.

Q12	When does your teacher use Persian in the English classes?	Percentage
	To define new and difficult words, phrases and expressions	40%
	To explain complex grammar rules	5%
	To explain difficult concepts	26%
	To give instructions about homework	9%
	To check understanding	16%
	During examination	2%
	To explain and introduce cultural differences	2%
	Other, please specify .....	-----

The results of the study indicate that the teachers and students has positive views towards the use of Persian in the English classroom. Also, the students are aware of this fact that use of English in the class is very important and they like to use it over and over in the classroom.

#### 5. Conclusions



The main purpose of this study was to investigate the teachers' and students' attitude toward using first language in English classroom. The result of the study indicates that there is a tendency to use mixture of Persian and English in the classroom in Iran's current educational system. Also, using students' first language in teaching English is a useful tool in beginning levels.

According to this study, Iranian teachers use Persian as a teaching tool to define new and difficult words, phrases and expressions, to explain complex grammar rules, to explain difficult concepts, to give instructions about homework, to check understanding, and to explain and introduce cultural differences. In addition, junior secondary high school students, are comfortable with using Persian in English classrooms.

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