



## **Investigating the Role of Iranian EFL Learners' L2 Proficiency in Their Attitudes Toward the Use of L1 in Institutional Contexts: A Mixed Methods Study**

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### **Abstract**

Given the long-lasting debates over L1 use in language teaching and learning, this study adopted a mixed methods design to investigate the role of Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency in their attitudes toward using L1. A questionnaire originally developed by Scheffler et al. (2017) was modified and distributed among 180 elementary, intermediate, and advanced learners in four private language institutes in Karaj, Iran. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 18 participants to support and supplement the findings of the quantitative phase. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and the interviews were transcribed to find common themes. Quantitative data showed that the elementary learners held positive attitudes toward L1 use, while the intermediate and advanced learners held negative attitudes. It was also revealed that the elementary learners held positive attitudes toward all functions of L1 use. The intermediate learners held positive attitudes toward using L1 only for vocabulary and grammar points, while advanced learners held negative attitudes toward all dimensions of L1 use. The findings are likely to help EFL teachers to hear learners' voices and decide when and at which level it is appropriate to use or limit L1.

*Keywords:* EFL learners, proficiency, attitude, first language

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## **Introduction**

The role of L1 in language teaching has been a source of controversy for over a century (G. Cook, 2010, Mohammadi Darabad et al., 2021; Rezaee & Fathi, 2016). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the Direct Method and the growing dissatisfaction with the Grammar Translation Method, the use of translation was strongly frowned upon and as a result, students' L1 was rarely used as the medium of instruction (Cummins, 2007).

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the learners' L1 almost had no place in the process of second language (L2) teaching and learning (Cook, 2001), with L1 being totally prohibited or minimized as much as possible in the language teaching orthodoxy (for a review, see Yi, 2016). Total or partial exclusion of L1 use was justified on the grounds that it interfered with L2 learning (Brooks-Lewis, 2009), precluded learners from being maximally exposed to target language input (Ellis 1984; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Turnbull, 2001), and deprived them of opportunities to practice it in real-world tasks (G. Cook, 2010). To put it in a nutshell, L1 use was regarded as an impediment to achieving L2 native-speaker competence (Cook, 1999), which was considered to be the primary goal of monolingual language instruction at the time (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2013).

However, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, adopting a native speaker model in language teaching has been discouraged (Kirkpatrick, 2006; McKay, 2003). There have been calls for applying L2 user models and exploiting learners' L1 in language teaching instead of approximation to monolingual native speakers (Cook, 1999). Some scholars have cast doubt on the feasibility and desirability of the monolingual approach to language teaching (Atkinson, 1993).

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, bilingual teaching gained more support (G. Cook, 2010). Some researchers and commentators warned against the total exclusion of L1 and the detrimental effect of such a radical policy (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Macaro, 2001; Schweers, 1999; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Wigglesworth, 2002). This alternative view has gained momentum in the post-method era, with scholars calling for the "judicious" and "principled" use of learners' L1 (Butzkamm, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood & Yu, 2009; Macaro, 2001) as a linguistic resource which should not be ignored (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Moreover, the role of L1 has been referred to as a "natural reference system and a pathfinder" for language learners (Hall & Cook, 2013, p. 9). Rejecting the compartmentalization of L1 and L2 in students' minds, Widdowson (2003) and Cook (2001) have argued against monolingual language teaching. In addition, drawing on a number of studies, McMillan and Rivers (2011) state that cognitive, communicative, and social functions of L1 play an important role in L2 learning. There is also mounting evidence that L1 has pedagogical functions and is frequently used by teachers mainly to "explain vocabulary and grammar, give instructions, develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere" (Hall & Cook, 2013, p. 22).

The emergence of English as an international language with its principles revolving around multilingualism (Glasgow, 2018) has also contributed significantly

to making the atmosphere more welcoming for L1 use. In this regard, Rivers (2010) points out that “L1 use can enhance and support L2 learning as well as contributing to the development of multilingual and multicultural language learner identities” (p. 104).

Similarly, Xu (2017) discussing the paradigm shift in English language teaching around the world, points to the “shift in people’s perception of the role of their first language and culture ..., from a ‘problem’ resulting from ‘interference’ to a resource that can be naturally ‘transferred’ into their English language learning and use” (p. 703). Xu goes on to argue that learners’ L1 is no longer a baggage of burden and negativity but a “badge of linguistic and cultural heritage and identity” (pp. 703-704). Similarly, McKay (2018), highlighting the importance of L1 in developing language proficiency, calls for a reexamination of the L2-only policy in language classrooms. That said, it seems axiomatic that the advocacy of L1 use has picked up momentum, and “the pendulum has swung firmly in its favor” (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 233).

However, in spite of the preponderance of evidence substantiating the judicious use of L1 and the lack of theoretical underpinning and empirical evidence for its prohibition (Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Brooks-Lewis, 2009), the use of English as the only medium of instruction in L2 classes continues to enjoy a hegemonic status in many contexts (MacMillan & Rivers, 2011) and is stipulated in several governmental policies (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008, cited in Glasgow, 2018). There are still reports of strict L1 prohibition, and L1 use is regarded as a negative classroom behavior to be reprimanded or penalized (Jenkins, 2010).

Along the same vein, some studies in the Iranian context have shown that a majority of teachers hold negative views toward L1 use (Miri et al., 2016; Yaqubi & Pouromid, 2013), and are reluctant to use it in their classes (Tajgozari, 2017). Some teachers even believe that it should not be used at all (Tajgozari, 2017).

To date, most of the studies regarding L1 use have focused on teachers’ discourse (e.g., Macaro, 2001; Polio & Duff, 1994) and few studies have attempted to make the students’ voices heard (Butzkamm, 2003; Galali & Cinkara, 2017). Despite the significance of examining learners’ perceptions regarding L1 use, it seems to be an under-investigated research area (Hall & Cook, 2012; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Besides, research on learners’ perceptions toward L1 use (e.g., Burden, 2000; Hashemi & Khalili Sabet, 2013; Nazary, 2008) has mainly been conducted in university contexts and learners’ attitudes have been elicited mostly through questionnaires as the sole instrument of data collection, ignoring the qualitative aspect of the issue (Galali & Cinkara, 2017; Shariati, 2019).

Moreover, most studies have reported inconclusive findings. While some studies reported learners’ positive attitudes (Debreli & Oyman, 2015; Hashemi & Khalili Sabet, 2013; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008), the results of some other studies were indicative of learners’ negative stance (Burden, 2000; Nazary, 2008), which highlights the need for further investigation. Since data have been mainly gathered through one method of data collection and mostly in university contexts,

there seems to be a need for studies which use follow-up interviews (Wesely, 2012) in institutional contexts after administering questionnaires to corroborate or complement the findings.

### **Literature Review**

Using L1 in L2 classroom has long been a bone of contention. In reference to the recent history of research and theories in L2 acquisition, Yi (2016) posits that L1 in L2 learning has a two-sided role: it can both debilitate and facilitate language learning.

#### **L1 “the Crutch”**

The origins of criticisms levelled against L1 date back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Grammar Translation Method was losing its favor (Sampson, 2013) due to overemphasis on linking L2 words to L1 equivalents misleading learners into thinking that this is always the case (Scheffler, 2012). Toward the end of the century, following the Reform Movement and the popularity of the Direct Method, the pendulum swung in favor of monolingual approaches which would push learners to “follow the path of the native infant” (G. Cook, 2010, p.18). Thus, the learners’ L1 was no longer the medium of instruction and the focus shifted from reading literary texts and translating disconnected sentences to spoken language, fluency, and connected texts (G. Cook, 2010; Hall & Cook, 2013; Yi, 2016).

Another line of arguments against the role of L1 in L2 learning is traceable to the “debates that took place in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the role of L1 transfer centered on competing claims of behaviorist and Mentalist theories of acquisition” (Ellis, 2008, p. 349). Ellis traces back the early criticism levelled at L1 to the behaviorist notion of negative transfer which considered L1 as interfering with L2 acquisition. Krashen and Terrell (1983) – proponents of the natural approach to language teaching – further marginalized L1 use, emphasizing creating an input-rich environment for learners in which the target language is used exclusively and learners are involved in meaning-focused activities.

#### **The L2-Only Policy, Only a Policy**

Questioning the L2-only policy dominating L2 classrooms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars stated that this policy is more based on political and socio-economic grounds rather than on theoretical and empirical underpinnings. They argued that since methods were developed in center-based communities (e.g., UK, US) and exported to periphery communities by native speaker teachers who could not speak the learners’ mother tongue, this hegemony was created as a tool to exert power and keep their domination over other languages and cultures (Auerbach, 1993; Phillipson, 1992). This commentary has been reiterated by several other scholars (e.g., Akbari, 2008; Canagarajah, 1999)

#### **The Role of L1 Revisited**

In the field of second language acquisition, the atmosphere for L1 use seems more welcoming than before. This shift in paradigm is reflected in Ellis’s (2008)

comments in which he bemoans minimalist researchers neglecting the positive contribution of L1 by an overt emphasis on negative transfer. After years of animosity and neglect, scholars in language pedagogy have started beating the drum of L1 use in L2 classrooms (Atkinson, 1987; Butzkamm, 2003; Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Cook, 2001, 2016).

In the last three decades or so, the role of L1 in L2 learning and teaching has been revisited (Cummins, 2007; Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Glasgow, 2018; Hall & Cook, 2012; Hall & Cook, 2013; Levine, 2011; Littlewood & Yu, 2009; Macaro, 1997, 2001; Nation, 2003; Rivers, 2010; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002) reflecting the general consensus on its positive role if used selectively and judiciously. Several studies have corroborated the use of L1 from pedagogical (e.g., de La Fuente & Goldenberg, 2022; Ganem-Gutierrez, 2009; He, 2012; Lee & Macaro, 2013), attitudinal (e.g., Scheffler, 2012; Scheffler et al., 2016), and affective (e.g., Bruen & Kelly, 2014) perspectives.

### **L1 the “Helpful Scaffold”**

Empirical studies focusing on the pedagogical effects of L1 use have highlighted its positive role in vocabulary acquisition (Joyce, 2015; Lee & Macaro, 2013), consciousness-raising grammar tasks (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008), and task-based language learning (Azkaria & Garcia Mayo, 2014; de La Fuente & Goldenberg, 2022). Moreover, drawing on the English language teaching literature in different language classroom settings (e.g., submersion, segregation, mother-tongue maintenance, etc.), Ellis (2008) refers to the importance of recognizing learners’ L1 which enhances their learning (p. 311). In addition, L1 has been identified as a communication strategy that learners employ to compensate for their insufficient lexical and grammatical knowledge (Cook, 2016; Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

### **L1 in Socio-Cultural Theory**

According to Yi (2016), learning in socio-cultural theory is a “social and intermental activity” (p. 27). A plethora of research has investigated the role of L1 in L2 learning within this framework (e.g., Algeria de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009; Storch & Aldosari, 2010), identifying L1 as a mediating tool through which learners provide each other with scaffolding during collaborative activities and process language at higher cognitive levels such as “attending, planning, and reasoning” (Swain & Lapkin 2000, p. 253). It also helps them arrive “at a shared understanding of objects, events, goals, and sub-goals of a task” (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999, p. 242) and assist each other in working out their ways through the tasks.

Meanwhile, with reference to some studies within the socio-cultural framework (e.g., Brooks & Donato, 1994; Platt & Brooks, 1994), Ellis (2003) highlights the positive role of L1 in assisting learners “to achieve control of a task, ..., to set and revise goals and engage in private speech” (p. 200).

## **Learners' Attitudes**

Another strand of research has investigated the role of L1 in L2 classrooms from learners' perspective (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Neokleous, 2017; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). For example, Brooks-Lewis (2009) conducted a study in a university context aiming to tap into the perception of 256 adult EFL Mexican learners regarding the inclusion of L1 in their courses. The researcher himself was the instructor of the course. Learners were urged to write diaries of their learning experience and provide the instructor with written reports regarding their perceptions. He started with Spanish—the known language for learners and gradually moved toward more target language use (English). At the end of the course, the analysis of the learners' written comments showed that the majority of the learners held that the use of L1 reduced their anxiety, increased their confidence, and helped them use their prior knowledge gained through their first language.

Likewise, Carson and Kashihara (2012) conducted a study in a Japanese university context investigating learners' attitudes toward instructors' use of L1 and the role of proficiency level in students' preference regarding the use of L1 (Japanese) in L2 (English) classroom. They used Schweers' (1999) questionnaire with some modifications and collected data from 305 participants who were studying English in their first and second years. Students' proficiency was determined using their latest TOEIC scores. The results revealed that in general L1 use had more desirability among the beginner learners. Moreover, the learners did not desire L1 support for testing and emotional support. As to the instructional functions of L1 use, the beginners felt more dependent on L1 use than the advanced learners.

Learners' perception toward L1 use has also been investigated in the Iranian context. For instance, in a university context, Nazary (2008) investigated the perception of students from different fields who had taken part in general English classes. He used a questionnaire developed by Prodromou (2002) which consisted of 16 items. 85 students from elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels were chosen randomly. He found that overall, the majority of learners with different proficiency levels did not appreciate the effectiveness of L1 use. Another finding of the study was that the learners of different proficiency levels held different attitudes.

In another study, Tajgozari (2017) examined the perceptions of 56 high school students aged between 14 and 18 along with those of 11 of their English instructors in an institutional context. The learners' perceptions were examined through a questionnaire developed by Prodromou (2002). The learners' level of proficiency was determined by using Nelson Proficiency Test before the study. They were divided into elementary, intermediate, and advanced groups. The findings showed that on average, 90% of elementary students, 73.3% of intermediate students, and 51.1% of advanced students agreed with L1 use in the class.

In another study in a university context, Hashemi and Khalili Sabet (2013) investigated the perceptions of 345 learners and 25 instructors. The learners completed a 26-item questionnaire developed by the researcher and validated by other researchers in the department. They found that the learners held positive attitudes toward the use of L1.

Reviewing the above studies, the researchers found some gaps. To begin with, the studies have been either solely qualitative or quantitative. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, so far, very few studies, if any, have used a combination of both methods for data collection. In addition, the quantitative studies which used questionnaires have reported only descriptive analysis (frequency counts or percentages). Moreover, in very few, if any, of the studies reported in the literature, inferential statistics have been used to find out if there is a significant difference in the learners' attitudes across various proficiency levels.

Another gap in the literature is that studies conducted in the Iranian context have mainly focused on a specific target group. For instance, in Tajgozari's (2017) study, all the participants were high school students and in Nazary's study, the participants were all university students. Therefore, the wider population of language learners who have a variety of purposes for attending English classes have not been represented in the samplings, making it difficult to generalize the findings.

Considering the significance of investigating learners' attitudes (Long, 1997; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Wesely, 2012) and in order to predict and avoid "expectational conflicts" (Kern, 1995, p. 71), this study aims to fill the gap in previous studies by tapping into learners' perceptions using questionnaires and interviews. The goal is to investigate the role of Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency level in their attitudes toward using L1 in institutional contexts and find out if there is a statistically significant difference in their attitudes across levels. The research questions guiding the present study are as follows:

- 1) What are Iranian EFL learners' attitudes across different proficiency levels toward L1 use?
- 2) Toward which function(s) of L1 use, do Iranian EFL learners in each proficiency level hold the most positive attitudes?
- 3) What is the role of Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency level in their attitudes toward L1 use?
- 4) Is there a statistically significant difference in Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward functions of L1 use across L2 proficiency levels?

### **Method**

For the sake of triangulation and complementarity, this study employed a parallel mixed methods design, which is using quantitative and qualitative strands of research concurrently or with minimal time lapse (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

### **Participants**

The participants were 180 EFL Iranian learners above the age of 14 studying general English in language institutes in Karaj, Iran (see Appendix A for the participants' demographic information). The participants, whose mother tongue was Persian, were chosen randomly from 4 language institutes two of which were among the most famous institutes, while the other two enjoyed less popularity. Among the participants who were willing to be interviewed, 18 volunteers, the demographic

information of whom can be found in Appendix B, were randomly selected by the institute authorities. In order to help maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used instead of interviewees' real names.

## **Instruments**

### ***Questionnaire***

The questionnaire, originally developed by Scheffler et al. (2016), was adopted with some modifications. The reliability index of the questionnaire based on the results of a pilot study (to be further elaborated on in the procedure section) turned out to be 0.90. The reason for its adoption was that in this questionnaire, the respondents are required to express the degree of agreement with the given statements on a 5-Point Likert scale which "provides finer scale for statistical analysis purpose" (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009, p. 50) and increases the internal-consistency reliability (Masters, 1974).

Since the aim of the study was to investigate the role of learners' L2 proficiency level in their attitudes, other sections of the questionnaire which required them to self-report their activities at home and their teachers' practice regarding L1 use in the class were omitted. Only the part containing 36 statements with 5-point Likert scale response options remained. Therefore, the final modified version was a closed 36-item questionnaire. In order to obtain the learners' demographic information, a box with some choices was added to the beginning of the questionnaire, which required the learners to self-report their level of L2 proficiency along with their gender, age range, and years of learning English. A self-reported level of L2 proficiency was adopted because the institutes' authorities would reject administering any exam which would take the learners' class time. The questions aimed to investigate the learners' attitudes toward the use of L1 in learning English in six categories, including anxiety, rapport, grammar, vocabulary, class management, and assessment. Each category was targeted by six statements, three of which were positively keyed, while the other three were negatively keyed.

### ***Interview***

Another instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. This type of interview was chosen because according to Mackey and Gass (2016), it gives the researcher "freedom to digress and probe for more information" (p. 225). The interview questions (see Appendix C) were generated by studying the literature and considering the aim of the study. Pilot interviews were conducted with three learners with different L2 proficiency levels. Based on the pilot interviews, some adjustments were made to the wording of two questions.

## **Procedure**

The modified questionnaire was translated into Persian (learners' L1) by the second researcher, assuming that the English version might not be understandable

for learners of all proficiency levels and hence might lead to some confusion. To check the validity of the questionnaire, the translated version was given to an M.A. graduate of English language teaching to translate it back into English to make sure there is no ambiguity. Then, the Persian version was given to a Ph.D. candidate of Persian literature to be checked for punctuation and possible grammatical errors to avoid learners' misunderstanding or confusion. To check the reliability of the questionnaire, the final translated version was distributed among 60 Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels, studying in a language institute where the second researcher used to work. Upon receiving 46 completed questionnaires, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach Alpha. The obtained value was 0.90, which indicates the questionnaire enjoyed a high index of reliability. The learners were also provided with some space at the end of the questionnaire to comment on any ambiguity they might have come across while completing the questionnaire. However, there was no report of ambiguity in any of the items.

In the next step, the second researcher approached four institutes which expressed their consent for distributing the questionnaires. Out of 180 questionnaires, 45 were given to each institute to be distributed among their learners. The authorities were advised to distribute it proportionately among elementary, intermediate, and advanced level learners. The learners were required to choose their current level of L2 proficiency based on their own perception. When distributing the questionnaires, the institute authorities considered the learners' proficiency based on the placement tests they had previously administered. Out of the 180 distributed questionnaires, 165 were returned with a response rate of 91.6%.

To delve further into the learners' perceptions and investigate how their L2 proficiency levels affect their attitudes, the second researcher arranged for interviews with 18 volunteers from three different levels. The interviews were arranged at times convenient to learners. All the interviews took place in one empty class in the institutes where the learners had classes. Care was taken to choose a class which was far from distracting noise. All the interviews were held in the learners' L1 (Persian) and took about 15 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the second researcher. In order to observe ethical considerations, the second researcher obtained each interviewee's consent before audio recording the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Out of 165 received questionnaires, three of them which had one or more missing responses were excluded from the study. The 162 remaining questionnaires were entered into SPSS for further statistical analysis. 53 elementary, 61 intermediate, and 48 advanced learners had filled out the questionnaire completely. However, to make the sampling in three different groups of proficiency levels equal, 5 questionnaires from the elementary level and 13 questionnaires from the intermediate level were randomly removed, with 48 filled-out questionnaires remaining in each group. Thus, the final number of questionnaires to be analyzed was 144. In order to analyze the data, each response option was scored from 1 to 5,

with 1 showing total disagreement and 5 indicating total agreement. It is to be noted that half of the statements for each category were negatively keyed.

Before conducting descriptive analysis, normal distribution of data was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test of normality and Q-Q Plot in SPSS. The result indicated normal distribution of data. The mean and standard deviation of responses for each category were calculated. Since the numerical value for each response ranged from 1 to 5, the mean scores above 3 would indicate learners' positive attitudes, while the mean scores below 3 would indicate negative attitudes. In order to calculate the overall mean score for each level, the sum of means (SoMs) was preferred to calculating mean of means since the data were discontinuous (Chavez, 2003). To see if there is a statistically significant difference in the learners' attitudes toward L1 use across different proficiency levels, the Kruskal Wallis test of K-independent samples normally used for ordinal data was carried out.

The interviews were analyzed by transcribing them, reading through them carefully, and underlining the key words in common. In this way, some valuable information was obtained to support and supplement the findings of the quantitative data.

## Results

### The Results of the Questionnaire

The first research question aimed to investigate the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward L1 use across different proficiency levels. According to Table 1, while elementary learners held positive attitudes (SoMs = 19.22 > 18), intermediate (SoMs = 17.44 < 18), and advanced learners (SoMs = 14.62 < 18) held negative attitudes toward L1 use.

**Table 1**

*The Mean Scores for Learners' Attitudes Toward Functions of L1 Use Across 3 Proficiency levels*

Level		Anxiety	Rapport	Grammar	Vocabulary	Assessment	Class Management	SoMs
Elementary	M	3.22	3.05	3.50	3.38	3.10	2.94	19.22 > 18
	SD	.62	.48	.56	.61	.59	.56	
Intermediate	M	2.74	2.84	3.19	3.31	2.62	2.74	17.44 < 18
	SD	.78	.66	.67	.67	.74	.78	
Advanced	M	2.13	2.57	2.62	2.86	2.23	2.21	14.62 < 18
	SD	.714	.63	.69	.69	.62	.55	

Note. Number of participants in each group = 48, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, SoMs = Sum of means, 18 = The neutral point.

1 = Totally disagree, 5 = Totally agree

Table 1 also illustrates the breakdown of learners' attitudes toward different functions of L1 use. As can be seen, elementary learners held positive attitudes toward all functions of L1 use except classroom management. Intermediate learners

held positive attitudes toward the use of L1 only for vocabulary and grammar points. Advanced learners, however, held negative attitudes toward all parameters.

The second research question examined toward which functions of L1 use, Iranian EFL learners held the most positive attitudes at each proficiency level. As Table 1 demonstrates, the elementary learners perceived the use of L1 to be the most useful for grammar points, whereas the intermediate and advanced learners considered L1 to be the most useful for vocabulary.

The third research question aimed to find out the role of Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency in their attitudes. According to Table 1, there is a negative relationship between learners' proficiency level and their attitudes toward L1 use, meaning that as learners' level of proficiency increased, their attitudes toward the use of L1 seemed to be less positive and more negative. This shows that learners' attitudes toward L1 use is a function of their proficiency levels.

The fourth research question aimed to investigate if there is a statistically significant difference in learners' attitude across three proficiency levels toward functions of L1 use.

**Table 2**

*Significance Level of Learners' Attitudes Toward L1 Use Across 3 Levels*

	Anxiety	Rapport	Grammar	Vocabulary	Assessment	Class Management
Chi-Square	42.69	12.17	34.09	16.40	32.27	28.24
Df	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.002	.000	.000	.000	.000

As shown in Table 2, there are significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) among the three groups of learners with respect to all parameters including "Anxiety", "Rapport", "Grammar", "Vocabulary", "Assessment", and "Class Management."

**The Results of the Analysis of the Interview**

Based on the interview data, all the interviewees, regardless of their level, attested to the positive effect of being exposed to L2, but the elementary learners were against L2-only instruction and argued for a higher percentage of L1 use as it would improve their understanding. As one participant said:

It is true that we are not in the L2 environment, so we should listen [to English] a lot, just like a child who learns his mother tongue by listening, but I think 70 percent of the class time should be in English, because it makes us speak English and 30 percent [of the class time] should be in Persian. Honestly, I won't understand much if the teacher doesn't resort to L1. (Narges, elementary)

Or another participant mentioned:

Our mother tongue is Persian, so obviously it is difficult for me to learn English without any Persian explanation. Because if the teacher speaks only

in English, I don't understand what he is saying. I don't like the teaching method in which Persian is not used at all. I agree that English should be used in the class, but I think 40 percent of the class [time] should be in Persian and 60 percent in English. (Morteza, elementary)

Another finding of the conducted interviews was that all the participants at different levels believed L1 can be helpful for vocabulary and grammar issues; however, with the rise in learners' proficiency level they felt less dependent on L1 use, thus arguing for more judicious and restricted use of L1 only when L2 explanation turns out to be insufficient. As one of the participants said:

I think L1 is so helpful in vocabulary and grammar issues. When the teacher explains them in Farsi, that's the moment when something lights up in my mind, because it improves our understanding and helps us to learn better. (Narges, elementary)

One more participant said:

Persian is useful only in special cases and after several explanations in English. If the students still have problems understanding the materials, then the teachers' use of L1 helps the learners to understand the lesson better, especially when it comes to vocabulary and grammar issues. (Nazanin, intermediate)

In this respect, one more participant commented:

I think when teaching grammar and vocabulary items, sometimes L1 can help us understand better. But it should not exceed a restricted amount. (Raha, advanced)

Based on the interview results, the majority of the participants at different levels highlighted the anxiety-provoking experience of L2-only instruction at the beginning stages of their language learning, which led to their frustration and disappointment.

In this respect, Mina, an elementary student, said:

When you ask the definition of a word, they [teachers] give a synonym in English, but they should speak a little Persian as well. Sometimes when I don't know the meaning of the [English] word, they give a synonym in English, but I don't know the synonym either, so it makes me anxious and irritated.

Likewise, Leila, an intermediate student, stated:

At the beginning levels, it was very difficult. When the teacher explained everything in English to me, I felt disappointed. I just stared at the teacher, because I didn't understand anything. But over time, as I learned more vocabulary and my grammar knowledge improved, it became easier for me to understand the materials.

Finally, Parviz, an advanced student, observed:

At the elementary level we had a teacher who did not allow us to use any L1 and we had to speak using L2 from the very beginning of the class. If we spoke L1, he would give us a negative mark. At the time, my repertoire of

vocabulary was very limited and I was silent the whole session. It made me leave that institute feeling desperate and disappointed.

Overall, as evidenced by the interviews, the elementary learners were highly dependent on L1 use and felt frustrated and stressed out when facing an L2-only instruction, while more proficient learners showed a higher degree of willingness toward using L2 and minimizing L1 use as much as possible. This is supported by the questionnaire data which revealed a negative relationship between the learners' proficiency level and their willingness toward L1 use. In addition, the learners' susceptibility to anxiety in case of teachers' emphasis on L1 avoidance is in line with the questionnaire data, which indicated that anxiety had the third highest mean score among the elementary learners.

Furthermore, in spite of the variation in learners' attitudes toward the ideal amount of L1 use at different levels, no learner denied the positive role of L1 for grammar and vocabulary points. This corroborates the results of questionnaire data which showed that grammar and vocabulary had the highest mean scores across different proficiency levels. Moreover, intermediate and advanced learners' emphasis on a restricted amount of L1 use could complement quantitative results, since their negative attitudes revealed in the questionnaire analysis might not necessarily mean that they are in favor of total exclusion of L1 at all costs. Instead, the interviews revealed that they prefer restricted and judicious use of L1 and only in case of exigencies when L2 explanation does not work out.

### **Discussion**

As mentioned previously, this study aimed to investigate the role of Iranian EFL learners' L2 proficiency in their attitudes toward L1 use in institutional contexts. The results indicated that elementary learners agreed most with using L1 for explaining grammar while intermediate and advanced learners were most in favor of using L1 for explaining vocabulary, which is to a great extent in line with the results of Kim and Petraki's (2009) study. However, it is to be noted that in the aforementioned study elementary learners found L1 most useful for explaining vocabulary while using L1 for explaining grammar was the second most useful activity for them. The discrepancy might be due to grouping of the samples. Level 1 group in Kim and Petraki's study included beginners to pre-intermediate learners while in this study level 1 included only elementary learners. Therefore, respondents' attitudes in group 1 in Kim and Petraki's (2009) study might be closer to intermediate learners. The discrepancy could also be attributed to determining learners' proficiency level through self-reports, which might have suffered from lack of precision.

In addition, the results showed that the degree of learners' agreement about the use of L1 depended on their proficiency level. While elementary learners were the strongest supporters of L1 use (Debreli & Oyman, 2015) intermediate and advanced learners were rather reluctant toward this phenomenon. This can be justified on the accounts that with the development of learners' proficiency their reliance on L1 is diminished, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Carson &

Kashihara, 2012; Chavez, 2003; Prodromou, 2002; Shariati, 2019; Shuchi & Shafiqul Islam, 2016; Tajgozari, 2017).

The results further highlighted that teachers' exclusive use of L2 without any recourse to L1 caused frustration and anxiety for learners at the elementary level. This could indicate that learners who do not have enough linguistic knowledge need more L1 support (Shin et al., 2020).

According to the interview data, most of the learners especially at higher levels believed in the positive role of exposure to L2; however, they did not agree with the total exclusion of L1, especially at the elementary level. Reviewing previous studies (e.g., Macaro et al., 2020) shows the same conclusion. Besides, the results of the interview data revealed that while the elementary learners desired a higher percentage of L1 use, intermediate and advanced learners were more conservative in this regard. They welcomed restricted and selective use of L1 only in case of insufficiency of teachers' explanation in L2 and on very special occasions such as explaining grammar and vocabulary. This might indicate that providing learners with L1 translation after L2 explanation is likely to help learners obtain an exact understanding in their mother tongues (Shin et al., 2020).

Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that while the questionnaire data indicated advanced learners' negative attitudes toward all functions of L1 use, the interview results showed that they prefer a very limited use of L1 for vocabulary and grammar points only and only when L2 explanation does not work. On the surface, this might seem contradictory with the questionnaire results; however, deep down, it could suggest that the quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire per se might not give a complete picture of the learners' attitudes toward L1 use unless they are examined in the light of interview results.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

In spite of its contributions, this study suffered from a shortcoming that could be dealt with in future research. Due to some constraints, the students' proficiency level was determined through self-reports, which might have affected the results of the study since students might have over- or under-reported their proficiency levels. Therefore, in future studies, researchers are recommended to use reliable proficiency tests to maximize the reliability of the findings.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the obtained results, it is concluded that learners' attitudes toward L1 use are similar to a continuum which is affected by learners' L2 proficiency level. Depending on where on the continuum the learners' proficiency lies, individual learners might have different attitudes toward L1 use. On the one end of the spectrum, there are learners with low L2 proficiency level who do not have much linguistic knowledge and desire more L1 use to help them with comprehension of English materials, while on the other end, there are more proficient learners who prefer less L1 and more L2 use. Therefore, it might be advisable for EFL teachers to

be aware of the variability and change in the learners' attitudes across different proficiency levels, which occur along with their progress in language learning. The results also suggest that teachers should be encouraged to adopt a more flexible approach with regard to the use of L1, especially at elementary levels since learners at the beginning stages of language learning are more prone to frustration and anxiety due to their limited knowledge of L2.

In addition, the results could suggest that as learners become more proficient in L2, teachers' L1 use should be gradually minimized and teachers at higher levels should avoid excessive and uncontrolled use of L1 as the first and easiest strategy. Therefore, teachers at higher levels of proficiency can use other alternatives to L1 use such as simplification, examples, pictures, etc. (Polio & Duff, 1994).

This study has some implications for EFL teachers and institute authorities. The results of this study could help teachers identify, at what level of proficiency, learners have a more positive or negative attitude toward the functions of L1 use. This could help them decide when to use or avoid L1 for each group of proficiency levels, thus avoiding likely conflicts. This said, it could be concluded that L1 use is not an either-or issue and teachers should not employ a one-size-fits-all approach toward L1 use for all levels. Besides, the results of the study could invite EFL teachers and decision makers to think twice before dogmatic adherence to L2-only policy without considering the learners' proficiency level as an external factor existing in the immediate context of classroom.

The results could further suggest that while teachers' efforts to maximize L2 exposure in the class are appreciated by learners, any attempt to minimize their dependence on L1 should happen gradually so that learners can overcome the challenges of learning a new language at the beginning stages of language learning. Therefore, it might be advisable for institute managers and supervisors not to dictate certain L2-only policies to teachers and ban the use of L1, especially at lower levels. It might be best to give teachers autonomy and provide them with appropriate training so that they can tailor their use of L1 to learners' level of L2 proficiency creating a desirable atmosphere conducive to language learning.

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**Appendix A**  
**Demographic Information of the Survey Participants**

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Age group</b>		
15-20	71	49.3
21-25	20	13.9
26-30	22	15.3
31 and older	31	21.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	84	58.3
Female	60	41.7
<b>Years of learning</b>		
0-2	57	39.6
3-5	47	32.6
6 and more	40	27.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>100</b>

**Appendix B**  
**The Semi-Structured Interview Participants' Demographic Information**

Name	Gender	Age	Level	Years of Learning	Book
Narges	female	28	elementary	6 months	<i>American file 1</i>
Morteza	male	25	elementary	4 months	<i>American file 1</i>
Mina	female	34	elementary	4 months	<i>World English 1</i>
Bahar	female	22	elementary	9 months	<i>World English 1</i>
Hadi	male	27	elementary	About 1 year	<i>American file 1</i>
Shohre	female	29	elementary	5 months	<i>American file 1</i>
Leila	female	28	intermediate	about 2 years	<i>American File 3</i>
Ahmad	male	33	intermediate	about 3 years	<i>American File 3</i>
Ehsan	male	32	intermediate	about 2.5 years	<i>World English 3</i>
Mojtaba	male	24	intermediate	about 2.5 years	<i>American File 3</i>
Nazanin	female	35	intermediate	about 3 years	<i>World English 3</i>
Mahtab	female	31	intermediate	about 3 years	<i>American File 3</i>
Raha	female	37	advanced	about 3 years	<i>American File 4</i>
Hassan	male	19	advanced	about 4 years	<i>American File 4</i>
Babak	male	26	advanced	about 3 years	<i>American File 4</i>
Parinaz	female	19	advanced	about 4 years	<i>American File 4</i>
Soheil	male	29	advanced	about 3 years	<i>Mindset 1</i>
Akbar	male	33	advanced	about 3.5 years	<i>Mindset 1</i>

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please explain briefly about your language learning background.
2. What is your idea about using Persian in English classroom?
3. In your opinion, how much Persian use is ideal in the class and in what cases?
4. What is your idea about total exclusion of L1 use in the class?
5. Has your idea regarding the use of Persian in the class changed over time?

### Authors' Biographies

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